

Way down yonder, down Mexico way: tourists, snowbirds and expats in Mexico

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Abstract: In recent years Mexico has become not only an increasingly important tourist destination, but also a winter target for Canadian “snowbirds” and indeed a home for retired expatriate Canucks. Although tourism is now much more common, there are still relatively few Canadian snowbirds, and an even smaller number of people who can afford to become retired expatriates. However, increased leisure time, higher incomes, and a greatly enhanced mobility have meant that numbers in each category have increased, and have reached a high enough level for each cohort to have an impact – economic, social and possibly environment – upon their destinations. In this paper we shall discuss how physical and human geography of the Lake Chapala area has positive and negative influences upon the decision-making process of Canadian visitors. Lake Chapala is Mexico’s largest lake and is located about 49 minutes south of downtown Guadalajara – the second largest city in the country – in the state of Jalisco. The purpose of our research project is to illuminate the process whereby Canadians choose a particular destination in Mexico, and to begin to explore the impacts of the tourists upon this destination.

Introduction

In recent years Mexico has become not only an increasingly important tourist destination, but also a winter target for Canadian “snowbirds,” and indeed a home for retired expatriate Canucks. Such movements represent a luxury for all involved, at least when compared to the expectations of the recent past, and consequently, up until the last few years, participation was restricted to a select few. Although tourism is now much more common, there are still relatively few Canadian snowbirds, and an even smaller number



Figure 1: Location of Guadalajara and Lake Chapala.

of people who can afford to become retired expatriates. However, increased leisure time, higher incomes, and a greatly enhanced mobility have meant that numbers in each category have increased and have reached a high enough level for each cohort to have an impact – economic, social and possibly environmental – upon their destinations (McIntosh and Goeldner 1990; Pearce 1989).

The purpose of our research project is to identify the reasons for the choice of a particular destination in Mexico, and to begin to explore the impacts of the tourists upon this destination. It is hoped that this case study, apart from being of inherent interest, may lead to the development of models of tourism, and thus a stronger base for its related sub-discipline within geography (Pearce 1995). Mexico has been chosen because of its growing importance as a destination for Canadians. This importance is likely to increase (perhaps dramatically) as the value of the Canadian dollar falls (Rafferty 1993) curtailing visits to many conventional sites in the USA, and as the perceived advantages of Mexico become more

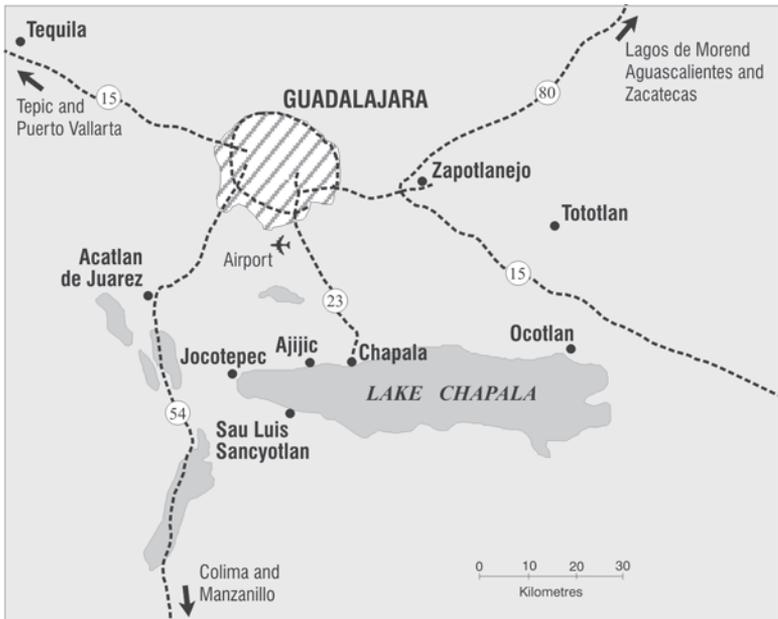


Figure 2: Guadalajara and Lake Chapala settlements.

widely known. In this paper we shall discuss the case of Lake Chapala, a major destination point near Guadalajara (Figure 1).

