

Yukon woos ‘unwelcome’ Mexicans

Friday August 21, 2009

By Genesee Keevil

Ian Stewart/Yukon News



Mexican photographer Cesar Damian with local artist Joyce Majiski in Whitehorse last week.

Canada is the rudest host country Cesar Damian has ever visited.

“It’s like, ‘Please come to dinner - but I don’t want you at my dinner,’” he said.

Last year, the Mexican artist was invited to the Yukon as part of an artist exchange. But Canada changed its regulations just before he left.

Overnight, Mexicans travelling to Canada required a visa.

When Damian arrived at the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City the lineup snaked on for blocks.

“There were people in line with flights leaving that day,” he said.

“They had their tickets in their hands and their suitcases.”

The changes, which took effect without warning at midnight on July 14th, were set to staunch a flood of Mexican refugee claims in Canada.

“It’s not a pleasant thing to do, but it’s absolutely necessary to protect the integrity of our immigration system and our laws,” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney told CBC at the time.

But the Canadian Embassy in Mexico wasn’t prepared for the changes, said Damian.

“There were people sleeping there with their suitcases,” he said.

“You stand in line and there is a big wall and loudspeakers, and every 20 minutes they would ask four people to come in.

“I saw people who didn’t get their visas.”

It was offensive, said Damian.

“It felt like we weren’t welcome.”

After waiting in line for an hour, Damian realized he didn’t have the proper documents; he needed a certified cheque.

But the bank in his hometown wasn’t familiar with it, because the visa requirements were so new, he said.

When he returned to the embassy a few days later, the crowds had dissipated.

The only people left were folks who had to go to Canada for school or work, he said.

“People who were travelling for leisure chose to go to another place, because they realized they weren’t welcome in Canada,” said Damian.

The Yukon has been targeting Mexico as an emerging tourist market, said Tourism and Culture Minister Elaine Taylor.

Over the past two years, the territorial government has spent roughly \$28,000 marketing the Yukon in Mexico, said Tourism director Pierre Germain in an e-mail.

Taylor’s department has been “bringing up Mexican media to raise awareness about the Yukon,” she said. These familiarization, or “fam,” tours have cost about \$4,000 a year.

“Two years ago at the Yukon Quest, there was a (Mexican) travel-trade familiarization tour here and they were able to experience winter tourism at its best,” said Taylor.

The remaining \$20,000 was spent on advertising and trade initiatives.

But the new visa restrictions may throw a wrench in things.

“We know there are enhanced security measures being taken all around us,” said Taylor.

“And we are continuing to monitor what that means in terms of visitation, not just to the Yukon but all of Canada.”

“We need to be regarded as a safe, secure destination. That’s one of the attractive points of marketing Canada to the rest of the world. However, we want to ensure there’s a free-flowing trade of commodities and visitors as well.

“It’s a fine balance and we need to always work toward that.”

At The Council of the Federation premiers’ meeting in Saskatchewan two weeks ago, the premiers called on Ottawa “to make it easier for Mexicans living outside Mexico City to obtain Canadian visas and to work on a longer-term resolution of this issue.”

But it may be too little, too late.

A lot of our tourism dollars are going to be lost, said local artist Joyce Majiski, who is running the cultural exchange with Damian and other Mexican artists.

“It’s about who actually gets through the door to be a tourist in the country,” she said.

Mexican travellers have to convince visa officers their Canadian visit will be temporary and that they won’t overstay their approved time. They also need to be healthy, have no criminal record, pose no security risk and have enough money to cover their stay.

After three attempts, Damian was issued a five-year working visa.

But he hadn’t planned on working.

“I just said it was a cultural exchange with a group of artists,” said Majiski, who wrote a letter to support Damian’s visa application.

Damian was coming north to explore immigration stories, a theme that has run through most of his art and photography.

During one of his projects, Damian spent time with the Mexican border cops photographing immigrants from South America who ride the tops of freight trains in a last-ditch effort to get to the US.

“I had to stop because it was so sad,” he said.

Damian was in the hospital with one young man who, when he woke up, learned he'd lost a leg falling off the top of a train car in a scuffle.

He also met a man who'd just been caught after a year travelling from Peru to the Mexican border.

"His father had left (for the US) when he was five, and now his father was dying and he wanted to meet him before it was too late," said Damian.

"He'd just had a son of his own."

The man was sent back to Peru.

"It was very hard," said Damian.

Curious about the dangerous border crossing, Damian hired a guide and travelled illegally into the United States as part of another art project.

"It was very hard, emotionally, spiritually and physically," he said.

Even living in the US legally, as a photography student in Arizona, was difficult.

"People were very open there," said Damian.

"But then they'd ask me where I was from, and when I said Mexico, they'd put up a wall."

This treatment made Damian even more curious about immigration and its effects.

Waiting at the embassy, he was reminded of his time in the US.

"There was no one to talk to," he said. It was just "a big wall," and a loudspeaker calling out numbers.

"I had the same feeling I experienced in Arizona," he said.

In Whitehorse, Damian plans to talk to immigrants who have moved to the North from all over the world.

"I am trying to understand my own feelings about foreigners, because I was very critical of the US, so I am trying to look at the other side," he said.

Meeting with immigrants isn't easy.

"There's a lot of fear," said Damian.

"They don't want to talk about their real situation because it's often illegal."

“But it’s an amazing project because it could open a lot of doors for people who don’t have a voice or the freedom to speak.”

Damian’s work will be part of a collaborative exhibition at the Yukon Arts Centre Gallery in November entitled, *Voz/Voice: The Arts of Resistance and Resilience*.

Tourism and Culture’s arts fund has given the venture, called the Llama Project, \$25,000.

“This particular collaboration enables our Yukon artists to share their knowledge, training and expertise, while in turn learning skills and talents of other artists, which will help in the further development of arts in the territory,” said Taylor.

If it weren’t for the show and his work with other members of the artistic exchange, Damian wouldn’t have bothered going through the hassle of getting a Canadian visa.

“I was not welcome,” he said.

“If it was just tourism, I would have preferred to go to another place.”

Contact Genesee Keevil at

gkeevil@yukon-news.com