

March 2011

Patzcuaro Michoacán, Mexico

The state of Michoacán lies west of Mexico City, and stretches south to the Pacific coast. Michoacán has hit the news recently as one of the hotspots of the drug wars. Anzie and I and friend Rich Beatty, a former Newburyporter and longtime Mexico aficionado, are happy to say that we arrived back in San Miguel after a two-day visit to Michoacán with our heads still attached. As Rich said, we were neither robbed, mugged nor spat upon. More about that later!

Rich did the driving, accompanied by Bungee, his Wheaton terrier. Bungee was good company. Certain things set him off: strangers approaching the car – like gas station attendants, and speed bumps.

We made amazing time from SMA to **Morelia**, the state capitol of Michoacán, named after Jose Morelos, hero of the Revolution. The downtown is a gem. Long, wide boulevards; uniform earth-tone colonial buildings, a magnificent aqueduct with over 200 arches have earned it status as a UNESCO world heritage site.

One of the most amazing churches we've ever seen is the **Sanctuario de Guadalupe**. The exterior is rather bland; however, the interior is truly awe-inspiring. The decor is a fantastic over-the-top mix of baroque and rococo. The theme is flowers all plated in a ton of gilt. Amazingly, it all works.



Even though the traffic is a real bear, we shall return.

The further south we traveled the greener the landscape became. By the time we reached **Patzcuaro**, we were surrounded by evergreens and deciduous trees of a northern climate. It stands to reason, since Patzcuaro lies at almost 7200 ft. of elevation, 800 ft. higher than SMA.

Patzcuaro is lovely small city. It lies on the shore of tranquil Lake Patzcuaro. It was founded by **Don Vasco de Quiroga**, a lawyer / judge who arrived in Mexico in 1531 at the age of 60, and was named Bishop of Patzcuaro (the original capital of Michoacan) in 1537. Unlike others of his time, Quiroga respected and loved the Indians he lived with. Influenced by Thomas More's Utopia, Quiroga worked with local Indian rulers to create an Utopian model in the area around Lake Patzcuaro. He encouraged each small town to develop a specialized craft so that they would be able to trade with the other surrounding towns and develop a level of self sufficiency. His vision can still be seen today in both Patzcuaro city and the many towns surrounding the lake. There's the copper town, the stone sculpture town, the straw and reed-weaving town, the pottery town, the cloth town, the guitar and violin town, etc.

We stayed at the **Posada Mandala**, a modest but clean inn located steps from the center of town. Our rooms adjoined, fronted by a long balcony that overlooked the rooftops of Patzcuaro.



After settling in, we took a stroll through the town. The town offers three pretty squares. One, the **Plaza Vasco de Quiroga**, has been beautifully renovated. Gardens, walks and manicured grassy areas surround the statue of Quiroga, the Bishop who did much to improve the state of the city and the surrounding area back in the 16th century. Recorded music emanates from the many speakers installed in the grounds. We paused for ice cream in a café along the arcaded perimeter of the Plaza and watched as Bungee stole the hearts of passersby.

The second, called the "little square", was busier as the outdoor market lies adjacent. Here in the center is a sculpture of local revolutionary heroine, **Gertrudis de Bocanegra**. The third square, in front of the Basilica, is filled with small stands selling handicrafts and religious art.

The next morning we took off for a tour around Lake Patzcuaro. The smell and the look of the long-needed pines that umbrella-ed the road reminded me of lake country in the Adirondacks. Suddenly we were confronted with hundreds, no, thousands of stone sculptures on either side of the road: angels, devils, angels fighting devils, friars that resembled Richard Nixon, eagles clutching snakes (the national symbol), pigs, frogs, fish, birds, turtles ... just about every subject you could name ... all sculpted from light gray rock. These were not cast. No two were alike. The displays went on for a quarter mile, at least. We must have spent a half hour roaming through this unique art garden on the outskirts of **Tzintzuntzan**. According to Rich, the town's name is derived from the sound made by hummingbirds.

We parked in the center of town in front of a large, walled public park. We entered the park to find ancient olive trees. They were imported from Spain and planted in the time of Cortez and Quiroga – the 1500's. At the opposite end of the park was a church. As we were walking toward it, a group filed in through a gate to our right. Leading was a pretty young girl dressed in a formal blue gown. She was followed by young men playing trumpet and sax. The group was met at the church door by a priest and altar boys. Rich explained that it was the girl's *quincañero*, a religious celebration that acknowledges that she has entered womanhood, upon her fifteenth birthday. We entered the church after the group; it was almost filled with people. The front of the church was decorated with flowers, as was the entire interior. That girl must have come from a well-to-do-family.

