

January, 2011

Mexico City

We are infatuated with Mexican history. I told my English class the other night: “You have so much to be proud of here in Mexico, especially your history. In the U.S. our history goes back 400 years. Yours dates back 5000 years, and you have the evidence to prove it!”

Mexico is huge. My Daddy used to say: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” Last year we traveled to Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, part of the coast south of there, and Ajijic. Next year we hope to journey down to Oaxaca.

We took a bus direct from San Miguel de Allende to Mexico City. The buses are very comfortable. They show movies, have a selection of music, restrooms. Passengers are given a bag containing a drink and snacks before departure.

Mexico City far exceeded our expectations. We expected throat-choking, eye-smarting air pollution. This is old news. Los Angeles is worse. Many people ride bicycles. Bikes are available for free at stands located all over the central city. At a recent world conference, the mayor of Mexico City committed to reducing air pollution by 5 % within 12 months. We were told to be on our guard for thieves and pickpockets. Not a problem! We found the people to be warm, friendly and proud of their city. Our cab drivers went out of their way to show off the sites.

We stayed at the **Hotel Catedral**, located right in the heart of downtown, two blocks from the **Zocalo** – the largest plaza in all of the Americas. The hotel offered two restaurants and roof terraces with views of the city and beyond. We could see two snow-capped volcanoes in the far distance. Our room was comfortable with Wi-Fi. All this for less than \$60./night.

By the way, tourism is really down in all of Mexico. The country is suffering from the news of drug wars along the U.S. border. Last year it was the Swine Flu. We’ve seen an extraordinary turnover in restaurants in SMA since last year. The *taxistas* are crying the blues. Taxi business is way off. For those of us who are already ensconced here, life is easy: no problem making reservations; traffic is less; it’s a buyer’s market in real estate (not that we’re the least bit interested in buying another property).

Back to Mexico City. After settling into the hotel, we couldn’t wait to explore. We walked around the **Templo Mayor**, which faces onto the Zocalo. It was discovered in 1978 when a telephone repairman was digging a trench to install phone wires. They soon discovered that this was the major Aztec temple. Not only that, archeologists subsequently discovered four more temples beneath the top one. They theorize that each succeeding Aztec ruler built a new temple over the old one. The dig continues.

We next visited the **Catedral Metropolitana**, located right on the Zocalo. We noticed what appeared to be electronic measuring equipment located in at least three areas of the church. When we exited the Catedral, we came upon a guide leaning on crutches. He explained that the equipment was for measuring earth movement. He drew our attention to a corner of the structure, which was significantly lower than the opposite corner. The Catedral and several other buildings were sinking. The city was built on a lakebed, which tends to amplify tremors. The rising population (now 22 million!) has drawn out most of the water from the aquifer, leaving an empty space. You may recall the disastrous earthquake of 1985. That exacerbated the problem, but the buildings continued to sink. Finally in the late '90's an impressive undertaking took place which, in 2000, was declared successful.

We meandered through the streets that surrounded the Zocalo. The businesses appeared to be arranged like the *souks* of the Arab world – by product type. We first entered the jewelry souk. One huge city block was dedicated to jewelry and watches, gold and silver, precious and semi-precious stones. Arcade after arcade held hundreds of stalls, each one seemingly offering similar merchandise. Then we came upon other souks: the camera souk, the children's toy souk, the religious article souk, the electronic souk. We even discovered a medical supply souk, which offered everything from hospital beds to prostheses to bed pans.

That night we dined at the **Café de Tacuba**. Our Spanish teacher, Jessica, originated from Cuernavaca, which is situated fairly close to Mexico City. She recommended a few of her favorite downtown restaurants. This one was a wonderful memory. It began in 1912 in this old convent. The décor is old Mexico: colorful hand-painted tiles, stained glass, murals. At the entrance to the main dining room are huge paintings depicting the invention of *mole poblano*, a complex sauce comprised of a variety of chiles and chocolate.

The moles are delicious. We discovered that there exist three basic moles: yellow, red and black. Every chef worth his salt, or pepper, has developed his or her own mole recipe. Miquel, chef and owner of **Dona Diabla** here in SMA, explains with much pride that he takes four hours to make yellow mole, five hours to make red, and seven hours to make the black.

While we were sipping our margaritas, Anzie watched the maitre D' as he folded napkins into intricate designs. Her winning smile enticed him over to our table. He proceeded to teach us how to make a flower design – sort of linen origami. During the evening he taught us a few more. He explained that he had written a booklet that gives instructions for folding 100 different designs.

Still somewhat full from lunch, we dined light on soup and appetizers. A woman at the next table ordered chicken mole. It was enough for two people. She said it was delicious. We discovered that portions are pretty big here; that we can usually share one *entrada* and be completely satisfied. We were entertained by a mariachi band. We're not exactly enchanted with mariachis, but these guys were good.

On our way back to the hotel we heard drumming from the direction of the Zocalo. The sound echoed off the surrounding buildings. We discovered a ring of about twenty dancers celebrating the ancient Aztec tradition of dancing to the full moon. A tiny, round older woman led the dance in the center of the circle. The steps and moves were rather intricate. It was a work-out. Dancers stopped to rest, but the leader continued on and on.

