

Travels with Anzie – Blood and Silver

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Blood and silver make for a toxic blend. Looking at the history of the Spanish conquest of North Central Mexico reminds one of the “blood diamonds” of Sierra Leone, Africa. In the early 1500’s Spanish troops under the leadership of Hernan Cortez marched north from Mexico City to an area that is now the State of Zacatecas. They had heard about the silver-rich hills of the region, and they wanted a major piece of that action.

The Spanish had met with little resistance in eastern and central Mexico. The gold mines they wrested from Moctezuma in the Mexico City region just served to whet their appetite. However, they hadn’t heard about the Chichimecas. Their nation consisted of several warlike tribes, including the Zacatecos, that populated the North Central, and they didn’t give up easily. Finally, after several unsuccessful attempts -- with severe and bloody losses -- to establish a permanent Spanish presence in the area, Cortez sent in a major force under the leadership of Nuño de Guzman and Pedro Peramindes. They were able to establish a permanent Spanish presence in the 1540’s. Then came the missionaries to conquer the souls of the indigenous people: the Franciscans, followed by the Augustinians and the Dominicans.

Relations were relatively peaceful until the War of Independence against the Spanish (1811-1821). The Mexicans won, but again at the cost of many lives. Then, in 1911, another Revolution broke out. This time, the government of Porfirio Diaz and the upper class were pitted against the lower classes. In the Battle of Zacatecas 20,000 rebel soldiers led by Pancho Villa took on the Federales led by Huerta. Villa’s forces bombarded the two federal strongholds, the hills of Cerro de Bufa and Cerro de Grillo. Eventually the Federales fled to downtown Zacatecas seeking their way south. Villa’s forces caught up with them there, and a bloodbath ensued. Estimated number of dead: Federales 7000, rebels 3000.

Ever since the Spanish conquered Mexico in the early 1500’s silver mining was a major industry. Guanajuato, the state where San Miquel de Allende (SMA) is located, at one time produced 70-80% of the world’s silver. The city of **Guanajuato** was a major producer. Most of the mines are shut down for various reasons. Often the veins ran out to the point where mining was no longer profitable. In the town of **Pozos**, a 30-minute drive from SMA, miners hit an underground river that flooded the mines. In the state of Zacatecas several mines are still working. Carlos Slim, one of the world’s richest men, owns at least one.

We embarked on a six-day tour with fellow adventurers Trish and Steve Singer. About two to three hours northwest of SMA we discovered a group of attractive towns that became prosperous from the mining of silver as well as gold, copper, tin, lead and zinc. These are **Aquascalientes**, **Zacatecas** and **San Luis de Potosi**. Besides the history, these cities offer other attractions: architecture, culture and cuisine.

But wait! Two other towns in the area deserve mention:

San Juan de los Lagos: The big draw is the Cathedral of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos. 4 – 7 million pilgrims visit each year to pray to the statue of Our Lady. The

statue is 16" tall and made of sugar cane paste. Many miracles are attributed to her. The first miracle, in 1623, occurred when a family of acrobats performed in the town square. One of their feats consisted of "flying" over a field of spears. When the youngest daughter "flew", she landed on the spears and immediately died. Local women rushed the statue to the girl, and prayed over it until she revived. This made the statue famous.

On our way back from the west coast this past January we were stopped outside of San Juan. A huge traffic jam was caused by hordes of pilgrims walking to San Juan. We passed perambulating crowds for the next 12 miles. It surely bears witness to the profound popularity of this religious site.

Other than the Cathedral, the town is fairly decrepit and has zip-ola to offer.

Lagos de Moreno: We discovered this city a couple of years ago on our way to someplace else. Knowing zilch about it, we were surprised by its charm, cleanliness and friendliness of its citizens. The city is touting itself as "the Athens of Mexico". A Parthenon-like church overlooks the town. However, "Athens" is meant to refer to the number of famous writers and composers that originated in the city, none with whom I am familiar.