Lake Chapala is Mexico’s largest lake and is located about 40 minutes south of downtown Guadalajara – the second largest city in the country – the state of Jalisco (Figure 2). Although there are several settlements around the lake (the three main ones being Chapala, Aijijic and Jocotepec), the most popular with Canadians is Aijijic, and it is this town that will be a focus within this paper (http://www.mexconnect.com/mes_/chreares.html). Chapala is the main seat of government for several of the villages that sit near the lake. Inside the town’s colonial buildings are housed almost all the agencies and departments that administer to the legal, civic and ecological life of the area. Jocotepec has relatively few foreign residents at present.

Characteristics of the Destination

Physical Geography

Lake Chapala is a remnant of a much larger water body – Lake Jalisco – that during the late Pleistocene, perhaps 30,000 years ago, covered much of the state of Jalisco and spread into the states of Michoacan and Aguascalientes. Lake Jalisco probably resulted from volcanic damming of natural outlets, and volcanism is still active in the general area. Gradually, Lake Jalisco emptied leaving behind a series of lakes the largest of which is Lake Chapala. All of the lakes are shallow and some (e.g. Lake San Marcos west of Lake Chapala) are water covered only during the wet season of the year (http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/geolog.html Leyden 1994).

Like all lakes, Chapala is doomed to extinction by natural processes of erosion, such as the lowering of the outlet, and deposition, with sediment being deposited by inflowing rivers; for example the Lerma River has deposited a sizeable delta at the east end of the lake. Moreover the natural lake level fluctuates markedly between the wet and dry seasons. Added to this is the fact that the lake is being negatively affected by cultural processes such as: (i) the removal of the water from inflowing rivers (for irrigation and water supply), (ii) increased phosphorus levels, algae blooms and increases in heavy metals, and (iii) infestations of aquatic weeds (Burton 1997). To quote one observer of the Lerma River:

“Right now, it is not a river but a gigantic, stagnant latrine of human waste from scores of cities and towns, of tons of chemical fertilizers and manure from agri-businesses, of toxins from private factories, the government’s oil monopoly Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) and its energy monopoly Comision Federal Electricidad” (Hunt 1998:20)

A critical question with respect to our research is “how far will these physical and cultural processes negatively affect tourism in the foreseeable future?”

An important variable for all three cohorts of visitors is climate - as it is the Great Canadian Winter that “impels” many of these visitors to leave their homes in the Snow Belt for varying lengths

of time. In the Lake Chapala area, average high temperatures range from 24 degrees Celsius in December and January, to 30 degrees Celsius in May. Lows range from 8 degrees Celsius in January to 16 degrees Celsius in June. Consequently Ajijic's climate has (reputedly) been called one of the best in the world by *National Geographic*, and has been described by boosters as having an "eternal spring." This means that residents "do not need heating or air conditioning in their homes." Certainly such artificial aids are unusual, and often unused. The climate has a low humidity, which - as boosters point out - cannot be said for the coastal resort areas (<http://virtualmex.com/ajijic/climate.htm>), which represent major competitive destinations within Mexico. The climate results in general from the location of the region within world climatic systems, but specifically it is a function of the local mountainous environment (Ajijic is at 5200 feet/1585 m asl) and the existence of Lake Chapala, which has an ameliorating effect upon the local microclimate. Of course, if the lake is destroyed, the genial climate of a great part of the Jalisco highlands will go with it.

Lake Chapala has been an attraction for human groups since pre-Hispanic times, with thriving settlements scattered around the lake and its environs. Since the late nineteenth century it has been an area of tourism for both Mexican nationals and foreigners. The building of a railroad connection early in this century cut the journey from Guadalajara from twelve to three hours (<http://www.mexconnect.com/MEX/paraiso/localhistory.html>). More recently the lake shore has attracted an artistic community, and increasing numbers of Anglo American visitors, as well as continuing to cater to the growing population of Guadalajara.

