

This is Cancun, a 14-mile strip of white sand, blue water and high rise hotels and danger. What some now call a fake paradise.

SOT: Music

Lydia Cacho: It looks like paradise, but underneath the paradise, there's a lot of people suffering, but we're not supposed to say it because it's not good for business.

Almost two million Americans a year come to this Mexican resort, including huge numbers of American high school and college students on package tours for Spring Break and Senior Week.

SOT: It's friggin wild, it's awesome, it's amazing!

With thousands expected this month for another set of senior weeks, business is booming.

And few want to talk of the danger that some American teenage tourists have discovered in Cancun.

Suzanne Lewers: I just want out of Mexico. Just get me out of this country for the love of Christ.

It's not something given much prominence by the tour companies, but the U.S. State Department's travel information sheet for Mexico warns that there have been a "significant number of rapes in Cancun."

Suzanne Lewers: And you know, Cancun and Mexico did a really good job of keeping it under wraps.

Suzanne Lewers, of Sonoma County, California is one of the rape victims.

She has now decided to talk publicly about her Senior Week in Cancun, appearing on 20/20 in hopes other American teens can learn from her experience.

Suzanne Lewers: People need to know that these kind of things happen. And the Natalie Holloway thing, I mean, this happens, it's reality.

Much like the ill-fated senior week trip to Aruba by Alabama teenager Natalie Holloway, Suzanne's trip to Cancun was supposed to be friends and fun and sun and whatever, a graduation present from her parents.

Suzanne Lewers: I walked off the plane, and there was a guy with a cart with beer, and so we all just went straight for the beer.

Two days later when she and her friends had a falling out, Suzanne decided to go on a nighttime party cruise alone.

Suzanne Lewers: Got to the place and I was standing in line, and there's just groups of friends in front of me and behind me, and there I am standing by myself. And I almost started to cry, I was so upset.

That's when a stranger offered to help.

Suzanne Lewers: I was just like, 'Get away from me.' He's like walking next to me, no, I can't leave a girl crying. A really nice dressed guy.

She says he first offered her a cigarette and then asked if she had a few dollars for a joint.

Suzanne: I handed him a five dollar bill, um... he went to grab it, and when he did that, out from his pocket came a badge. Shining in the moonlight. Could you imagine? I mean, it was like somebody had hit me in my chest and took my breath away. And I'm like, 'Oh my God, I'm going to jail in Mexico.'

It was worse than that. He took her to a hotel on the pretext she would be freed if she would help him arrest others. There were no others.

Suzanne Lewers: He goes, 'Something we can do, we can stay here and we can do what men and women do.' I start crying again, like... how are you gonna not stop crying then. And I start crying, trying to be strong, but crying nonetheless. And um... and I swear my life flashed before my eyes - when I was a little girl. And I was very uncertain about my future.

Brian Ross: You thought you were, he was gonna kill you?

Suzanne Lewers: I was positive. I knew. And um, he had me, you know, he sat down on the couch, like we were in a strip movie or something, and 'take off your clothes.' And I'm standing there, I'm like, 'Please no,

dude, you don't understand. No, please.' Told you stop crying, just take 'em off. I'm like, oh wow, and if you know me, I've always said if I was in that situation, I'd fight my way out of it. And things change when you're really there. And um... I did what he said, you know. And um, it was just horrible. He had me for hours and hours and hours. I wanna say around like six or seven hours. I mean, it was a repeated assault. Over and over. Um, I did at one point try to fight back. Wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done. I found myself blacking out from being choked and when I woke back up I thought, okay, well that didn't work.

Brian Ross: And, and he was, he was still there?

Suzanne Lewers: And he was still there, um, he was raping me actually, when I woke up. It was rape after rape after rape.

When it was finally over, he walked her out to the empty streets of Cancun and kissed her on the cheek.

Suzanne Lewers: How dare he. It just went through my mind, how dare he pull me close and kiss my cheek. (Exhales)

Suzanne's description of the man led to this artist's sketch.

But as she would discover, it would be a long, difficult time, and other American girls would also be raped, before Cancun police and Mexican justice would catch up with the serial rapist.

