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Woodlands a haven for Mexican entrepreneurs

Affluent flee violence and mayhem

By JENALIA MORENO

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THE WOODLANDS - Most certified public accountants aren't summoned to the airport late at night to pick up clients fleeing their home countries.

But [David Matos](#) is accustomed to the dangers his newest customers have faced and the service they expect.

"I've had people crying and sharing their stories," he said. "It's surreal."

Most of his clients are foreigners, and of those, the majority are affluent Mexicans who have relocated to this suburban enclave to escape kidnapping and murder threats in their native country, where crime has escalated during the nation's drug war.

Matos is part of a cadre of business people catering to the growing population of Mexican entrepreneurs relocating to The Woodlands.

"This is becoming a haven," said Matos, a native of Spain who was raised in the U.S. but lived in Mexico for a few years when he worked for an energy company.

In 2006, he left Mexico after receiving a threatening call from a drug cartel member who was trying to extort money by reciting Matos' daily routine. The caller politely listed what time Matos went to work, the gym and back home, then asked for "protection" money.

"I was out of the country within 12 hours," Matos said.

Attorneys, real estate agents and retail workers in The Woodlands are working more often with rich Mexicans who are starting new lives in Texas after experiencing similar threats.

A close-knit community of Mexican families and businesses serving them has grown in The Woodlands over the last few years as these newcomers try to learn the ropes.

"We have to explain everything to them" from where to go grocery shopping to what schools are best, said [Elizabeth Fernandez](#), a real estate agent who works with her husband, Javier Fernandez.

Adriana Valencia, a financial consultant with [Investment Professionals](#) in The Woodlands, said she considers herself part of an "advisory team."

'Very, very different'

Along with financial advice, she tells her customers about where to open bank accounts and explains visa requirements.

"When you start living here, the culture here is very, very different," said [Gonzalo Roque](#), who owns Zushi, a Japanese restaurant near Houston's Memorial Park. He moved to The Woodlands from Mexico City a few years ago.

One of the biggest differences for [Guillermo Garza](#) is that so many transactions require hiring an attorney in the U.S.

"You have to do everything with a lawyer here," said Garza, who is investing in hot yoga studios where participants perform yoga exercises in warm, humid conditions. "That's not common in our culture."

For now, Garza sees nothing more than cleared land and a pad site as construction workers toil away in a new shopping center in The Woodlands. But he envisions an Express Hot Yoga studio emerging from this space nestled among the trees. And he hopes that studio will help him qualify for a renewed visa since his home building business failed.

The new residents need lawyers for help obtaining their visas and starting their businesses.

John Meyer, an immigration attorney at Houston's FosterQuan, travels with other Texas lawyers, accountants and real estate agents to Mexican cities once or twice a year to give seminars on how to start businesses and buy homes in Texas.

Roque and his wife went to one such seminar in Mexico City in 2004, and moved to The Woodlands a few months later.

'Little Mexico'

Since then, the Mexican community has multiplied. On many Sundays, the Roques gather in a park with other Mexican residents of The Woodlands' western neighborhoods, an area they now jokingly call "Little Mexico."

The businesses that court this market are seeing their workloads multiply.

Javier Fernandez, of [Uptown Real Estate Group](#) in the Galleria area, relocated 30 Mexican families to The Woodlands in the past year. Five years ago, he helped about 10 Mexican families a year, and most were buying vacation homes. Today, most Mexican residents live in these homes year-round.

"They come here and bring their wealth and they start creating more wealth," said Fernandez, who added that many Mexican entrepreneurs are among the wealthiest residents of the area.

Indeed, the dollar value of business loans by BBVA Compass' Woodlands operations has increased 163 percent in the first half of the year compared with the same six months of 2010, said [Amos McDonald](#), a district retail executive for the bank. Most such loans require 25 percent down payments.

Evolving culture

The new wave of residents is changing the culture of The Woodlands, lawyer [Bret Strong](#) said.

Residents are increasingly likely to hear Spanish along The Woodlands Waterway or at the mall, along with other languages, as The Woodlands becomes more cosmopolitan.

"The Woodlands is becoming an international tourist destination and an international location. Suburbia used to be considered not culturally diverse. That's changing, especially in The Woodlands," said Strong, who has lived in the area for more than two decades.

In the past year, his [Strong Firm](#) has helped establish 30 to 40 businesses owned by Mexican entrepreneurs. His clients have launched restaurants, opened warehouses or bought commercial real estate, said Strong, who works with three other attorneys who all speak Spanish.

The influx is occurring elsewhere in the Houston area as well. The Greenspoint District, which works with businesses in north Houston, is translating its marketing materials into Spanish, economic development director [Regina Lindsey](#) said. In February, former Mexican President [Vicente Fox](#) visited the district to meet with Mexican entrepreneurs in the area.