

January 3, 2010

Our Trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

We arrived in SMA on Jan. 1, after six days on the road.

We were lucky weather-wise. We saw a lot of snow on the ground from CT all the way through VA. Our travel window was fortuitous. Another blizzard was expected three days after we departed VA.

We had purchased a Garmin GPS some weeks before. Our GPS has a female personality named Samantha. During our trip we developed a strained relationship. When we didn't take Sam's recommended route: "Recalculating! Take highlighted route!" We thought we could detect a hint of exasperation in Sam's voice as we continued to disregard her directions.

We spent our first night in Winchester, VA at a motel that sported an indoor swimming pool. Great way to get the body loosened up after 10 hours on the road.

The next night we spent in Chattanooga, TN – a neat town, that has gone through a tasteful redevelopment. It looked like it could be an easy city to live in. This was a planned stop. We had an absolutely wonderful dinner with cousins Jim, Dan, and Susan Kennedy at Jim and Barbara's house. I hadn't seen these cousins since 1992! I had never met Barbara or their handsome boys. These are the siblings of Mimi Kennedy, who is still making waves as an actress. Jim, Dan and Susan are having interesting careers in their own right.

Third day we raced across Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana – stopping only for waffles and gas. That night we stayed in Lake Charles, LA – casinos and chemical plants ring the lake. Ate good Cajun. 'Nough said.

Spent night 4 in Laredo, TX at the Best Western – San Ysidro. Ate excellent Barbeque at Rudy's. They serve an amazing array of slow-cooked meats, iced-down buckets of beer and gas. Yep, you can get your tank filled there too.

Crossed the border at Bridge No. 2 at about 7:30 AM, then followed a labyrinthine route to the customs building. We entered a huge Kafkaesque space that challenged all who entered to find the appropriate window and clerk for each of the 5-step process to get us and our car into the country legally. Fortunately we beat the crowd, and Anzie had prepped us correctly. We had duplicate copies of our passports, drivers licenses, car title, and proof of Mexican auto insurance (which we had purchased in advance). We also had to purchase tourist visas for \$21 apiece. And as we had already bought on line our Vehicle Import Permit, we were through the process in about 20 minutes. We are proud that this is probably an all-time speed record. The line of vehicles incoming to the

U.S. stretched for two miles, probably Mexicans coming to work to the U.S. No dullards we, our return trip plans will include a re-entry at a later hour.

So, how are the roads in Mexico? Narrow two-lane gravel pot-holed ways where one must frequently dodge errant burros and drug-crazed banditos? Surprise! The roads are good to excellent --- four-lane most of the way. We took the toll road option. Speed limit maxes out at 80 mph. It's a might expensive. Our 700 mile trip cost about \$60.

We spent night 5 – New Years Eve – in Matehuala, Mex. It's a genuine Mexican small city. We were probably the only gringos in town. We ate at one of the top restaurants in Matehuala, Fontenella, at the egregious fare of less than \$20. The food and was worth every peso.

We strolled down to a park two blocks away, and discovered two groups of “indigenous” dancers, part of a church youth group. These were young men and women dressed in Indian garb, complete with feathered headdress and metal-soled sandals, that sounded like castanets. They danced to the beat of drums, creating their own rhythm with the sandals – very cool. Eventually they gathered with a coterie of grandfathers with bugles and statues of Jesus and Mary each borne by six bearers. They paraded throughout the town preceded by fireworks.

We were in bed by 10:00. So much for a wild New Years Eve.

Day 6 – January 1, 2010: We were on the road by 9:00. We had the road pretty much to ourselves, except for the Montana and North Dakota license plates that blew by us.. The topography was amazing: huge mountain ranges, one after the other off into the horizon; colors, hues right out of Georgia O’Keeffe. As we passed over each mountain into another expansive plain the flora changed. One plain is covered by mesquite-like brush. The next is pocked with cacti in Dr. Zuess-like anthropomorphic forms.

We arrived in San Miguel de Allende early afternoon, more than 2700 miles from Newburyport. Sam directed us precisely to the cul-de-sac and our house. While we waited for our realtor to open the house, we met our landlady, Susie (originally from Wenham, MA), and her grandchildren. Susie introduced us to our new digs. They are absolutely exquisite! So is the town.

San Miguel has a European, colonial Spanish atmosphere. The streets and sidewalks are paved with cobblestones and flagstone. The architecture bespeaks the city’s designation as a UNESCO heritage site. What’s more, you don’t have to eat Mexican every meal. There’s Thai, Chinese, Indonesian, French, Italian, Uruguayan And our new local bar is an excellent barbeque restaurant, The Longhorn.

We spent the last three winters in Costa Rica. It's a veritable paradise; however, very few cultural activities existed near us. Here in SMA there's something cultural happening just about every day: lectures at the library, classical concerts, play-reading groups, plays in English. Even a week-long a writers workshop coming soon. Art galleries of all media are ubiquitous. For sports there's golf, baseball, tennis and bullfighting, to name a few.

The natives are welcoming. Today our cleaning lady's husband, Pablo, went with us 15 miles out of SMA to the village of Conforton, which is known for its artisans. We purchased a free-standing charcoal grill for \$15! Pablo is an elementary school teacher, and speaks very little English. So it was good practice for us.

We are in love with our house. Even though it's only one bedroom, it's huge! It's larger than our three-bedroom house in Costa Rica. It has a courtyard in front and another in back. Both are magnificently flowered. We have an orchid tree in the rear garden that attracts hummingbirds. The house is fully equipped with gas stove and oven, washer and dryer, two gas fireplaces, microwave, etc. The rooms are beautifully decorated with handwoven rugs and many Mexican artifacts. We have a garage, but our car is 3 inches too long. So we're parking on the street. We think it's safe; it's a nice neighborhood. To see pictures of the house go to: <http://www.sanmiguelrentals.com/casaEstrellita.html>

We attended a UU service last Sunday. Instead of coffee hour, they do lunch. We've met quite a few expats. They're all welcoming and helpful. We're spending our days exploring the town and the outskirts. By next week, we hope to be in language class. Eventually we'll venture out further but, for now, it's just nice to use the Shoeleather Express in lieu of sitting behind the wheel.

It's a good time to be here, if you're interested. Everybody's complaining about the fact that tourism is down. Yes, the plight of the world economy extends this far. We have seen many housing developments that are closed down all over the area. There are many hotels and B&B's that are quite reasonable.

So ... Come on down!!!

Love,

Chuck & Anne

P.S. – It was 45 degrees both inside and out today. Anne is hunkered down in front of the fireplace as I write this.