The next morning we planned to visit the Palacio Nacional on the Zocalo. However, we found it blocked off by police, as was the entire Zocalo. Reason: a planned demonstration by electrical workers. Two years ago the state government of the Distrito Federal, which covers Mexico City and the environs, determined that many inefficiencies existed within the state-run electrical utility. Many workers were laid off with promises of relocation. Said relocation had yet to occur for many. Cops were everywhere, with busloads more on the side streets.

So, we went to Plan B: **Turibus** runs a series of red double-decker busses that tour much of downtown Mexico City. The tour includes headphones that explain the sites. Just like downtown Boston, you can get on and off the busses all day long. After 3 ½ hours of riding through many different neighborhoods, we had developed some sense of the layout.

Although the tour was far from over, we decided to get off and visit the **Museo de Arte Popular**. We love this museum! Upon entering we were confronted with a train. On each open car is depicted a scene from Mexican history portrayed by the skeletal Day of the Dead figures – eerily funny. In the same atrium is parked a Volkswagen Beetle completely covered in colorful beaded decoration, right down to the bumpers and hubcaps.

Four floors are filled with arts and crafts from the 31 states of Mexico. We particularly enjoyed the giant papier-mâché creatures that must thrill parade spectators, the “tree of life” sculptures in ceramic or wood, the Day of the Dead sculptures. We enjoyed it so much that we returned later to take pictures.

We decided to walk back to our hotel. On the way we went to the top of the **Latin-American Tower** for an excellent view of the city. At 47 stories it’s the tallest building in Latin America. Anzie had a wave of altitude sickness on the way up. After all, we were now 47 stories above the 7200 ground elevation. In Dubai last October our apartment was located in a 55-story building, and it was by no means the tallest in the neighborhood.

After a stop along a pedestrian mall for *chiladas* (beer and lemon juice in a salt-rimmed glass – quite tasty!) sushi, live Beatles music and a fellow dressed as a guitar, we repaired to our hotel for the night.

Spent the next morning at the **Templo Mayor**. This was the Aztecs’ main temple, dedicated to their cult of death. Captives from rival tribes, as many as 10,000 at a time,

were sacrificed to the bloodthirsty god of war, Huitzilopochtli. The ruins are well-marked with signs in English and Spanish. Adjacent is a modern museum in which are displayed artifacts that were found in the Templo, including the famous Aztec calendar.

Lunched at the **Casa de los Azulejos (House of Tiles) a.k.a. Sanborns**. It is indeed covered with hand-painted tiles. We ate inside the 3 story central courtyard – now covered with a stained glass roof. It is in one of the oldest colonial palaces left in the City. The light fare is less than memorable, but it's still worth a visit.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casa_de_los_Azulejos,_Mexico_City

Less than a block away lies **Bellas Artes**. We stopped by there to purchase tickets to the **Ballet Folklórico de México**. Although this show is normally held in the famous Bellas Artes theater, it is undergoing renovation. So the show is held in an outside theater located at the **Museo de Antropología**. It's a visual feast of Mexican regional dances in whirling colors – truly worthwhile.

We were sorry we couldn't visit the theater in Bellas Artes. It's famous for its glass curtain. Designed by Tiffany, it is a landscape that features the two volcanoes that can be viewed from Mexico City. Not to be missed are the murals on the mezzanine. We met a guide who explained the intricacies of masterpieces by Rivera, Orozco, Sigüeiro and others – well worth his fee of 40 pesos (\$3.30).

Sidebar: You've heard the expression, "The blind leading the blind". Well, we witnessed two instances of the real thing. Three blind people walked single file, the rear two holding onto the shoulder of the one in front. The one in front held the cane.

Palacio Nacional: Located on the Zocalo, this edifice stretches two football fields. Besides government offices, it contains many of the most well-known murals by Diego Rivera, as well as a museum depicting the events and the characters of the two revolutions: 1810 and 1910. Rivera's mural stretches nearly 1200 feet. The subject is *Epic of the Mexican People and Their Struggle for Freedom*. It covers two millennia, from the ancient tribes, through the Spanish conquest, the two revolutions, industrialization, bourgeois decadence and nuclear holocaust ---- History as seen through Rivera's imagination. Yep, even Karl Marx is there.

<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/mexico/mexicocity/rivera/muralsintro.html>

Museo Nacional de Antropología: This exposition of Mexican anthropological history served two purposes for us. First, it brought the history that we were reading and hearing about to life. Second, it prepped us for our upcoming foray into ancient ruins. This massive museum is divided into twelve sections, or rooms. Each gives the history of a separate tribe, eg., Toltec, Zapotec, Olmec, Aztec, Mayan, etc. Outside of each room, we found a jungle garden containing a replica of an ancient ruin. One of the interesting pieces was the Aztec Codex, or History Book. We spent 3 ½ hours there. We could've spent at least a day.

Hosteria de Santo Domingo: Another of Jessica's favorites, the Hosteria exudes old world charm. It should; it's been around since the late 19th century. The specialty is *chiles en nogada*. This is the dish that celebrates the Mexican flag: the green poblano chiles, the white walnut cream sauce, the red pomegranate seeds sprinkled over the top. The chiles are stuffed with chopped meat filling. It's excellent. However, the Hosteria normally serves it cold, for some reason known only to history. You must ask to have it heated. That evening they had a special on Cosmopolitans. Although they were a bit too sweet for our taste, they were tasty and powerful. Here's a recipe for those you want to try making them. <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/2397-stuffed-chiles-in-walnut-sauce-chiles-en-nogada>

Onward to the Yucatan!

Chuck & Anzie