Daniel Wilkinson: The vast majority of crimes do not get solved.

Daniel Wilkinson of Human Rights Watch says what happened in the case of Suzanne Lewers is all too typical of what happens in Mexico.

Brian Ross: What should an American tourist expect if they become a victim in Mexico?

Daniel Wilkinson: I think anyone who becomes a victim of a sexual attack in Mexico should not have very high hopes of seeing justice done.

And Lydia Cacho, a journalist and rape crisis counselor in Cancun, says many tourists don't want to report their crimes to Mexican police, and that there may have been dozens who were victims of the serial rapist.

Lydia Cacho: He would talk to the girls outside the discos. Usually he would pick one of the lonely girls that got away from the groups.

Brian Ross: How many were victims?

Lydia Cacho: We don't know. Maybe 50, 60?

The Cancun Tourism Ministry says Cancun is a safe place, and extra efforts are made to protect tourists.

But Lydia Cacho says the rape problem is widespread, involving hotel workers, security guards and even male

American tourists who are rarely prosecuted.

Brian Ross: You see a lot of this?

Lydia Cacho: Yes, we see that a lot.

Brian Ross: Do they bring it on themselves the American kids?

Lydia Cacho: Oh no. I was talking about this with one of the U.S. representatives on the phone and she goes, 'Well, yeah, but she was wearing this bikini. What was she doing drunk and wearing a bikini at three o'clock in the morning.' And I said being a free tourist, wearing whatever she wants. A woman can walk naked in the street and nobody has the right to rape her.

And she says the US State Department could do a lot more to help.

It's small Cancun office, in a shopping mall next to fast food chains, has only four employees and closes at two in the afternoon.

Stand-up: It's now 6 o'clock in the evening in Cancun and the American consulate here has been closed for more than 4 hours. The most dangerous part of the day for Americans here on Spring Break is about to begin.

The US consulate says its four employees are enough to handle the yearly onslaught of young Americans.

And that someone from the consulate is always available

by cell phone and can respond quickly.

Not so, says Lydia Cacho.

Lydia Cacho: You keep calling the U.S. consulate, they don't answer the phone. When they do answer the cell phone, they get really mad at us. They don't like us

Brian Ross:)The U.S. government people don't like you?

Lydia Cacho: Here, they don't like me.

Brian Ross: Because ...?

Lydia Cacho: Well, because we're telling them that they're not doing their job in protecting their kids.

Suzanne Lewers says she received good treatment from the US consulate, which was the first to tell her the man who raped her had been caught.

But not until at least twelve other tourists reported they also had been raped by him.

Suzanne Lewers: Mm-hmm. I was so mad. I was so mad I could've just gone on a plane and went down there and just started shooting. I was so mad, I couldn't believe that he had gotten away with it so many more times.

Brian Ross: So there were no specific warnings there's a serial rapist out.

Suzanne Lewers: No. And there really should have been. They should've really warned people.

Suzanne and four other young women returned to Mexico to confront the accused rapist, who had passed himself off as a police officer again and again.

Suzanne Lewers: For some of these girls it had just been a couple months. And to see those girls and how upset they were, and that this one caused it. Mm-mmm. He was on my list, top of my list. I mean, to me, I was fighting evil, you know, and I wasn't gonna let him win.

He was sentenced to eight years for raping Suzanne and ten years for impersonating a police officer.

In a way, Suzanne considers herself to be lucky, given what happened to Natalee Holloway, given what happened to her during her senior week last year in Aruba.

Suzanne Lewers: Yeah, um...that could've been me. And it could be any one of the girls that are thinking about going on a senior trip this year.

Suzanne Lewers: I don't want any parent across the country to take, um, their kids when they're eighteen going on a senior trip lightly. I was a kid. We are kids. And at eighteen, you're really not an adult yet. The law says you are, you're not.

Brian Ross: You're still just a kid.

Suzanne Lewers: You're still just a kid. And um, kids are vulnerable. Americans as well as everyone else that goes down there for a good time needs to feel somewhat protected and, um, I didn't.