During our first visit a couple of years ago, we met a local man who had worked in Montana several years as a cowboy. Upon returning to Mexico he became a guide and instructor of horseback riding. With him that day was a lady who came all the way from France to ride horseback through the lovely surrounding countryside. Or maybe something else was going on between them. Who knows?

We shared a sumptuous breakfast at **La Casona de Teté**. Located near the town center, this hotel has a distinctive old world hacienda feel. After we ordered, the kitchen surprised us with a complementary fruit dish and pastries. We followed our stomachs out of there.

Aguascalientes: The name of the smallest State in Mexico and its capital city. The name derives from the many hot water springs in the area, which are themselves a tourist attraction. The downtown area has the appearance of "old money". The central plaza is rather grand and surrounded by buildings and churches of rich colonial architecture. We stayed at the **Quality Inn**, which fronted on the plaza. The hotel had great location, parking, clean, modern rooms and a helpful staff.

We meandered around the plaza and the surrounding area. We came upon the Cultural Center -- a combination art gallery, library and music space. We viewed an extensive and thought-provoking exhibit of posters from all over the world. Someone informed us that a musical performance was to begin in an hour. Our interest peaked, we continued our exploration of the adjacent neighborhood, had coffee at a café across the street, and arrived promptly at the appointed hour.

Nothing happened for another hour. Then the performance turned out to be a series of dances performed by children. We were probably the only members of the audience who weren't relations.

We dined at the **Zodiaco**. Even though it was recommended, the cafeteria-like atmosphere with way too much candlepower of lighting was off-putting. As it turned out, the cuisine was very good. We had fish – fresh, well-spiced, delicious. Anzie struck up a conversation with the owners, and they gifted her with two desserts to go. Anzie's gift of gab wins out again!

The Road to Zacatecas: Since we had a short, two-hour trip to Zacatecas, we had some time to kill. The Mexican government instituted a program in 2010 called "**Pueblos Magicos**" or Magic Towns. Magic Towns are selected based upon historic significance or picturesqueness. During our travels we have been "collecting" Magic Towns. We have found that some of them are more magic than others.

The town of **Real de Asiento** is an example of a less than magical Magic Town. We passed by a few mines on our way. The landscape was rather barren. Reminded us of the "Burrens" of Connemara in Western Ireland: rocky with sparse vegetation. When we arrived at around 11:00 AM, Asiento looked like a ghost town, except for a few men laying flagstones in the main square. Facing the square is a pretty church, Our Lady of Belen (Bethlehem). On a side altar our guide pointed out an unusual statue of a dead Christ. We have seen many statues of Jesus lying in a glass casket. What differentiated this one was that the statue incorporated a real skeleton with articulated joints. We could see the bones revealed at the joints while the rest of the body was covered in plaster and paint.

In front of the church is a hole in the ground that appears to be a tunnel entrance. Only when we visited the Office of Tourism, located on the other side of the block from the church, did we find the answer. There, in the reception hall, was another entrance to what is indeed a tunnel that goes beneath the church. Is it a mine, you might ask? No, the tunnel was dug at the turn of the 20th century to save the church from inundation by an underground river.

The botanical garden and other sites were closed. It was Saturday. Nobody works on Saturday! Asiento has a ways to go before it become truly "magical".

Zacatecas: The city we've been waiting for. A growing town of 138,000 with lots to do and see. We stayed in El Centro at the hotel **Mision Argentio**. Great location, but watch out you don't get a room without windows. We and the Singers were originally assigned these dark and smelly rooms. Fortunately we were able to upgrade to a huge suite with a terrace. The hotel was jammed because of a wedding, so Steve & Trish had to move to another hotel a short distance from us. The management was accommodating re the move.

El Centro is filled with beautiful 19th century Spanish Colonial architecture. Just down the street is the **Calderon Theatre**. We stopped in for a look around to discover that the Zacatecas Orchestra was playing that night. We bought tickets, and proceeded to have our expectations exceeded by professionally played music. The featured clarinetist was outstanding. We also spent the following evening there enjoying folk music with the audience joining in on the songs.

