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# Building destination tourism alliances in the central-western region of Mexico for the recovery of post-Covid-19 tourism

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on knowing the joint work between Mexico's tourist destinations and the private sector, promoting proximity tourism for the recovery of tourism after the Covid-19 pandemic, through the creation of the "Central West Pact for Tourism" in Mexico. For the qualitative empirical analysis based on a case study, it is based on secondary data and an in-depth interview conducted virtually with two pioneering leaders of this pact and responsible for tourism management in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. In addition, a qualitative content analysis of the project's official website (*Viaja En Corto – Descubre El Centro de México*, 2021) was carried out, with the aim of obtaining data to complement the interview. The results obtained are presented with graphical maps and allow to know in depth the main objectives and common characteristics of the members of the Pact, strategies and challenges that this tourism alliance has. This article may be of interest to leaders of destination management organizations to build partnerships with the public and private sectors.

**Keywords:** destinations, Mexico, pandemic, proximity tourism, sector alliance, tourism region.

## Introduction

How much do we bet on visiting destinations close to our territory? Do we feel more attracted to traveling to distant destinations?

Generally, we don't know what we have close, close in our community as heritage, and this can be similar to what happens on a personal level with the knowledge of our own "I", it is difficult for us to identify our strengths or positive characteristics of our personality, to look inside ourselves. The

same could happen with our nearby territory, it is difficult for us to give value within our territory. This may be due to the fact that, in a context of globalization of information, knowledge of distant territories is made easier to the detriment of other more popular and closer ones (Soria & Llurdés Coit, 2013). This could make the potential tourists have many destination options when deciding, and this could make them feel less attracted to know their heritage, considering that it will be an option that will always be close to him or her.

Strong globalization of the markets in general and the tourism industry in particular have caused an increase without precedent of the competition between destinations and they compete to awaken interest in potential tourists and position themselves in the place selected for their future vacations (Acerenza, 2003).

The effects of this Covid-19 pandemic have halted the way many destinations work to innovate in new forms of recovery. The profile and needs of tourists are constantly changing. Still without a doubt we are facing a great opportunity in the middle of the crisis to design the next tourism, where we can't return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem (Sengel, 2021).

### **Literature review and context**

The restrictions imposed in many countries have led to short trips for proximity tourism as shown by the UNWTO in its 2020 report on "Tourism and Covid" (UNWTO, 2020) where domestic tourism has registered a positive development in many markets due to the fact that the people travel to the nearest areas. In that sense distance may actually become a disadvantage and proximity a new commodity (Hussain, 2021).

But it is not only the restrictions imposed that have led to nearby trips, it is also the fear of people catching Covid-19 in generally crowded tourist destinations such as large cities and, on the other hand, the decrease in purchasing power derived from the situation (Fernández Alles, 2020).

In the context of growing insecurity and uncertainty, nearby destinations could be considered 'less risky' by many potential tourists who, having been noticeably affected by the economic crisis arising from the health crisis, have seen their purchasing power reduced (Romagosa, 2020).

Nature, rural tourism and road-trips have become popular choices due to the travel limitations and the search for outdoor experiences, likewise this represents an opportunity to connect with local communities and nearby populations. One of the objectives of proximity tourism is to contribute to the valorization of the heritage present in a territory, and structure it for its transformation into a resource of tourist interest (Soria & Llurdés Coit, 2013). The existing generic definitions of proximity tourism refer to a form of tourism that emphasizes local destinations, short distances and lower-carbon modes of transport, as well as the mundane exceptionality of the ordinary (Rantala et al., 2020).

Is it time for proximity tourism? How many destination management organizations have seen an opportunity to promote this type of tourism? It seems that sometimes tourist destinations work in an individualized way and exploiting the same tourist products that have been in the international market, positioned them for years in the face of international demand. Is a collaborative strategy possible to recover tourism?

