

Surfers warn of armed robberies while camping on Mexico's Baja coast

by Terry Rodgers & Anna Cearley -

The fear is growing.

Southern California surfers have reason to be especially wary about venturing to Baja California after a spate of armed robberies by paramilitary-style criminals.

SURFERATTACK - Ruben Valdez and Briana Kennedy of Orange County surfed near where robbers have struck. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. **SURFERATTACK** - Longtime surfers familiar with the Baja California coast call it hazardous territory because of a run of robberies since June. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. About a half-dozen robberies and carjackings that targeted U.S. surfers en route to camping spots along the 780-mile Baja California peninsula have occurred since June, according to unconfirmed tallies reported via the Internet.

Mexican authorities said they've heard of few such crimes since August, but concede that American tourists may not be stopping to report the incidents before returning to the United States.

In addition to the buzz created by online postings, members of the Swamis Surfing Association heard from one of their own Tuesday night about the heightened crime risk.

Pat Weber of Encinitas, Calif., talked during the club's meeting about his traumatic experience last month at Cuatro Casas, a popular but remote surfing spot about 200 miles south of the border.

Weber said he and his girlfriend had gone to Baja to escape the foul air caused by the wildfires in San Diego County. Just after sundown Oct. 23, two men wearing military clothing and ski masks confronted the couple. Weber said he initially refused to come out of his motor home, but surrendered after the robbers fired a shot into the vehicle.

"They made us get down on all fours - execution position - and put guns to our heads," said Weber, who owns the San Diego Surfing Academy in Carlsbad, Calif.

The gunmen sexually assaulted his girlfriend before stealing \$10,000 worth of computers, video cameras and other gear, he said.

Weber had logged more than 500 days in Baja and taken dozens of students there over the past 10 years. He now considers it hazardous territory.

"My career guiding surfing tours into Mexico is over," he said. "I'm cutting it off. I'm urging everyone else for their safety to do the same."

Unlike many other victims, Weber stopped in Ensenada to report the robbery and assault to police. He wasn't the only recent victim at Cuatro Casas.

On Sept. 16, three San Diego-area surfers camping there were robbed at gunpoint by two men fitting the same description as those who attacked Weber and his girlfriend.

The three surfers, each in their 20s, were roused from their tents at midnight and robbed by the masked men. The victims lost everything but their vehicle and keys. Terrified, they did not report the crime until they had returned home.

Some visitors don't trust Mexican law-enforcement officers, who have been linked to corruption and criminal groups over the years. Other travelers just want to put the trauma behind them as quickly as possible.

Mexican authorities said they have increased patrols along the U.S.-Mexico border highway, Calle Internacional, and along Mexico Highway 1 leading to the Ensenada toll road.

Investigators need help from victims to solve the recent cases, said Antonio Martinez Luna, the attorney general for Baja California. Mexican tourism officials have assigned a liaison to document the robberies and encourage people to provide more information.

"There are lots of things we need to go over," Luna said. "As more time passes, the trail is lost and the memory is lost."

Several recent crimes against surfers - and one against fishermen - were roadside robberies.

In each of those cases, the perpetrators fooled tourists into pulling off the road by using flashing lights similar to those mounted on police cars. These thieves forced their victims to kneel and put firearms to their heads.

On Aug. 26, a group of anglers traveling along the border highway were carjacked and robbed. They later reported it on a sportfishing Web site.

Five days later, a similar crime occurred about 4:30 a.m. along the same stretch of the highway.

In that incident, three surfers from north San Diego County were traveling in two trucks. A group of armed men pulled them over just north of the Ensenada toll road. The surfers were forced out of their vehicles at gunpoint, and one was ordered to kneel and crawl down the face of a cliff as if he were about to be executed.

The gunmen took the trucks and other equipment - worth \$60,000 - and left the surfers dazed on the roadside.

Eric "Bird" Huffman, owner of SouthCoast Surf Shop in Pacific Beach in San Diego, has traveled to Baja for more than 30 years. He now considers it too risky to travel anywhere within 100 miles of the border.

Huffman said his apprehension is based on a proliferation of harrowing stories from his customers.

"The bad guys are obviously getting more aggressive," he said. "It's like the frickin' Wild West down there."

Some people posting comments on various surfing and sportfishing Web sites have speculated whether members of the Zetas, a gang tied to drug traffickers, committed some of the crimes. But U.S. law enforcement agents who track violent trends in Mexico could not confirm any connection with the Zetas.

At the Hotel La Fonda, a popular oasis for travelers along the Baja coast, general manager Alejandro Martinez said he hasn't noticed a drop in the number of American surfers.

But Joe Segal of Hawaii, who operates a Web site that offers Mexican car insurance and guide books on Baja surfing, said his sales dipped sharply after articles about the robberies spread on the Internet.

"Southern California surfers are affected by this the most because they are the ones who regularly drive down there to escape the California scene," Segal said.

Carol Kramer, co-owner of the Baja Discover Travel Club in San Diego, said she has urged Baja tourism officials to address the latest crime fears swiftly and decisively.

"You always hear about the 'mordidas' - the bribes. But these recent incidents were far more severe," said Kramer, referring to the longtime practice of Mexican police officers taking bribes for trumped-up traffic citations.

"(Mexican officials) have to realize that if this keeps happening, they will cut off their foot, and tourism will dwindle," she added.

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