Besides the many museums, the churches are worth a visit. Several are over the top with gilt, thanks to the mine owners in the 19th century. You will note a preponderance

of “churrigueresque” decoration around the main entrance: incredibly intricate stone carving.

Although I’m currently a Unitarian Universalist, I was born and raised Catholic. As they say, “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.” So, here’s my theory: The more Catholic churches I visit, the more indulgences I accumulate. Indulgences reduce the amount of time I must spend in Purgatory, a temporary Hell, before I get sent to Heaven. The way I figure it, I’m probably down to only a couple of eternities in the bad place before I get to the good place. Hey, as the French philosopher Pascal said, you never know.

Mining is obviously a risky business. Failures outnumber successes by a wide margin. Among the many palatial buildings in downtown Zacatecas is the **Palacio de la Mala Noche**, Palace of the Bad Night. In the 18th Century Jose Manuel de Retecui was one of many failed prospectors. Down to his last few pesos, he prepared to commit suicide. Legend has it that he had a pistol to his temple when he heard a knock at his door. A compadre informed him that a large vein of silver was just discovered on his claim. Jose went on to become a rich man. He built the Palace to commemorate his close call. The building now houses the State Supreme Court.

One tour not to miss is the **El Eden Mine**. Begun in the 1586 it became a major producer of silver, gold, copper, lead and zinc. It was closed in 1964 due to a devastating flood. It was opened in 1975 as a tourist attraction.

Your tour begins with a train ride “to the bowels of the earth” – about 2000 ft. underground. You then commence a two km. guided walk through tunnels, over suspension bridges, overlooking drops of 100 ft. or more into a lighted underground river. On the way you view an impressive exhibit of minerals from around the world. Included is a Herkimer Diamond from upstate New York!



Our tour guide was excellent. He depicted vividly life in the mines. Donkeys spent their entire lives in the mine, never seeing daylight. Women transported sacks of ore on their backs climbing ladders, which were nothing more than logs with steps hacked out with axes. James Michener, in his historic novel “Mexico”, describes how one misstep could be fatal for these ore-carriers, falling hundreds of feet to their deaths. But, they were expendable.

The mine also contains a disco, “**El Malacate**”, open Thursday-Saturday evenings. I regret that we didn’t attend. I would have loved to boogie 2000 ft. below the surface. Next time.

Our mine tour ended on **Cerro de la Bufa**, a mountain (8800 ft.) that overlooks the town. After a thirst-quenching beer, we climbed into a cable car that took us 2000 ft. to the top. We were presented with an extraordinary 360 degree view of the surrounding area. A plaza and museum are dedicated to the Mexican Revolution. Statues of Pancho Villa and two other compatriots on horseback hold center stage. A charming chapel dedicated to Our Lady, which took two centuries to complete, anchors the opposite end of the plaza. Our guide gave us a stirring description of the **Tomba de Zacateca**, the Fall of Zacateca, where Villa and his troops routed the Federales.



And now, a couple of tangents:

Railroads: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Porfirio Diaz ruled Mexico with an iron hand. He filled the jails with dissidents; he killed off opposing candidates, e.g., Madero. In spite of all this he did enable the mining industry to expand by building railroads. During his reign railroads were built to connect Mexico City to Zacatecas to as far north as the border town of Juarez. After mining declined these same railroads facilitated the movement of migrant workers to the United States. To date, the states of Zacatecas and Aquascalientes contribute the major portion of immigrants to the States.

Tequila vs. Mezcal: There are many liquor stores in Zacatecas. But the only liquor they sell is mezcal. If you're familiar with mezcal and tequila, you will note that they are rarely drunk straight. The closest to straight is with salt and lemon. Normally they're imbibed in a margarita. Tequila is mezcal that comes from the State of Tequila, like Champagne. Tequila producers have attempted to imitate the producers of scotch and bourbon. They try to classify tequilas by levels of quality. I remember a restaurant along Rte 1 in Salisbury, MA that advertised 97 different types of tequila. For the last six years we have vacationed in Mexico, I have tried to develop a taste for both tequila and mescal. I have failed. Last year at the local Writers Festival Fiesta I attempted once more to develop a taste. My attempt resulted in a chipped tooth as I slipped on wet tile, and did a face plant on a cast iron table.

