Acapulco catching up to Cancun as hot spring break spot

A woman is helped as she drinks beer from a funnel and a hose during spring break in Cancun, Mexico, last week.

Tourists relax by the pool at a seaside resort in Acapulco, Mexico, in 1997.

By WILL WEISSERT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ACAPULCO, Mexico — For tens of thousands of college students fleeing frozen campuses for a week of sun, sand and Jell-O shots, spring break south of the border has a new home.

Acapulco, the Pacific playground of the 1960s for movie stars like John Wayne and Cary Grant, has become a major destination for their great-grandchildren's generation.

A surge in student interest here comes as Mexico's spring-break king — the Caribbean resort of Cancun — is taking baby steps to restrict the college crowd's increasingly reckless behavior and to tone down its nonstop party image.

"It's time for a change. People have been coming to Cancun for years," said Jen Lanza, a senior majoring in public relations at Seton Hall University, in South Orange, N.J., who was enjoying pre-noon bottles of Corona on the beach with friends. "This is a nicer place. Cleaner, more mature."

Acapulco, which has always attracted some spring-breakers, experienced a college-student boom three years ago — despite the fact that a flight to Mexico's Pacific side is longer and more expensive for many cash-strapped undergrads.

Mario Ricciardelli, CEO of studentcity.com, a Web site devoted to spring-break travel, said Acapulco is now his company's top destination and that bookings for the resort are up 70 percent from 2004, compared to a booking increase of only 10 percent to 15 percent this year in Cancun.

"Word of mouth is critical," Ricciardelli said. "Acapulco has generated a reputation as a fun, high-quality place to visit and that message is spreading."

The Student Travel Services' Web site lists Acapulco as its "fastest-growing spring break destination."

Many U.S. tourism operators expect at least 50,000 spring breakers to descend on Acapulco this year, and others say as many as 90,000 plus could arrive. At least 100,000 spring breakers will hit the beaches in Cancun, American industry watchers say, although officials of Quintano Roo state, where Cancun is located, estimate only half that number will show up.

Sean Keener, president of HostsAll Travel Network, the parent company of StudentSpringBreak.com, said Acapulco "has officially tied or is near No. 1 with Cancun."

"It's not because of the beaches — it's because they have a variety of hotels and most importantly, the people and the hotels want college students there, unlike some destinations," Keener said.

The granddaddy of Mexican resorts, Acapulco was glorified in Frank Sinatra songs and Elvis movies. Elizabeth Taylor was married here, John F. and Jackie Kennedy came on their honeymoon, and Howard Hughes spent his later years hiding out in a suite at the Princess Hotel, a pyramid-shaped icon on the exclusive Punta Diamante, or Diamond Point.

"We thought half our school was going to Cancun and we came here to get away from them," said Kate Senzamici, a 20-year-old English major at Providence College in Rhode Island. "It turns out, they're all here too."

Associated Press photos

Police patrol the beaches of Cancun, Mexico, last week in a operation aimed at maintaining order during the year's spring break tourist season. A surge in student interest in the Pacific resort city of Acapulco comes as Mexico's spring-break king, the Caribbean resort of Cancun, is taking baby steps to restrict the college crowd's increasingly reckless behavior and to tone down its nonstop party image.

Many students said they had already visited Cancun and were looking for something more upscale.

"In Cancun, you see people falling over. You see people puking," said Chris Leilli, a sophomore business major at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., who was wading around a hotel swimming pool. "Here the clubs are fun, you drink, but there's a line most of the people don't cross."

As in Cancun, Acapulco's drinking age is 18, and bars and night clubs crowd the resort's golden-sand bays. Students roam from alcohol-soaked pool parties to booze cruises to beach beer blasts by day, then pack into all-you-can drink discotheques at night.

But many clubs here require slacks and dress shoes for men, unlike in Cancun. Also, most of the hotels in this city of 800,000 were built decades ago, offering a more traditional feel than the Caribbean resort's ultramodern facilities.

"In Cancun, it's Mexico but it doesn't feel like it," said Rob LaPage, a business ethics sophomore at Wayne State University in Detroit. "Here you have more culture."

Cancun, meanwhile, has begun a push to attract more families and business travelers — heading slowly down a trail blazed by Fort Lauderdale, Fla., which has worked hard to expand its reputation beyond a destination for students on spring break.

A "civility pact" signed by Cancun travel agents, hotel operators and bar owners in 2002 prevents drunken patrons from entering restaurants and clubs, and restricts contests and advertising aimed at students that promote drinking. More recently, some hotels have limited the number of spring-breakers who can pack into a room and have added extra security staff to guard against damage or unruliness.

Keener, whose travel network is based in Eugene, Ore., said it was too early to say Cancun is giving spring-breakers the cold shoulder.

"Some of the folks we talk to down there want to get more market share other than spring break," he said. "But I don't think they're ready to ditch it completely."

Nicole LaVecchia, a 22-year-old Seton Hall senior, said she could understand why communities might want to put the brakes on spring break.

"I would hate us, I mean, not us, but spring-breakers in general," LaVecchia said. "I feel bad for the families staying at our hotel. Look at what they're exposed to! Wet T-shirt contests in front of kids?"

Sarah Healey, a Providence College junior studying biology and Spanish, said Acapulco offered a mix of spring-breakers and visitors on "normal vacations."

Why isn't spring break normal?

"It's not very relaxing," Healey said. "You don't sleep. You drink all day and before you know it, it's time to go out. Then it's dawn again."

If You Go

ACAPULCO: www.visitacapulco.com.mx/english/homepage.html or contact the Mexico Tourism Board, (800) 44-MEXICO.

SPRING BREAK TRAVEL: www.studentcity.com or (888) 777-4642, or www.StudentSpringBreak.com.

