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## Tourists shun Mexico, embrace Caribbean amid flu

By DANICA COTO – 2 days ago

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — The Caribbean is reporting an unexpected jump in tourism as vacationers once bound for Mexico's sunny shores turn to new destinations amid worries about swine flu.

Travel agents in the U.S. say they are aggressively recommending Jamaica and the Dominican Republic as alternatives to Cancun and other Mexican beach resorts because they are close and affordable.

"The seats are selling out so quickly that the rates on the airlines have just skyrocketed," said Barbara Gomez, a Tripology travel expert based in Pennsylvania. "They're both very popular destinations."

The increase in flights and cruise ship arrivals to the Caribbean comes as the region struggles to revive its tourism industry, with several nations reporting double-digit drops in visits from last year — a slump that officials have blamed on the global economic crisis.

Although it is too early to talk of a definitive trend, cruise lines and tour group operators are redistributing passengers to the region, said Hugh Riley, interim secretary general of the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

Most clients are open to the possibility of swapping Mexico for the Caribbean, but concerns remain, said Sheri Brown at the Travel Leaders agency in Plano, Texas. "Usually, their first question is if it's going to cost a lot more," she said.

Jeanne Ciociola of Philadelphia said her upcoming 25th wedding anniversary was the only reason she paid \$700 extra for a trip to Jamaica instead of a stay at resort on Mexico's Yucatan coast.

But she is not happy about staying in a Jamaican hotel with two double beds.

"I've been sleeping on a full-size bed for 25 years," she said. "For our anniversary, I wanted to sleep in a king bed. It's a disappointment all around."

In the Dominican Republic, at least 11 tour group flights originally bound for Mexico arrived in Punta Cana and Puerto Plata this week, said Haydee Kuret, president of the National Association of Hotels and Restaurants. The flights came from several nations, including the United States and Spain, she said.

Meanwhile, Carnival Cruise Lines announced Friday that it would divert three of its ships from Mexico to the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each is capable of carrying nearly 3,000 passengers.