On our second day in Zacatecas we did a guided tour of the area. Our first stop was **La Quemada**, a mysterious archeological ruin located about 35 miles outside of Zacatecas. Estimates peg the settlement to between 300 and 1200 A.D. It consists of a major flat-topped pyramid surrounded by other multi-tiered structures. To date, no one has determined which tribe was responsible for this complex. It has been determined that only about one-tenth of the structures have been uncovered. Our guide explained that most of the government money set aside for archeological digs goes to those large,

well-known digs such as Chichen Itza in the Yucatan and Teotihuacan near Mexico City. Here was a temple.



Next we visited **Jerez**, another Pueblo Magico. Approaching the town we are startled by the green. Compared to the arid environment of Zacatecas, the region looks positively lush. Turns out that the economy is agriculture-based. Approaching the town center we came upon a mariachi band. We heard their musical strains for over an hour. Our guide took us to the Hinojosa Theater that was built in 1869. Accents of red velvet, gilt and ivory give this 200-seat (approx.) theater an old world style.

Jerez sports a Western flavor: lots of cowboy hats, stores offering boots and saddles. The Immaculate Conception church is impressive in its tasteful decoration.

Back in Zacatecas we dined well. We ate breakfast at the **Olympia**, which reminded me of an old Schraft's. Are they still around? Had dinner at an excellent Greek restaurant, **Mykonos**.

One place we didn't get to, but will next time, is the **Quinta Real**. This unique hotel was built around a former bull ring. The last bullfight occurred in 1975; the hotel opened in the mid-'80's.



San Luis Potosi: Thanks to NAFTA, this town has become quite the industrial center of the last few decades. One reason is its location --- halfway between Mexico City and Laredo, TX. It also lies in the middle a triangle with two other major cities – Guadalajara and Monterrey. Entering the town we drove past huge factories with well-known names – Caterpillar, Honda, Nissan, Volkswagen, Audi Ford, GM.

This town with a population exceeding 723,000 was named after King Louis IX of France and Potosi, a rich mining site in Bolivia. The city began to develop with the

discovery of silver and gold in 1592. The deposits never rivalled those of Guanajuato or Zacatecas.

We stayed at the **Hotel Panorama** the town center. Parking was easy. They have a swimming pool, but the weather was chilly. The center city has a European feel to it; several well-manicured plazas. Across the street from the hotel is a long, colonnaded brownstone building with shops on the first level and living quarters above. It's a copy of a building on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris.

We took a double-decker bus tour of the center city. We sat on the open top deck with our guide and several tourism students from the local university. Our guide invited us to join him so that he could practice his English. The city was like Savannah, filled with parks. In fact one went for almost a kilometer. Our guide wanted us to distinguish between a "park", a "garden", a "square" and a "plaza". It wasn't easy. It is also a church-filled with churches and old monasteries – Augustine, Jesuit, Benedictine, Franciscan.....

It is a lively University town and we were delighted to find many artisanal beers. For dinner we discovered a pub, **La Oruja y La Cebeda**, The Caterpillar and the Barley. We sampled their various artisanal brews, and selected our favorites. The brews were excellent, as was the food.

For our final dinner we went to **La Gran Via**. It had the feeling of a private club. The service was first class, as was the cuisine – Spanish/Mediterranean. A bit pricey, but worth it.

The next morning on the way out of town we stopped at **El Labrinto**, The Labrynth of Science and Art. Aptly named, the contemporary building encircled a courtyard of mazes. The building contains 160 hands-on exhibits on a variety of subjects including space, ecology and chemistry.

This ended our six-day journey through North Central Mexico. Would we go back? You betcha! The blood has ceased flowing. The silver is on the wane. The North Central region of Mexico still has much to offer the tourist.

Hast la proxima!

Chuck, Anzie, Steve & Tricia