We then continued around the lake. Our next stop was the town of **Quiroga**, the market and commercial center for the area. We ate a delicious lunch of "carnitas" -- roasted pork -- and listened to wandering guitarists.

After lunch, Rich continued to drive us around Lake Patzcuaro. At one point, however, we realized we had lost sight of the lake for some time; so we stopped to take a look at the map. We had indeed missed a turn. Undaunted, we found a route that would take us over the mountains and back to the lake. Within a short time we entered the village of Zinciro. It's a non-descript village like many you pass through in Mexico, except for two things. We passed by a group of men drinking beer in a small square. Chuck gave them a friendly wave. The gang responded with very unfriendly glares. Within a short distance we spied a mansion that was under construction atop a hill overlooking the village. The building was in such stark contrast to the simple adobe-type housing that all three of us had the same thought simultaneously. Rich voiced it first: "Drug cartel!"

We knew that we didn't look like Ricardo, Carlos and Anna. Rather we could well be mistaken as gringo narcos. As we glanced in the rear- and sideview mirrors for possible pursuers, we hit the first *tope* (speedbump). You've heard of Murphy's Rules? Well, here's Murphy's Mexican counterpart: The smaller the village, the larger the *tope*. Rich's Subaru leapt over the first *tope*, and every one thereafter. Rich's lovely Wheaton terrier, Bungee, was not happy with all the jostling. He positively glared at Rich in the rearview mirror.

Just on the other side of Zinciro we came upon a large dust devil that sent a column of dust over 100 feet in the air. Fortunately no one was following us with guns, so we didn't need to hide in the dust devil --- our back-up plan!

With no more adventures, we continued our drive around the lake, and stopped in **Santa Clara del Cobre**, known for its copperware. Copper has been mined in this area since the 800's. Then in the beginning of this century the mines were exhausted. Now all the copper is recycled. On the main square we came upon vendors selling all things copper: jewelry, plates, etc. Turning a corner away from the square we found a museum in which artisans were actually firing and producing copperware. We didn't stay long, as they were about to quit for the day.

There are several shops along this street, **Pino Suarez**. We stopped in each one as Rich was looking for copper numbers for his house. Finally we entered **Cobre Porton**. This shop looks small from the street, but it stretches back room after room, shotgun-like. The rooms are filled with everything imaginable made from copper: sinks, bathtubs, kitchenware, lamps, ceiling lights, tables, chairs, beds, fountains ... on and on.

Finally, way in the rear, we find the workshop. It's a blacksmith shop complete with fiery furnace, the air filled with ash. As soon as we step into the shop, the workmen all snap to. They pull a block of red hot copper out of the fire, and lay it on an anvil. One man holds it with a pair of giant pincers, while three men proceed to hit it with sledgehammers in rotation. The piece becomes steadily wider and flatter until it's too cool. Then ... back into the furnace.

Another piece is brought out. This one looks to be in its final phase of becoming a vessel of some sort. The color is dark orange with black stains. It's immersed in saltwater mixed with "red earth", probably dirt with a high oxide content. In seconds it's withdrawn from the water. Its color has changed to a dull bright orange, and it's cool to the touch. The piece is placed on a narrow anvil, and a man begins to hammer it with what looks like a ball peen hammer. Each blow leaves a brightly polished spot on the otherwise dull surface. This is what gives the copper the hammered, polished finish. It's a laborious process. After we've witnessed all steps, the leader offers us sample of a fruit liqueur that they offer for sale in the front shop. Of course I bought a bottle. (See photos)

From there we traveled a few miles to **Lake Zirahuen**. Lake Patzcuaro is brown and allegedly polluted. It is strongly recommended not to eat fish from there. Lake Zirahuen is a gorgeous blue. Nestled in a valley, surrounded by evergreens and green deciduous, it resembles one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. Yet, it is undeveloped. No gated communities, no water parks, no marinas mar its banks. We stopped for refreshments at the General Dock, (a very shaky wooden pier) which offered three restaurants that had all seen better days. With an improved economy, an abatement of drug war news, we predict that, ten years from now, Lake Zirahuen will be a different, more prosperous venue.



That evening happened to be March 5th, Chuck's birthday. We celebrated with wine and hors d'oeuvres on our balcony, and then a magnificent dinner at **Lupita's**. Dinner was topped off with a chocolate cake. Mexicans really do cake. I can't remember a more delicious one. We shared it with other guests, the staff and a first-rate guitarist who showed up.