Human Geography

It is often suggested that tourism - and by extension "snowbirdism" and "expatism" - can be powerful and beneficial agents of both economic and social change within the host country (Mathieson and Wall 1982). Certainly these movements generally stimulate employment and investment, modify land use and the economic structures of destination areas, and make positive contributions to the balance of payments of these areas, and there

is no reason to believe that this is not true in the present instance. These migrations are gaining momentum as the quality of the tourist/residential experience in the Lake Chapala area becomes better known through word of mouth and through promotional materials - such as those contained on a multitude of World Wide Websites.

One of the many (now) freely available “promotional” websites (<http://virtualmex.com/ajjic/ajjic1.htm>) designed to promote the Lake Chapala area claims that:

Ajjic is a comfortable, safe place for you to retire or just spend your winters. The town and area have the largest concentration of Americans outside of Canada, and the largest concentration of Canadians outside of the US. But the village itself is still a quaint Mexican town with cobblestone streets, little shops, and a lovely town square. English is spoken everywhere. More than 200 English speaking support groups exist in the Lake Chapala/Guadalajara area. Everything from libraries, shopping tours, colonial city tours, beach tours, arts and crafts, social clubs, legal services, tourist advice, etc.

In truth, Ajjic is not the perfect destination that these words make it appear. It is still characterised by a high degree of poverty, as is almost any area of the “South,” and has numerous social, economic, and environmental problems that are independent of the tourist phenomenon. Ajjic however, does possess many positive characteristics that attract both short and long term visits from foreign countries - particularly from Canada and the United States.

Conversely, the growth of tourism in areas such as Ajjic has raised questions concerning the social, economic, and environmental desirability of encouraging further expansion. For example, tourism may be encouraging negative characteristics (crime etc.), and the local government bodies may be giving valuable resources over to tourist facilities rather than using them to improve the state of the host population.

Characteristics of The Visitors

Although there is a mix of foreign visitors, citizens of the United States and Canada predominate. One estimate has some 8,000 “Norte Americanos” living around Lake Chapala, with perhaps 35,000 in the larger Guadalajara region (Slemko 1998). At present, in total, the Canadians slightly outnumber the Americans, although this appears to reflect a recent change in migration patterns, with three out of five new visitors now reportedly being Canadian (<http://www.southmex.com/wwwboard/messages/104.html>). A so-far-unexplained fact is that Canadians appear to be more dominant in Ajijic, and Americans in the town of Chapala. This perhaps reflects different migrational streams, but may also reflect a social distance between these two groups. Field observation and interviews indicate that although all age groups can be found within the visitor cohorts, older people predominate, particularly (and not at all surprisingly) among the snowbird and expatriate groups. Although only a small minority of these visitors can probably be classified as “wealthy” in a North American context, all will have a significantly higher spending power than most Mexicans, and thus a greater potential for social, economic, and environmental impacts.

The “mix” of population clearly has an important effect upon the amount and variety of cultural landscape development that takes place. Thus the Lake Chapala region, compared for instance with the coastal resorts, has less to offer a younger cohort of tourist, with fewer bars and clubs, and few facilities oriented towards children. This also impacts upon the level of usage of the local region, and possibly upon what Doxey (cited in Mathieson and Wall 1982: 138) terms the level of irritation that might be aroused within the host population.

Environmental Impacts

It is hard to separate and disentangle the role of people from the role of nature. Similarly, *ecological* impacts of the incoming “Norte Americanos” are hard to measure, as it is difficult to separate these from the local/host impacts. Certainly the presence of the 8,000 visitors has an impact, and it would be greater per person

than for the host/local population (Ryan 1991: 95), but it is probably not the most serious threatening influence upon the local environment, which has at least eight million local inhabitants. The most serious impact appears to be the effect of agricultural effluents reaching the lake, and the impact of the removal of water for irrigation purposes. These negative effects are both direct and indirect via the impact of streams that flow into Lake Chapala (principally, the Lerma River). The River Lerma-Lake Chapala drainage basin supports 3,500 diverse industries, 750,000 hectares of irrigated farmland, and fourteen cities in excess of 100,000 population - in addition to the rural people. Burton (1997) suggests the contamination of the lake means that its future "does not look too promising." "Fishing, for instance, has gone from five-six tons at Chapala to about half a ton (for 400 fishermen) in 20 years." (Hunt 1998: 20). Although state and federal governments have committed themselves to the preservation/reclamation of the lake, these "signed vows" have not been adhered to (Hunt 1998: 20). This is in part because Mexico is not currently equipped for a holistic proposal that could protect the entire ecosystem. It is also in part because it is naive to expect that Lake Chapala will be "protected" or "conserved" without "first trying to ensure improved living standards for all the basin's 8 million inhabitants" (http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/tonysarticles/tblagunasaved.html).