The tourism sector in México is facing the worst moment in its history, due to the effects of Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to prevent its spread. This pandemic took over 247,295 employees in the tourism sector during 2020 (Morales, 2021) and in the last quarter of 2020, the GDP had a 26.9% drop compared to the same quarter of the previous year (INEGI, 2020).

Faced with this crisis and derived from the lack of strategies and measures for economic recovery in tourism in México, some destination management organizations of the center-west of Mexico decided to set up actions to recover tourism sector, this is the case of the "Central West

Pact for Tourism”, on which this research is focused.

## Methodology

This study is based on the interpretivist paradigm which addresses the subjective dimension, meanings and experiences, of social actors (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019). An important feature of interpretivism is that it considers the singularity of a given social phenomenon in its particular context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019). In line with the previous idea, this study explores the particular characteristics of the Central-West Pact for Tourism and the perspectives of governmental authorities in this field.

The methodological design and empirical analysis of this article are based on a case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Durán, 2012) to answer how and why a tourism promotion strategy with collaboration between destinations can represent a post-Covid tourism development based on proximity tourism. The analysis is based on secondary data analysis and an in-depth qualitative interview, a design similar to the one used and described by Bowen (2009).

The first stage was a qualitative interview conducted virtually in July 2021 with two pioneering leaders and pursuers of this pact responsible for the destination management of Zacatecas, Mexico. Regarding the design of the interview, a single, larger interview was conducted (McCracken, 1988) with questions structured to achieve a more complete understanding of background, members and requirements, objectives, benefits, strategies and challenges. Subsequently, the interview was transcribed and a microanalysis of the text was applied to establish relationships (Trinidad Requena et al., 2003) and the text of the interview was analyzed from an open coding process identifying main ideas and

meanings collected from the interviewees (Williams & Moser, 2019).

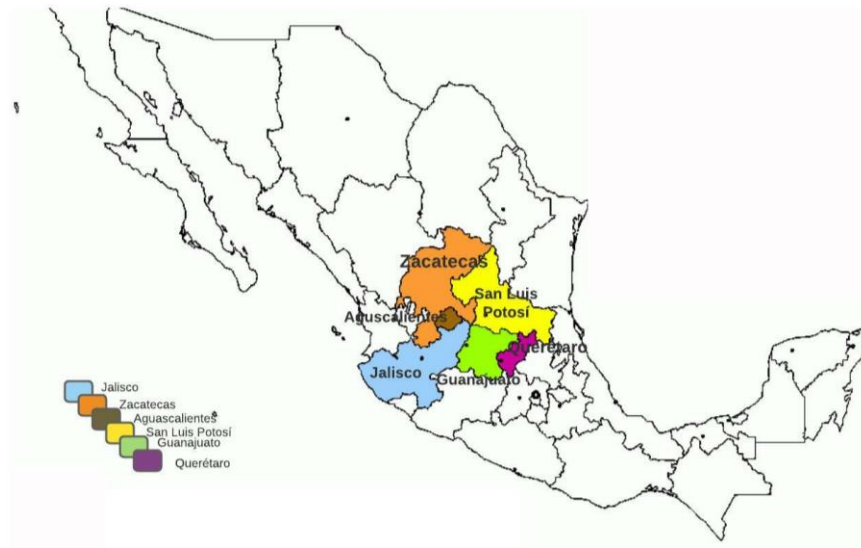
Secondly, data analysis of the project “*Viaja En Corto*” (“*Travel by short distance*”) (Viaja en Corto, 2021) was carried out, with the aim of obtaining data that complements the interview. The analysis concerned presentation, organizational plans and statistical information published in the project’s official website. Also, there has been made an analysis of the publicity campaigns “*Viaja en Corto*” (“*Travel by short distance*”), “*The Heartbeat of the Pueblos Mágicos*” (Magical Towns) of the Center-West, “*Fourteen points to attend you*” and “*Your new summer*”. The information is illustrated in diagrams or mind maps (Seid, 2016).