On our return trip we stopped in **Cuitzeo**. This city sits on the edge of a long, shallow lake by the same name that is a birdwatchers dream. In Cuitzeo is located a famous convent. (See photos attached) We stopped because Rich knows a family here. After some searching and asking around, we found Juan and his family. Juan was proud to show off his newly acquired U.S. work visa. Recently he's been working in Georgia building houses. Apparently, as long as he has a work contract that he can show Immigration, he is allowed into the U.S. for the duration of the contract.

We heard music playing close-by, and went outside to look. We found a group that was celebrating Mardi Gras a day early. It consisted of a man dressed up in a bull costume, a trumpeter, a drummer and two "faux" ladies. When one of the ladies invited Chuck to dance, he joined in eagerly. He was disappointed when he found out his dance partner was actually a man.

Patzcuaro – Part Two:

Four weeks later we visited Patzcuaro again, this time with friends Trish and Steve. They're living in SMA full time. We met them at a friend's house our first night in town. They moved from Cambridge, MA in the latter part of 2010. Turns out that Trish worked for the last mayor of Newburyport in Economic Development.

On this trip we visited the island of **Janitzio** in **Lake Patzcuaro**, which is the largest of the five lake islands. We understand that two other islands are worth visiting: La Pacanda and Yunuen. Maybe next time. Janitzio which, from a distance, resembles a miniature version of Mont. St. Michel in France, is the most tourist-oriented of the three. It is most famous for its celebration of the Day of the Dead. People reserve hotel rooms in Patzcuaro a year in advance for this holiday.



At the peak of this conical-shaped island stands a 100-ft. statue. It's a gowned figure with an upraised fist. As we approached, we tried to describe what it looked like. One suggestion: the Statue of Liberty after "Supersizing it" for a year. Another: Kate Smith (famous for the phrase, "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings.") dressed as the Statue of Liberty. At any rate, it sure is ugly. Maybe the local elementary school had a contest for who could draw the best statue.

So, who is the statue supposed to represent? It's Jose Maria Morelos, who led the battle for independence after its early leaders were executed in 1811. He's gotta be rolling in his grave.

The only way to get to the island is by ferry, a motorized craft that can hold 25 passengers. The trip takes a half hour. As it was mid-week, we had the boat to ourselves. We noted many large clumps of water hyacinth floating around us. This could become a problem if the hyacinth is allowed to overrun the lake. When we docked, the captain asked us when we wished to return. We told him to be back in an hour. Several restaurants border the dock area. The specialty seems to be fried fish. But these are little fish, like herring.

Many people live on the island, which is designed into tiers – like a wedding cake. A sidewalk circumvents the island. We walked about a third of the way around. We passed a bi-lingual elementary school. Over the doors of each classroom was printed the grade name in Spanish and in Purépecha, which is the language of the ancient indigenous indian tribe. Apparently a movement exists to keep the language alive.

On the return trip our skipper took us around the island. We noted that the houses are designed more like chalets, with steeper roofs than we see in other parts of Mexico. Perhaps this is why the area seems greener than other parts, that the rainfall is heavier.

Before we left Patzcuaro, we took a guided tour of the town. Jaime Hernandez Balderas is a local English teacher, movie-star handsome and an excellent guide. He taught us a lot, including:

- The first revolt against Spanish rule occurred in the Patzcuaro region in the 1790's, much before the 1810 revolt of Hidalgo and Allende. Unfortunately, it was put down within only a few days.
- **Gertrudis Bocanegra**, whose statue stands in one of the major squares, was a heroine of the Revolution. An officer of the Spanish Army proposed marriage to her. She replied that she could not accept unless he renounced his allegiance to the Spanish crown and sided with the

Revolution, which he did. She was shot in 1814 for refusing to divulge the secrets of the revolutionaries.

- Jaime gave us a detailed explanation of the amazing mural painted by Juan O’Gorman in 1942. It covers one wall of the **Biblioteca de Gertrudis Bocanegra**. It depicts the history of the region and the Purépecha/Tarascan people.
- **Museo de Artes Populares**. Contains examples of the crafts for which the region is famous: ceramics, masks and lacquerware.

By the way, shopping is a treat in Patzcuaro and it’s surrounding towns. The best bargains are found in textiles: tablecloths, bedspreads, napkins; copper: Anzie bought a beautiful pair of earrings for less than \$3.00; baskets and embroidered blouses and dresses.

And now, we must bid a fond adieu to Patzcuaro until next year.

Hasta luego!

Chuck & Anzie

Photos: <https://picasaweb.google.com/104483921374151958062/Patzcuaro#>