

about DRUGS. A Boeing 737, a semitrailer, a cargo ship, or a diplomatic pouch full of drugs. We are talking about a half-a-trillion-dollar industry that can afford to buy entire islands, bribe entire governments, wage private wars, and kill more people than some legitimate conflicts can. Three years ago, the UN estimated the narcotics industry to be a \$400 billion business that serviced a hard-core group of 190 million addicts. That's an industry, twice as big as the world's auto industry. Bigger than the oil and gas industry, and bigger than the legitimate drug or chemical category. It is dwarfed only by the world's arms trade, estimated to be \$800 billion a year. U.S. sales are estimated to generate \$87 billion that requires laundering.

Okay, that's nice, but what do drugs have to with my vacation? Lots, because many Western travelers tend to view drugs as a furtive part of their youth or something that affects only inner cities, but the adventurous traveler quickly learns just how vital a role drugs play in the world's most dangerous places. In fact, in many places, danger is a prerequisite to ensure the smooth flow of illegal goods and profits the drug industry needs to escape interdiction. Whenever there is drug activity there is corruption, AIDS, and organized crime. Here you'll enter a shadowy world where guests are unwelcome.

Typically, narco-regions are run by warlords, corrupt politicians, dirty cops, or criminals, all of whom can be considered tourism-unfriendly. Mexico City's former police chief built a mansion styled after the Parthenon and stashed away between \$1 and \$3 billion of corrupt profits during his 6-year term. But this is only a small piece of the pie, especially when you consider the Cali cartel made \$30 billion last year and the Gulf cartel profited \$20 billion (by government estimates).

With the increased presence of U.S. government agents and operatives, the druglords have become more careful and wary of unfamiliar faces—your life could be at risk if you are tagged as someone who should be removed. U.S. government sources spend millions, unsuccessfully, to try to solve the entire world's drug problems. But the problem also may be found within our own borders. The indisputable fact is that the Bolivian peasant who grows coca to feed his family, or Baluchi gunmen who are paid to protect a shipment, are not the criminals. These folks are merely doing something accepted in their own world. We create the drug problem by demanding more and more hard drugs, which keeps a hundred or so drug lords around the world very wealthy.

When DP hobnobs with gunmen, warlords, smugglers, fighters, and mafia hoods, it's typical to find that drugs are an integral part of their livelihood and others' not-so-livelihood. In some of these regions, there is no business other than drugs. In the absence of an economy, bribes and guns are used to enslave peasants, couriers, politicians, and

entire nations to feed the drug demands of Europe, Russia, Australia, and the Americas.

The drug business would not exist without three major markets, the largest being the United States. Approximately 14.8 million Americans are users of drugs, meaning they used an illicit drug at least once during the month prior to being interviewed for the latest National Household Survey on Drug Abuse—an annual nationwide survey among Americans age 12 and older. About 3.5 million were dependent on illicit drugs; an additional 8.2 million were dependent on alcohol. No biggie, I guess, when comparing the stoners to the boozers. The problem goes deeper, though. In 1998, Americans spent \$66.5 billion on these drugs: \$39 billion on cocaine; \$12 billion on heroin; \$2.2 billion on methamphetamine; \$11 billion on marijuana; and \$2.3 billion on other illegal drugs.

The good and bad news? Crack use is down, heroin use is up (with 20% purer smack available on the streets), and use of marijuana, tweaking (meth), embalming fluid (because it contains PCP), Ecstasy, and mixing prescription drugs, is up. The real bad news is that the drug business is above all a business. Profit and loss, market expansion, recruiting consumers, and supply and demand all drive the industry to create cheaper, more profitable drugs, and get new users on board to replace lost (or jailed) consumers.

UN drug trends

http://www.undcp.org/global_illicit_drug_trends.html

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/NIDAHome.html>

Office of National Drug Control Policy

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>

White House Drug Strategy

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/policy/index.html>

U.S. Expenditures on Illicit Drugs

http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/drugfact/american_users_spend2002

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/policy/ndcs01/tables.html>

Heroin

The sticky gum from the *Papaver somniferum*, or Eurasian poppy (or "maker of sleep," for you Latin buffs), was introduced to Asia from the Mediterranean by Arab traders in the twelfth century and was cultivated for its medicinal properties. This innocent little flower has now grown up to become the half-brother of war. India, Myanmar, China, Pakistan, Laos, Thailand, Mexico, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan are the troubled homes of this gentle, unassuming weed that blows in the wind.