



A day chasing death in Juárez: But how dangerous is it, really?

Unless you have been living under a rock lately, you've probably heard that Cd. Juárez is the most dangerous city in North America. So just how dangerous is it? Our sister city is in the midst of a long and arduous war of willpower between citizens who still believe in their city and criminals who want to wrest control away from the community in order to ply their deadly concoction in an attempt to mask life's everyday problems for those who are too lazy to deal with life head on. And regardless of what you may think the solution to the problem is, you are likely to agree that Juárez is not a safe city. But really, how dangerous is Juárez?

If you were to judge Juárez by the mass media reports you would probably think that anyone going to our sister city is just plain crazy, some would even say, certifiable. Being a Mexican national and having spent the majority of my life on both sides of the border, I am as comfortable in the US as I am in Mexico. Because of my ability to interact seamlessly on both sides of the border my view may be a little more optimistic than others. Nonetheless, my answer to anyone contemplating going to Juárez, whether for business or recreation is that Juárez is safe as long as you don't go looking for trouble. That said, I admit I went looking for trouble and guess what? I survived.



Recently, I spent the day in Juárez not tending to business or enjoying the city's attractions but rather chasing down murder scenes and interviewing obvious targets of the drug wars. We were a motley crew of three men and two women in two vehicles, one with Texas plates and the other with Juárez plates. The group was comprised of a female TV producer out of Austin, a high-profile female television journalist from an English-speaking country from another continent, a camera crew based out of Juárez, and me, a tag along. I've decided to omit everyone's names in order to protect the two cameramen who spend their days covering the gruesome

murders day in and day out. It is not my place to make their jobs any more difficult than it already is.

We started out at about 10:30 in the morning by crossing the border into Juárez and meeting up with the camera crew. Immediately we headed to what could be called the epicenter of the drug wars: the Juárez General Hospital. Soon enough I realized the contrast between scandalous exaggeration and reality. We arrived at the hospital and as the crew went about their business of interviewing the person in charge, I got the benefit of interacting with everyday people and soldiers while observing what was happening in the city.

My first observation was that of a city aware of its vulnerability but not in a state of panic. Children and families went about their normal lives, walking on the streets and chatting among themselves. The soldiers were there but they were in their truck relaxing, while two manned the entrance to the ER. My first thought was, this is supposedly a city under siege so I am sure the soldiers were on high alert suspiciously checking everyone as they approached the hospital. The reality?

The two soldiers manning the check point were leisurely taking turns walking across the street to buy a burrito from the street vendor to tide them over. Approaching them, they looked up at me and said "Buenos días señor" along with a friendly wave. After spending a few moments of small talk, I asked them what they thought about what was going on. They told me that they had been mobilized as part of the war on drugs and that they missed their families, but that for the most part they liked the city. Interestingly they had very little information about the outside world and were hungrily quizzing me about what I knew about their deployment, especially after I told them that I worked on online projects.

Both felt that I probably had a wealth of information by having access to such a diverse source of information. After sharing what little I knew with them, I asked if they were apprehensive to which they replied that they were confident in their ability to defend themselves. I then asked if it was okay for me to

take their pictures and both respectfully declined stating; “we can’t tell you not to but we would rather you didn’t”. Out of respect I did not take their pictures and excused myself.

My next conversation was with two female nurses buying tacos from the corner lunch wagon. I asked if they were afraid and both responded that they were from the city and that although they were not afraid they were more careful about their surroundings. Then, I was approached by an older neatly dressed gentleman who made small talk with me for a few minutes. He soon left but unbeknown to me he was to make another appearance later in the day.

The news crew completed their interview and we got in our vehicles in anticipation of heading to the next item on our itinerary. But our plans were interrupted when we got the first call of the day, a body had been found - were we interested? Of course the news crew was interested and we raced to the scene. We arrived about five minutes after the murder had been committed. A twenty-one year-old had been killed in what was going to be a bloody Tuesday.

His body lay where it had fallen. Soldiers secured the scene along with federal police while the state investigators began to collect evidence. A small group of people gathered to watch what was going on. As the news crew went about their business, I took the opportunity to take a few pictures of the scene and talk to the civilians gathered around. I asked the federal police and soldiers about their views and experiences. Everyone was willing to talk and share their points of view.



The federal police had arrived in February and were expecting to rotate to another city soon. Their job was to train, observe and support the newly-deployed Juárez police force. The soldiers, on the other hand were a combination of newly-arrived and those who had been at the city for at least three months and who were getting ready to redeploy soon. All were extremely polite to us and to the citizens with all requests or interactions

preceded with a friendly hello. Not once was a weapon raised in a menacing way or was someone given gruff instructions. Like the other security personnel at the hospital, these law enforcement professionals were also hungry for information about what was happening in the city. It was obvious that there was a lack of reliable information about the on goings in the city for both the security units and the civilians in Juárez. Although not directly expressed by those I talked to, I got the impression that the lack of information among the troops was a decision from their command. For what purpose, I can only speculate.