## Results

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020), in April of the same year the destination management organizations of the center-west in Mexico accelerated previous joint work intentions that had already been carried out before the pandemic. In August 2020 this gave rise to the “Central-West Pact for Tourism”, made up of six states in the heart of the country: Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas, who have in common proximity (from two to four and a half hours away by road), gastronomy, culture, history and traditions, natural landscapes and World Heritage cities declared by UNESCO (*Centro del Patrimonio Mundial*, n.d.). In addition to the fact that Jalisco is strategically known for being a city beach destination.

In Figure 1 we find the map of Mexico and the states that are part of this pact marked with colour.

**Figure 1.** Map of the member states of the “Central West Pact for Tourism” (own source)



The main objective in 2017 and 2018 was to work together and attract distant markets such as Europe, and show to the world a Mexico diversified in tourism like a “Viceregal Mexico”, “Independent Mexico” or “The Center of Mexico”, this considering that is unlikely that a foreigner tourist travels several days and visit a single state, but surely several regions. It is important to make another Mexico known beyond the south of the country (See Figure 2).

Although the initial and main purpose was another, the objective now is to promote proximity tourism, for the population of this region which is 22 million (Gobierno de Jalisco, 2021), the intention is not that tourists recognize the name of the pact, but they can recognize the different campaigns, meet their territory and identify their roots by practicing tourism. According to the interviewees, in the future when the health situation improves, the initial objective will be resumed (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Members of the “Central-West Pact for Tourism” previous and current objectives (own source)

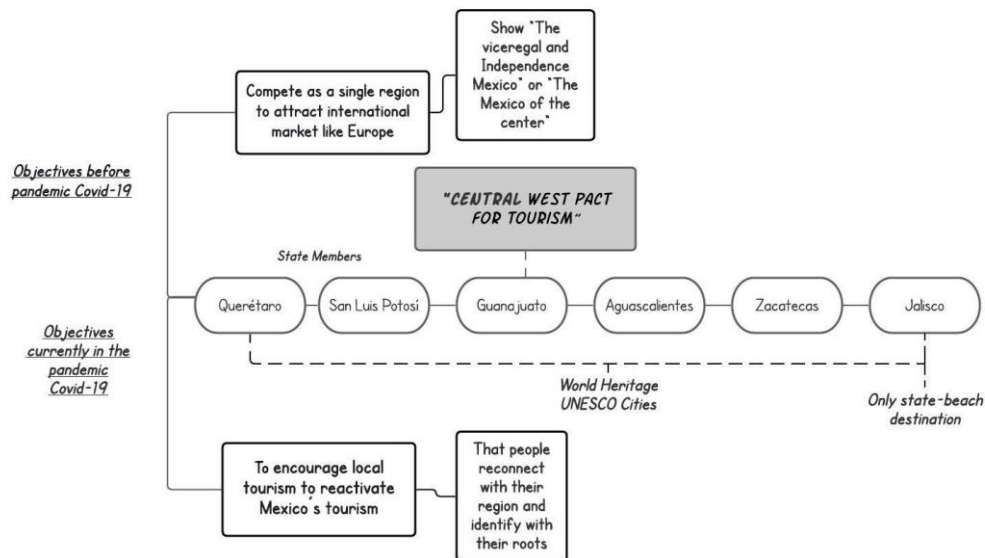


Figure 3. Logo of the tourism campaign “Viaja en Corto” (“Travel by short distance”), as well as the destination brands of the members of the Pact (source: Mejía, 2020)



1- “Viaja en Corto” (“Travel by short distance”): promotion campaign that seeks to encourage road tourism through different media: TV, radio, print and digital media. Advertising information is shared from all states within their own territories. Through the official website, more than 350 experiences are marketed, classified in: adventure, culture, family, gastronomy, nature, beach and romance, this in conjunction with the tour-operator “Experiencias Mx”.

