

February 15, 2010

Valentine's Day in a Ghost town

Meet Fernando. He's a man of many talents. He makes Pre-Hispanic musical instruments. He also plays them with a group. He teaches mathematics at the local school. He's also a guide, and that's how we met him.

We had heard about Mineral de Pozos shortly after we arrived in San Miguel de Allende (SMA). We took a daytrip to check it out in late January. The history is what piqued our curiosity.

Situated about one hour north of SMA at an altitude of 7500 ft., Pozos was at one time a mining center for silver, gold and mercury. At its peak it had 308 mines in operation and a population of 70,000. The mines petered out starting in the 1920's. The final straw: miners broke through to an underground river that flooded the mines. The last one closed in the 1940's. In 1945 the population had dwindled to 110 hardy souls, who lived off foreign remittances.

Fernando's family was closely linked to the mining industry. His grandfather was a chemist for the large silver mine, Cinco Señores. His father also worked at the mines, until they closed. The family moved to Mexico City to find work. When they could no longer stand big city life, they moved back in the '70's. Fernando's father eked out a living as a carpenter. In the early 2000's ex-pats began to discover Mineral de Pozos. The climate, although somewhat cooler than that of SMA -- since it's situated over 1000 ft. higher -- is sunny and dry. SMA was becoming too crowded, too noisy. SMA's popularity had begun to raise the price of real estate. Pozo's real estate was at rock bottom, since most of the houses were in ruins. Even now almost every other house looks to be a prime candidate for an archeological dig.

Just over five years ago, David and Julie Winslow purchased a ruin of a large mansion with the vision of turning it into a bed & breakfast hotel. The result is the **Posada de las Minas**. Located one block off the main plaza, Posada offers nine rooms. Each one is very different. Ours, the Luna Miel (Honeymoon) suite, included a bathroom, dressing room, large porch overlooking the downtown and a fireplace. The central courtyard, which serves as the main dining room, has a moveable roof. The bar offers an impressive array of tequilas. David makes a pilgrimage each year to the Tequila region in the state of Jalisco, and returns with additions to his collection. While his wife travels to Oaxaca region to collect art for the hotel and her gallery. During our wanders through the complex we discovered another small dining room, a common room, several other courtyards, an art gallery and a Jacuzzi.

The décor reflects excellent taste, while still feeling homey. They also provide off-street parking. David and Julie are welcoming hosts who are ready and willing to sit down for a good chat. James, Assistant Manager, seems to be right there when you need him. Their place is not just geared for norteamericano clientele. According to David, 70% of their guests are Mexican.

They offered a special Valentine's Day dinner. The entire hotel was decorated with hearts and flowers. The three-course dinner was exquisite and more than sufficient, and it was accompanied by a duet singing romantic Mexican songs.

The hotel arranged for our guided tour with Fernando. He met us at the hotel and drove us first to the Santa Brigida mine, about two miles out of town. According to local history, this was the first mine in the area. It was established by the Jesuits in the mid-1500's. They mined mercury here. Mercury was used to refine gold and silver. The three-chimney smelter is an icon for the area. Another series of smelting ovens stretches over 200 meters, probably 30 ovens in all. Fernando took us over to a cliff edge that overlooked a vast complex of caved-in mineshafts. He claims the deepest plunged 1000 meters. We could see evidence of copper and iron in the surrounding rocks, apparently not enough to make the exploration worthwhile.

Fernando drove us to the opposite side of town to the silver mines. We entered the gates of "Cinco Senores", which was the largest in the area. Pozos was considered the second richest silver mining area in the world, after Zacateras. The ruins are vast. The architecture reflects a definite Roman influence – arches throughout. The offices are now holding pens for goats. A wide open space surrounded by ruins is now used as an amphitheater. Fernando says his group has played there at least 15 times.

Most of the mines were owned and operated by friends of the Mexican dictator, Porfirio Diaz. Pozos was then named "Ciudad Porfirio Diaz". President Diaz did a lot for this town and his friends, the owners. He brought in the railroad, electricity, water, telephone and medical services, and a school. Diaz's reign lasted for almost 34 years. It ended with the Revolution of 1910. During this "peasants' revolt" 40 mine owners and rich landowners were executed. The laborers had become sick and tired of "owing their souls to the company store".

The name of the town was never officially changed. According to Fernando, in order to find a phone number in Pozos, you must look in the Queretaro phonebook under Porfirio Diaz.

Right now the population is up to around 4000. 150 of these are expats, many of them artists. Galleries are sprouting up all over downtown. This ghost town has come alive!
Hasta luego!

Chuck & Anne