I learned many interesting things from talking to these men. There are three distinct units - the military, the federal police and the state and municipal forces. Of the three, the military is in charge of security. They are divided into two groups: the “hunters” and the personnel that support the police units. The “hunters”, who wear the dark masks, are the ones that normally arrive at the scene first. Their job is to pursue, intercept and capture the criminals committing the crimes. The second group of soldiers is the military police. Their job is to help secure the scene and maintain a heavily-armed perimeter in case the perpetrators decide to

come back to finish the job. The federal police units assist the local units with security and investigation. The local police are ultimately tasked with gathering evidence and documenting the crime scene. But, although unconfirmed to me, I observed the military conducting their own investigation, but for what

purpose I could only guess as they were not as forth coming to my queries about this as they were to my other questions. My guess is that it was a military intelligence unit gathering intelligence or a unit shadowing the local police in their investigation.



I also soon realized that the military was not the only group doing their own intelligence gathering. It wasn't apparent at first, but it became obvious as the day went on. And then there he was again, the older gentlemen that had approached me earlier at the hospital was at this crime scene just minutes after we had arrived, and we had been given the lead by someone with knowledge of the operations in Juárez. I wondered if this man had also gotten his own tip. Coincidence or not, he soon approached me. "Do you want to interview the wife of the friend who was with the victim at the time of the shooting?" he asked me. Apparently, the victim had been walking with his friend when the shooting occurred. The friend was not hurt but obviously shaken by the events that had transpired. The police were interviewing him. I asked the reporter if she wanted to interview the wife and of course she said yes. It turns out that the victim had gotten out of drug rehabilitation the night before and was returning home from job-hunting when he was shot. When asked how she felt about the violence, the wife responded that there was "too much" violence and that it wasn't "fair that they killed the victim because he had just recently turned to God".

As for the gentleman who facilitated this interview, I surmised that he was some type of "fixer", someone facilitating communications between the diverse groups of interests congregating at the crime scenes; from the news media, to the security people, to the criminal elements, he seemed to be the "go-to" person. Not once did he ask for or insinuate that we had to "pay" for his service nor did we offer. So that got me thinking, what's in it for him? Since I wasn't sure what his motive was, I decided to ask the others what they thought rather than ask him directly. The Mexican cameramen agreed that he was some type of unofficial conduit but weren't sure why and for whom. And, they weren't interested in becoming too inquisitive. Of course I had to ask, were they afraid? Both of their answers were to the point, no but they recognized that they needed to be careful.

It turns out that the media at the crime scenes aren't normally targeted unless they are disrespectful of the dead. They told me, the body is most likely a criminal but it is someone's father, brother or husband. There is always someone watching that you don't get too close to the body to take pictures that are disrespectful to someone else. That's when I realized that the military wasn't the only one running an intelligence operation. At all three crime scenes there was someone that was just out of place. At the first scene there was a middle-aged, heavily tattooed man and at the second one there was another younger man, a heavily tattooed individual with a backpack. Finally at the last crime scene there were groups of individuals that could easily have been observing for others but it was hard to tell as this last scene had five young man shot to death in front of a house and the crowds were much larger.



On the way to the next interview we once again received a call of another shooting; coincidentally it was on the way to our next stop. Of course the news crew was more than interested and we arrived less than 3 minutes after the shooting had occurred. This time it was a Jeep Cherokee with three bodies in it. It had been shot at by a dark colored SUV. Once again we were treated respectfully and extended all courtesies. Soon, the news crew was able to complete the second interview of the day, and once again we got the call of another murder. This time we arrived about an hour and half after the crime had been committed. At this latest crime scene there were five bodies of young men in a low-income neighborhood. I asked one of the federal officers if this was drug related and he replied, "They say no, but look at how poor the neighborhood is and look at the car in the drive way". It was a new model VW Beetle. Later it



would turn out that the vehicle had been reported stolen earlier in the day. Again, the story was that the young men were returning home from a day of job hunting according to the witnesses and family members.

We went searching for insight into the violence in Juárez and what we found was nine bodies at three crime scenes. There were twelve murders that day. Some would say we went looking for trouble and we found it. But, were we in danger? More to the point is Juárez dangerous or not? I tend to think that the American news media exaggerates in order to sell their news reports to the public. But at the same time I can't deny that it is uncommon to be at two crime scenes with multiple bodies literally minutes after the victims were killed. The individuals with us, who live and work in Juárez, would have one point of view and no one likes to talk bad about their city. The two news professionals have their point of view based on their own experiences and bias. And I have my own point of view.

Of our motley crew I think the best answer to the question of Juárez' safety comes from the foreign correspondent in our crew. Her response to my question about fear was; "I didn't feel afraid the whole time we were in Juárez, rather I was a little apprehensive."

My advice if you are planning on visiting Juárez? Check your fear at the border and use common sense.

Would I take a family member or friend to Juárez? Yes. Do I still go to Juárez? Yes. Am I afraid? No. But, I am aware of my surroundings.

There is an old saying in Spanish; "Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres". It loosely translates to; tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are. I think this best describes your personal security in Juárez, or anywhere else for that matter. Hang out with drug dealers, addicts or other criminals and you are likely to get hurt. Keep to yourself and stay out of trouble and you are likely to be safe.