There are activities that have no cost due to their nature. In addition, it has a section of “getaways”, which are twenty interchangeable experiences passing through two capitals, where you can enjoy an environment of archaeology, magical town, spirits, gastronomy or crafts according to the interests of the tourist. Leaving aside the idea of generating a monothematic tourism route product that, at present, they consider unfunctional, except for the religious ones. This campaign

includes alliances with hotel chains where residents of these states who travel to one of the destinations get 30% discount when staying as well as with travel agencies, tour operators and car rental agencies.

In figure 3 the logo of the “Viaja en Corto” (“Travel by short distance”), campaign is shown, together with the destination brands of each state.

2- “The Heartbeat of the Pueblos Mágicos” (Magical Towns) of the Central-West of Mexico: this campaign seeks the promotion of the Pueblos Mágicos from the pact members. The Pueblos Mágicos are localities that have historic attributes and a socio-cultural manifestation that makes them belong to the Federal tourism program, called Pueblos Mágicos (SECTUR, 2019).

There are a total of 34 Magical Towns in this region and in order to promote the visit to them between the population, they created an exposition of 34 giant sculptural



hearts, hand-painted by craftsmen from these localities. These pieces are touring the 6 states so they can stay in some emblematic places from the capital cities through a “QR” code that connects the tourists directly to a blog where the

interested person can have a list of experiences for touring these places.

Below in figures 4, 5, and 6, you can see the different hearts of the Pueblos Mágicos painted by their artists.

**Figure 4. Photograph of an artisan from the Magical Town of Lagos de Moreno capturing the heritage of the territory through painting for the promotional campaign (source: *Viaja en Corto*, 2021)**



**Figure 5. Photograph of artisans with sculptural hearts already painted for the promotional campaign of the Magical Town of San Luis Potosí (source: *Viaja en Corto*, 2021)**



**Figure 6. The exhibition of “The Heartbeat of Magical Towns”, arrives to Mascota, Jalisco (source: Carrillo, 2021)**



3- **“Fourteen points to attend you”**: this is a document that was created by the destination management organizations responsible for the pact and summarize health and security protocols suggested by international health organizations and the World Travel Tourism Council (WTTC, 2020).

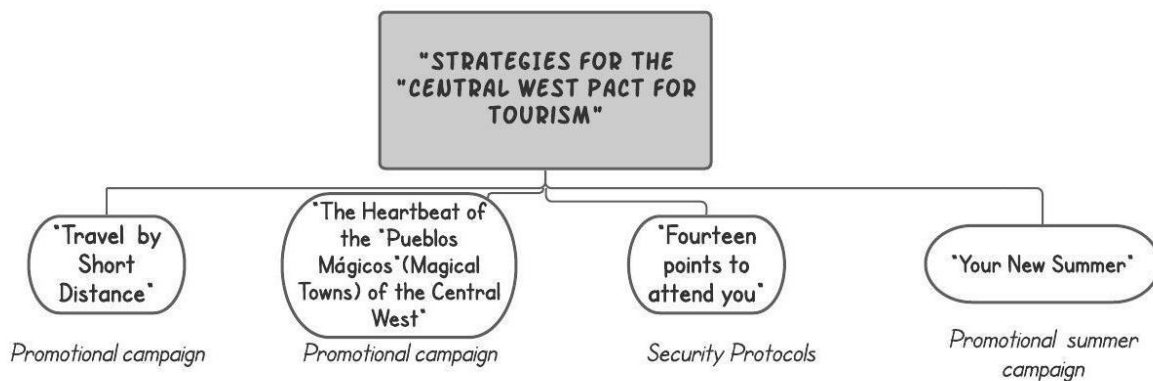
These fourteen points are minimum requirements that each service tourism provider must have in their establishment (*Catorce Puntos Para Atenderte, 2021*). Below is an example of point 6 of this document:

*Limit the capacity (number) of users according to the space of the establishment to guarantee the distance of at least 1.5 meters between each person. Define in a plan (lay out) different scenarios*

*that allow the correct distribution while respecting the healthy distance and the adequate circulation: a single entrance and a single exit with the fewest possible crossings. Maintain a maximum of 50% capacity in the establishments (Catorce Puntos Para Atenderte, 2021).*

4- **“Your new summer”**: this campaign seeks to influence people to travel in summer. It is about making summer feel within your reach. We are living difficult moments with the pandemic, but it is a personal decision if you decide to travel or not. Actually, this campaign is going to be launched in the market. In Figure 7 we find the four strategies that make up this Pact, as well as what each one means.

