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## Spring travelers detour from Baja

Concerns about violence has volunteers, tourist groups adjusting their itineraries

By **Sandra Dibble** (Contact) Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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TIJUANA — The student volunteers are here, in T-shirts and jeans, wielding hammers and trowels. They've arrived from as far as Ohio, Alaska and British Columbia to spend nights in tents and days on work projects in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

As reports of drug-related violence prompt cancellations in Baja California's traditional spring break destinations, volunteer groups are coping with their own falling numbers on projects across the state.

"My mom, she almost didn't let me come," said Jillian Yañez, 21, a student at Notre Dame de Namur University working recently in the eastern Tijuana neighborhood of Lomas del Pedregal. "But it sounded like a good opportunity."

Yañez, who is studying to become an elementary school teacher, was one of 11 students from the small Catholic university outside San Francisco who spent four days raising a wood-frame house that measured 11 feet by 22 feet on a concrete foundation.

San Ysidro-based Amor Ministries, which coordinated the project, said participation in its Mexico programs for March and April has dropped to 4,000 this year from 6,000 last year. The sun-and-sand venue of Rosarito Beach, where students long have packed hotels in the spring, expects about one-fifth of the young visitors it had a few years ago.

Directors of Amor Ministries and other groups that run spring break volunteer trips attribute their declining numbers to widespread U.S. media reports about violence in Mexico and U.S. government travel alerts.

The groups say they place a premium on the safety of their young visitors, and are confident of smooth trips. Still, some groups have modified their plans.

"We have taken more precautions in response to what our parents are saying are their concerns, but not as a result of what we're seeing down here," said Gayla Congdon, founder and chief spiritual officer of Amor Ministries.

The Christian organization coordinates volunteer house-building efforts in Tijuana, Rosarito Beach, Puerto Peñasco in Sonora, and outside Ciudad Juarez near El Paso, Texas.

The group, one of the largest such organizations in the border region, has never had an incident in 29 years, Congdon said. Concerns about student safety led the Amor Ministries to cancel its spring break trips to Chihuahua, across the border from Texas, but it has kept operating in Baja California.

Los Niños International, a Chula Vista-based group, also said there have been no incidents. But its directors decided to keep student volunteers out of Tijuana this spring break, focusing instead on projects in Tecate and Mexicali, said Elisa Sabatini, the group's executive director.

"We have to honor people's concerns," said Sabatini, whose group hosted 15 students from Fordham University through Saturday in Mexicali. "We would love to have them back in Tijuana once the situation merits it."

Phillipe Gagné, reservations coordinator for Los Niños and another nonprofit group, Esperanza International, said attendance is down about 10 percent overall.

Gagné said the Mexican families lose out, but so do the volunteers, who pay \$500 for a weeklong program.

"You lose the opportunity for our two cultures to get to know each other better," Gagné said. "We lose the opportunity to teach young people and sometimes older adults that low-income people may be poor economically, but in many other ways they're as rich or far richer."



Students from Vernon Christian School in British Columbia bought souvenirs from a vendor this month while taking a break from building a house (background) in the Tijuana neighborhood of Lomas del Pedregal. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune) -



Traci Casey gave Zack Cattell a boost while he worked on the inside of a house in Tijuana this month. They are volunteers from Church on the Rock in Wasilla, Alaska. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune)



Melanie Issac held stucco for parent volunteer Rod Dubland this month as part of Vernon Christian School's construction project in a Tijuana neighborhood. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune)

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Drug-related violence in Mexico has risen as a result of President Felipe Calderón's campaign against drug cartels responsible for smuggling methamphetamines, cocaine, marijuana and heroin into the United States.

The Tijuana region experienced a surge in killings beginning in September as rival gangs fought for control of drug routes and the domestic market, authorities said. The killings in Baja California have dropped significantly since mid-January.

Though visitors have not been targeted, the violence has been devastating to the tourism industry.

Summer Winter Action Tours, a Costa-Mesa based company specializing in student spring-break travel, said it canceled its planned trips to the resort of San Felipe and diverted to Palm Springs because of concerns voiced by students and parents, the Orange County Register reported.

Officials in San Felipe said the tour company canceled its two trips this month, but that hotels remained on "stand-by" for the last two trips in early and mid-April, which would bring 2,000 visitors. Summer Winter Action Tours did not return numerous phone requests for comment about the situation.

Rosarito Beach is hoping for 10,000 student visitors during the three-week period that started Friday. That is about one-third of last year's number, and one-fifth of what it was at its peak about three years ago.

"It makes me sad and angry at the same time," Rosarito Beach Mayor Hugo Torres said.

Torres said tourists are safe and stressed the steps the city has taken, including issuing citations in English and Spanish and the designation of a special tourist police unit. Officers suspected of collaborating with organized crime have been dropped from the force, Torres said.

But the message has not gotten through, he said.

"I blame the media to begin with, but now I blame this organization in Los Angeles," Torres said, referring to a travel alert issued last month by the Los Angeles office of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms that discourages travel to Rosarito Beach and Tijuana. "If I could sue them, I would."

Ignacio Zamudio, owner of a Club Iggys, a beachside bar in Rosarito Beach popular with spring break tourists, said he plans to focus more on Mexican tourists this season.

"You can't fight the tidal wave of bad publicity," Zamudio said. "You've got to let people come here and find out for themselves that things are OK."

Some groups have kept on coming. A weekend ago, San Felipe's hotels were filled with participants in the Baja 250 off-road race, and this past weekend the city's annual Hobie Cat Regatta took place, despite a drop in participants. From April 3-5, Rosarito Beach is hosting a professional surfing contest, and April 7-9, a binational clown convention. Tijuana's Convention and Visitors Bureau last week announced its promotional campaign for the city's 120th anniversary with "120 Things to Do in Tijuana."

Far from the bars and beaches, 15 Canadian students gathered in prayer this month outside the two-room house they built for a young family in Lomas del Pedregal.

"I've waited my whole life to do this," said Brienne Knorr, 15, a ninth-grader at Vernon Christian School in British Columbia. "It's kind of sad that it's over."

In Bakersfield, members of Laurelglen Bible Church are getting ready for their trip to Mexico next month. Eric Burns, pastor of high school ministries, said church leaders decided to bring 65 students only after careful consideration.

"For me, the trigger was looking at this in context," said Burns, whose group will stay at the Amor Ministries camp in eastern Tijuana but work on a project in nearby Tecate. "When you say Tijuana, what and where do you mean by that? Where you see people are dying? Is it humanitarians being killed, or is it people in the drug world being killed by drug gangs?"

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