Pioneertown film set offers a bit of the pretend Old West we remember

By MARLA JO FISHER
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

PIONEERTOWN — I am a cattle rancher's daughter, and even though I haven't been home on the range for ages, I'm still a sucker for anything that screams "Cowboy!"

That's why I'm irresistibly drawn to Pioneertown, a tiny desert hamlet in Southern California near Joshua Tree National Park that was created by movie cowboys in the 1940s as a film location.

Got a horse? Bring him on down. Pioneertown's one motel, guest ranch and local roadhouse all have corrals and hitching posts. There's even a trash bin for the manure.

It's been decades since I owned a saddle, but my kids love petting the horses when we visit Pappy and Harriet's Pioneertown Palace. These days, this funky old roadhouse with character is more likely to contain bikers than cowboys, but it's fun nonetheless.

Until recently, I had never heard of Pioneertown, even though I've created a weekend home nearby for five years. Then, a business owner in nearby Yucca Valley suggested I take a drive through Pipes Canyon, a scenic area strewn with boulders as beautiful as those in the park.

I took California 62, which is the main drug through Yucca Valley and Joshua Tree toward Twentynine Palms, and turned left onto California 247, known to the locals as Old Woman Springs Road.

This road is scenic itself, with its wild, windswept bluffs and tall Joshua trees, but things get even more beautiful when you turn left again, onto Pipes Canyon Road.

As my friend had predicted, I have become smitten with this desert landscape, with views as long and pretty as those of my favorites places in New Mexico. The land remains mostly undeveloped and consists of rolling hills and mesas interspersed with piles of granite boulders. Off in the distance, you can see the purple summit of Mount San Gorgonio, Southern California's tallest peak.

After about 10 minutes, the pavement curves to the left and turns into Pioneertown Road.

You're now facing the 20,000-acre Pipes Canyon Preserve, a little-known place owned by the Wildlands Conservancy. There are uncrowded hiking trails to a tree-lined creek bed with willows and cottonwoods, surrounded by Joshua trees, pinyon pines and manzanita bushes.

A few more scenic miles brings the visitor to Pioneertown, a collection of homes on the west side of the road, and an Old West movie set town to the east.

I was delighted the first time I stumbled onto this place, since I am attracted to undiscovered movie history as well as the real history of the Old West.

The two strains merge here, where movie actors, some of whom had been actual cowboys, formed a partnership in the 1940s to develop the area as a Western movie location.

Investors realized they could make money by developing the empty scenic landscape and renting it out to movie studios during the era when the Western was king.

Among the movies made there: "The Last Times of Judge Roy Bean" (1972), starring Paul Newman; "The Gay Amigo" (1949, starring Duncan Renaldo as the Cisco Kid and Leo Carrillo as his sidekick, Pancho; Gene Autry pictures "Indian Territory" (1950), "Whirlwind" (1951), "Silver Canyon" (1951) and "On Top of Old Smoky" (1953); "Cody of the Pony Express" (1950, starring Dickie Moore; and many more.

Singing cowboy Roy Rogers, the Sons of the Pioneers musical group, cowboy actor Dick Kurtis and others were investors in the project, which ultimately played host to their movies, as well as early TV series like "Annie Oakley," "Buffalo Bill Jr." and "The Cisco Kid."

Made to look like an Old West town's main street, Pioneertown's dusty Mane Street remains unpaved and rustic. It is small, and although it welcomes tourists, it isn't an relentlessly touristy as other Old West-style towns I've visited. A sign warns drivers, "If you're making dust, you're driving too fast."

You're just as likely to meet one of the hamlet's 300 local residents sitting out in front of the bowling alley, for example, as out-of-towners.

All the buildings are real — unlike other mock Old West towns, which are mostly stage-fronts — but they are not necessarily what they seem. The "bank," for example, is a home. Others are rented out as bed-and-breakfast suites.

The town's founders built the Pioneertown Motel for crew lodging, but it still welcomes visitors today, with a covered wagon in front. A modest and quirky place, with a variety of rooms that range from cowboy to the Twilight Zone, the motel has housed Roy Rogers, Barbara Stanwyck, Gene Autry and other film stars.

Today, it appeals to tourists seeking the offbeat, as well as riding clubs who like the popular equestrian trails nearby and the space to keep their horses and park their trailers.

Across the street, the Pioneer Bowl is a real six-lane bowling alley built for Roy Rogers and decorated with murals by famous set decorator Wallace Roland Stark.

It provided entertainment for film crews in an area where there was little entertainment.

In 1948, Roy Rogers rolled the first ball down a lane to officially open the bowling, with movie cowgirl Dale Evans and newspaper columnist Louella Parsons watching. He reportedly threw a strike.

Continuing the acting tradition, locals stage free Mane Street shootouts on weekends to amuse the kids.

Pappy and Harriet's Pioneertown Palace roadhouse is one of the main attractions here, bringing in musicians like Leon Russell and Steve Earle. Heat for special shows, and featuring local talent five nights per week. The rustic roadhouse, with old wooden walls, a stuffed moose head and assorted antlers on the walls is a fun and funky hangout with diner-style food and plenty to drink.

Its flier advertises it's open from 11 a.m. till "y'all stop drinkin'."

The Associated Press

Pioneertown was built in the late 1940's as a working community and movie set for Western films and television shows. Today, the community is a tourist spot, just north of Yucca Valley, and continues to be used as a filming location.

If You Go

GETTING THERE: Follow Interstate 10 east and take the Highway 62 exit to Yucca Valley in the Joshua Tree National Park. Look for the Pioneer Town sign and take a left on Pioneertown Road.

GENERAL INFORMATION: Pioneertown Motel, (760) 365-4879.

ON THE NET: www.pioneertown.com.

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