Figure 7. Strategies of the “Central West Pact for Tourism” (own source)



Something important to highlight about this strategy is the return on investment, with the contribution that each state has made, approximately 400,000 Mexican pesos, and each Mexican peso invested has been multiplied up to thirteen times. This can be seen reflected in advertising benefits on TV, radio, social networks, website, print advertising and others.

Some challenges that the Pact faces are:

- a) Collection, application, administration and regulation of resources. Mainly to be able to find that normative formula to create a nearby fund and finance all the joint promotion and development actions that the six states could have. The



creation of a trust would be ideal to generate program standards.

- b) Continuity of the plan due to changes of government in three of the states this year. In the coming weeks they will meet with transition teams so that it can be continued.
- c) Development of shared indicators to measure the impact and fulfilment of the objectives. Currently each destination management organization has a statistics department that reports data on arrivals and occupancy to “Data Tur” (National Statistical Information System of the Tourism Sector of Mexico) (*Datatur*, 2021); however, specific indicators cannot yet be developed to measure the impact of the strategies. It is important to mention that Guanajuato has a tourist observatory endorsed by the UNWTO that presents information from the Pact and graphs showing joint information on the members (*Observatorio Turístico del Estado de Guanajuato*, 2021a).

The following figure (Figure 8) shows a table with indicators for

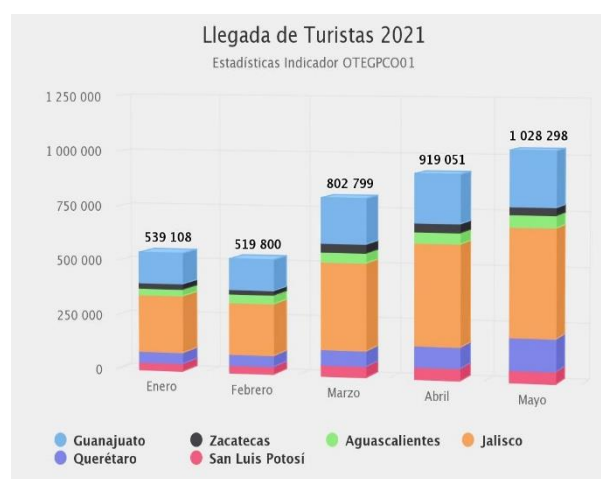
each member state of the Pact generated by the Guanajuato Tourism Observatory, specifically the monthly arrival of tourists in hotels from 1 to 5 stars.

- d) Specifically develop actions that promote commitment to sustainable tourism. For example, favour policies that mitigate environmental damage. Although there are objectives that are consistent with sustainability, such as: decentralization of tourism in large cities, commercialization and development of activities that seek to bring the population closer to the natural and cultural heritage.

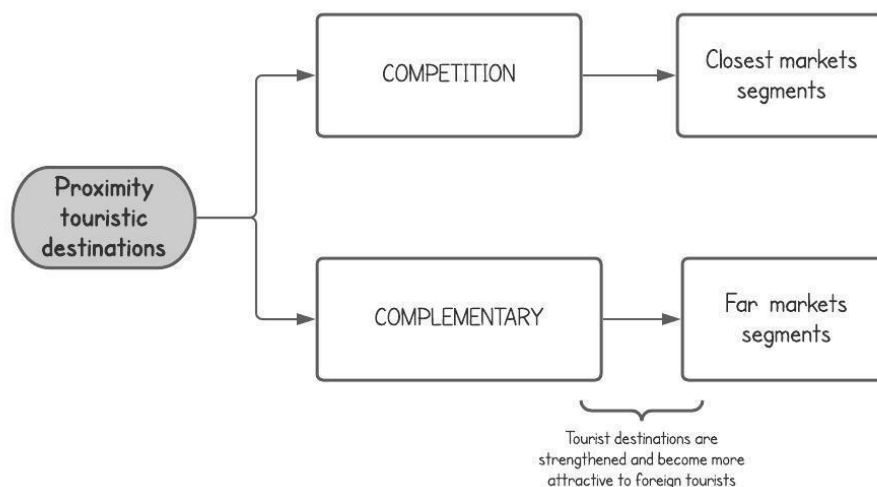
Finally, it is added, when a destination goes to closer markets, it becomes competition from its border destinations, but when you want to go to a distant market, the proximity destinations are called complementary (See Figure 9).

