

GATE Director, Marie Des Jarlais, FSPA, answers questions and addresses participant concerns about traveling to Mexico and Central America.

With everything we've been reading in the press, and watching on the news about the violence and instability in Mexico, how do you perceive the situation there?

Marie: It is true that there has been a rise in violence in Mexico in recent years. However, the U.S. media does not help anyone when it categorizes violence as in "Mexico," rather than a specific geographical location. The drug-related violence is primarily at the U.S-Mexico border, as this is the transit area for drugs to be brought into the U.S. for consumption. The port cities of Acapulco and Cancun have also seen higher levels of violence, as the creativity of the drug people is expressed in home made submarines, fast speed boats, etc. as the means to move the illegal drugs into the U.S. Mexico City, Oaxaca, Chiapas have been quiet and safe.

The American press is painting the current state of affairs with broad strokes that lead us to believe the entire country is in turmoil. You have been in Mexico for 20 years. What is the reality of the situation there? Where are the areas that warrant real concern and caution when traveling abroad?

Marie: It is true that the various families of drug lords have divided up the country into areas where they grow the illegal drugs and move them into the U.S. It is not true that the entire country is in turmoil. Mexico City is as it always has been: an energetic, diverse city where it is safe to be. The States of Oaxaca and Chiapas, where GATE does visit, are also safe. People continue to visit Mexico City, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other States in Mexico without incident. I monitor the situation in Mexico and the region every day with a critical eye to alternate press reports, and the vast web of contacts I have in the region. I, personally, would not travel to any of the Mexican border States at this time. That would be risky.

The GATE trips to Chiapas, Mexico and the State of Oaxaca – these areas seem to be removed from the current events taking place, is this true?

Marie: It is true that Oaxaca and Chiapas are quiet at this time. If there are problems, they tend to be land issues between people and groups, rather than drug-related activity. Again, I continue to monitor the situations in the region. GATE has never brought people into areas where people would be in danger. We have changed itineraries on very short notice to avoid problems.

Are you concerned in any way about the areas that GATE travels to, including GATE's Central American destinations?

Marie: No, I am not worried about any of GATE's destinations. One can always find an isolated example of violence, like a robbery or theft. GATE only uses private transportation (vans) and not public transportation, which is an investment in safety for participants. With the vast network of contacts in each country, I am very aware of current realities. GATE would never put people at risk.

We've heard a good deal about "unfriendly" weather conditions in Mexico and especially Central America in the last few months, including flooding. What are the current conditions like where GATE will be traveling, and what are your expectations for those locations in the coming months?

Marie: It is true that flooding and mudslides always make the news. In Oaxaca, for example, the flooding took place in a remote mountainous area that is not on the GATE itinerary. The city of Oaxaca is fine, as well as other areas that we visit. The same is true for Chiapas. There had been flooding in the city of San Cristobal, but life is back to "normal" now. Other areas of Chiapas that we visit we not affected.

The town of San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala was affected by flooding and mud. The parish is assisting people to rebuild their homes, and get back to normalcy. Other areas that we visit were not affected by the rains and mud. The rainy season ends in late October, and begins in May. I anticipate being able to visit the sites in Guatemala with no problems.

El Salvador was spared the worst of the rain and mud this time. There is no problem with transportation there.

If for some reason you feel that events may in some way make the areas we're traveling to questionable, what is GATE's procedure?

Marie: GATE will not put participants in danger. If something came up suddenly, the program would be changed to avoid the place of danger. This happened in the past with a student group scheduled to arrive in Guatemala. The program was changed to Mexico because of an auto-coup in Guatemala. Another time there was a problem at one of the sites we were scheduled to visit in Chiapas. That site visit was cancelled, and we went elsewhere without incident.

I would encourage you to look our GATE website and our programs for 2011. We have offerings in not only Mexico, but El Salvador, Guatemala and Venezuela. Early registrations are always appreciated. Your personal invitation and encouragement to family, friends and colleagues to join us in Latin America would be greatly appreciated, and thank you for helping to spread the good word about GATE!

For a perspective on these issues from the Mexican authorities, CLICK on the link below for a recent BBC Article, or cut and paste the URL address:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11733064>