Recent rains have led to rising lake levels once again, and may indicate the onset of a wetter cycle (Murray 1998). But these improvements may be only temporary, and may simply mean a postponement of the inevitable (http://www.guadalajara.reporter.com/no_password/chapala.html).

The social effects are, as is common in such situations, difficult to separate out into different variables. Interestingly however, there does appear to be a difference between visitor groups. The tourists are more likely to be involved in tourist-host relationships, which are unfavourable whereas the snowbirds and particularly the expats often work at promoting more favourable situations. One promoter, for instance, exhorts the employment of a house cleaner by snowbirds and expats as a means of boosting the local economy. On the other hand there does seem to have been a rise in crime as

a result of the “easy pickings” presented by the richer North Americans, and many of the housing estates now being constructed are “gated communities” protected by armed guards. Not a trouble free paradise, to be sure.

It is easier however, to recognise the impact of the visitors upon the cultural landscapes of the region (Hoffman 1992). Once again these vary from group to group. Interestingly however, there has been an apparently conscious attempt to preserve the basic form of this landscape, as this is seen as one of the attractive features of the region. Thus, for instance the scale of the host landscape has been maintained, high rise buildings are not present, and large services (“malls”) catering to the visitors are not to be found. Many services - including golf courses (with casual caddies available), restaurants, art and handicraft galleries, permanent stores, and periodic markets - have however, grown up to cater to the foreigners. Hotels and bed and breakfasts (B&Bs) supply the tourist and snowbird market, with houses and villas commonly being built, singly and in estates, to cater to the snowbird and expatriate visitors. Although most services and forms of shelter are too expensive for the host population they are often relatively inexpensive compared to their North American counterparts. In addition taxes are much lower, and the visitors can learn to take advantage of stores (etc.) that cater to the host population - at a lower price.

Conclusion

Movements between Canada and Mexico seem likely to increase in the foreseeable future. In part this reflects the widening horizons of Canadian travelers, as tourism “abroad” has become an accepted, accustomed, and even an expected part of the lifestyle of a large and growing number of Canadians (Mathieson and Wall 1982). In part it reflects the relative power of the Canadian dollar in Mexico compared to the USA - or indeed, Canada. Although this may not be a permanent condition for the “loonie,” it is likely that at least some of the “streams” of Canadians visiting Mexico as a result of this economic reality will maintain their allegiance to Mexico in the future. In part it seems to reflect the fact that tourists often become snowbirds who often become expatriate retirees; as

tourism continues to increase the whole set of processes is continually reinforced. In part it reflects high levels of “customer satisfaction.”

Socio-economic problems do not appear to be of major significance at present. Economically the visitor populations are still most commonly seen to be a benefit - at least by the more dominant members of the host population. They also provide an alternative market in many instances, for poorer sections of the population. Socially, and using Doxey’s “index of tourist irritation” as a guide (Mathieson and Wall 1982: 138), the host population falls into either the “level of euphoria” category, or the “level of apathy” category. There is little or no evidence of “irritation” or “antagonism.” Although the presence of the North Americans has, perhaps, stimulated the crime rate, it is difficult to quantify this increase.

The migrants to the Lake Chapala region appear to be quite satisfied with their new experiences, citing everything from “tranquility” to “better sex” as advantages of the region, and the increasing number who return emphasize their appreciation of the various experiences (http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/sml/gwfnfn youth.html).

The environmental challenges remain however, and are perhaps becoming more severe, which could mean that although Mexico in general may continue to grow as a destination, Lake Chapala may not be quite so popular as it has been in the recent past.

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