Despite the fact that today there are already several strategies to strengthen this Pact, the purpose is that there will continue to be more projects and joint work that strengthens the union.

**Figure 8. Monthly arrival of tourists to hotels from 1 to 5 stars in the member states of the Pact** (source: Observatorio Turístico del Estado de Guanajuato, 2021b)



**Figure 9. The vocation of work of the destinations of proximity** (own source)



## Discussions and conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has made local tourism a favoured type of tourism due to health circumstances. The crisis has made us change direction and accelerate new forms of recovery of the tourism industry, as we can see with the Central West Pact for Tourism. This opens a range of possibilities to connect with nearby heritage.

The results of this article show that the analyzed pact confirms that it is possible for destinations to collaborate and build alliances in the tourism value chain to be more competitive without the need to always be a competitor. This invites us to diversify travel options by looking widely and deeply into the territory. According to Romagosa (2020) the destinations that seem to be in a less disadvantaged, more resilient position, are those that have more diversified options, are less dependent on a particular market and have opted for qualitative rather than quantitative criteria (that is, development rather than growth). The call is to diversify, and work in collaboration throughout the tourism value chain.

The joint work between destinations can reduce many costs in tourism promotion, help the generation of more information and strategies, add talent and expand the tourist imagination of the country if they work from the construction of an image for the Center-West of Mexico.

For this particular reactivation strategy where one of the common characteristics is the short distance between the “proximity” destinations, it is considered that this type of tourism is used for a matter of necessity and to act quickly in the face of crises, however there is no consideration of sustainability and acting more responsibly. This should be a time to make far-reaching structural changes in tourism starting with a reflection on its sustainability and bring it closer to resilience (Hussain, 2021).

If work is done on greater social and environmental (Lew, 2020) awareness regardless of whether there is a pandemic or not, post-crisis tourists will probably choose to travel to destinations closer to their place of residence (Romagosa, 2020). Sustainability today must be recognizable, identifiable and “affordable” (Díaz de Losada, 2020), without sustainability there is no sustainable tourism.

Moreover, this Pact has a local tourist offer based on experiences that seek to bring people closer to their heritage, however, the construction of alliances with local service providers, such as hotels and restaurants, could create value. Actually, the current alliances contemplate large hotel chains, in the definition of proximity, not only the requirement of a short distance to travel cannot enter, but also the inclusion and commitment of consumption of local products, identity of the destinations throughout the value chain called km0 (Suárez Rosa & Fumero González, 2020) and the promotion of slow tourism that seeks to strengthen ties with local communities (Palomo Ortega et al., 2020), but, above all, to act thinking of the general interest of society, of the locals and not so much of the interests of certain economic actors with great influence or market power (Palomo Ortega et al., 2020). Proximity in tourism would also have to contemplate this proximity to know the tourist in depth and that the tourist also feels close to the destination management organizations and feel safe in the destination.

Despite the fact that this Pact faces numerous challenges, the great work that has been done so far with all the strategies it contemplates should be recognized. Its future lines of improvement could be based on the alignment of tourism indicators and observatories, the creation of a regional tourism development plan and a sustainability policy. As future lines of research, it would be contemplated to study the level of participation and interest of the member states as well as the impact of the strategies in terms of tourist arrivals to the region.

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