

Our Year on the Road & Living in Mexico

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Adventures

Challenges

Triumphs

Lessons Learned

by Chuck Bolotin





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The Story Behind the Stories, and How This Book is Organized

Did you ever stop to review your life over some period of time; to ponder in what ways the experiences you've had and your responses to those experiences have changed you, and what you could learn from it all?

One of the advantages of purposefully doing things differently than you have in the past and putting yourself in unusual circumstances is that, in so doing, events happen more quickly, and if you keep a diary over that period, you can learn more easily from them.

For my wife and me, for the one year we spent traveling and living in Mexico, our diary is the book you're reading now. It starts with an article I wrote for Richard Eisenberg, the Managing Editor of [NextAvenue](#), "Becoming a Globetrotting Nomad at 58: Would You Pull the Rope?", which explains the genesis of the trip that seems to have begun so much longer than a year ago.

In this book after that article I wrote for NextAvenue, we take you along on our adventure through stories written for our website, [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), in which my wife and I pack our stuff into a large white van, and along with our two dogs, as typical newbies, cross the border into Mexico.

Our plan was to stay in each of the most popular expat destinations, to see what each was like by living there for six weeks or so, and have some fun and adventures along the way, all before we were too old to do it. We share what we were thinking, what we saw and what we felt, how we responded, and how it all turned out. After the stories of our road trip itself, we provide a series of "lessons learned" articles we wrote along the way.

One of our objectives in writing this book is to give to others like us a story they could use to help them to decide if they would like to embark on their own, similar adventures. If you're one of these people, while our experiences and perspectives will be a bit different from yours in many ways, there is probably a lot we have in common, so this is our gift and guide for you.

We share the good, the bad, the nerve-racking, the frustrating, the exhilaration, and, from my perspective writing this now more than a year after we started, a bit of the triumph and gratitude of seeing and experiencing more than we thought we would, while ultimately being quite a bit more successful than we thought we would. It is not, however, that our trip wasn't without its problems and trials, as you'll soon discover.

Each chapter is a story or a lesson learned, and all stories have links to other resources, including the [YouTube videos](#) we made along the way, [other articles written by or about us](#) in publications as diverse as Marketwatch, Fortune, TheStreet, etc., and of course our friends who published our first road trip article, NextAvenue. If you're looking for other resources, stories and answers from more than 500 expats about what it's like to live abroad, we can point you to

Best Places in the World to Retire, to the [Questions and Answers](#) area, the [Expatriate Stories](#), and of course the [Location Advisor](#), where you can input what you're looking for and the software will let you know which places match up with your criteria. You may also be interested in the research studies our company did on Panama, Belize and Nicaragua, and the ones we did after surveying 1,129 expats currently living in Mexico. They are all available for free download [here](#).

Before we depart on our trip together, in addition to Richard Eisenberg, please allow me to thank my friend Alfonso Galindo, CEO of North America Trust Bank Mexico, who suggested the trip and writing about it; Mike Cobb, Chairman and CEO of ECI Development, who suggested that I put these stories into a book; and of course, my soulmate, life partner, wife, editor, graphics designer (for example, the graphics in this book) and writer in her own right (she wrote the chapter "The Woman at the Pemex"), Jet Metier. Thank you, everyone! It turned out well.

The van is waiting outside. It's packed, filled with gas, and both dogs are inside. We're going forward, and the adventure is about to begin.

Let's get started, shall we?

-- Chuck Bolotin, writing from Mexico, September 1, 2017



(You can download additional copies or share Our Year on the Road and Living in Mexico [here](#).)

Becoming a Globetrotting Nomad at 58: Would You Pull the Rope?

(We thank the wonderful people and our good friends at Nextavenue.org, where [this article was originally published](#) July 28, 2016.)

I was at a lecture a few years ago where the speaker casually mentioned that most members of the audience were in the final third of their lives. As I looked around, I saw a lot of “old people,” so it seemed like he was right.

Then, I did the math relative to myself.

Oh, no! He was talking about me! I realized I was now in the last third of my life. (I’m now 58.) I had never stopped to think about it.

Even before that, I was speaking with a friend who was a few years older than me and in perfect health. He predicted that, given how long he keeps things, he would probably purchase just one more car in his lifetime and had likely bought all the suits he would ever own. “How strange for him,” I thought, until, once again, I did the math for myself. I had probably purchased my last suit, too.

Then a year ago in May, while playing basketball, I tore my Achilles tendon. It was just another reminder that not only is tomorrow promised to no one, but neither is the health to live life actively — which, to me, is important.

Every day, whether we want to or not, we play Russian Roulette with our health and even our lives. One day, something *will* happen; we just don’t know when. I began wondering: Would I wait too long to do the things I wanted to, and then not be able to at all?

The possibility of having regrets was too much for me to bear, so I decided not to wait any longer. That’s why, a few months back, my wife Jet Metier and I [decided to become nomads](#).

We sold our four-bedroom home in Tucson, gave away about half our stuff and put all the other stuff into storage that we couldn’t fit into a huge van we purchased for our adventure.

As the co-founder (with my wife) of the website [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), I had created the business to be able to be run it from anywhere in the world with an Internet connection. I have people working for me in the Philippines and Finland, customers in Central America and Portugal, and people from all over the world as visitors to the site. There was



nothing holding me back from life as a digital nomad except for the imagination and the courage to do it.

Our plan is to be mobile, and to “live” at various vacation rentals for six weeks to several months at a time. Since our site is about [retiring abroad](#), our new lifestyle has the added advantage of eventually allowing me to include our experiences among the 500+ expats on our site who answer questions and tell their stories about living abroad.

On April 4, we left Arizona, and recently we were in Chico, California. Our rough plan: to drive from there to [La Paz, in Baja California](#), take a ferry to the [Puerto Vallarta](#) area, drive the highlands of Mexico to [Ajijic / Lake Chapala](#) and then to [San Miguel de Allende](#), reputed to have some of the best weather anywhere. We’ll then drive down to [Merida](#), in the Yucatan Peninsula, over to [Belize](#), and along the way, perhaps visit [Nicaragua](#) and [Panama](#). If we can get someone we trust to watch our two dogs, we may even visit [Portugal](#). (By the way, my Spanish is extremely elementary, my wife’s is close to nonexistent, and neither of us speaks Portuguese.)

I’m writing regular updates on [my Facebook page](#). Periodically, I’ll write about my experience for [NextAvenue](#), so perhaps you can see if something like what we’re doing or one of the places we visit would be good for you.

I’m a big fan of [Jonathan Look](#) (another nomad traveling the world and a [Next Avenue writer](#)) who recently related a quote from a book by journalist and entrepreneur [Steven Kotler](#). It said that once basic survival needs have been met, the three drivers that motivate humans most are: a combination of autonomy (the desire to direct your own life), mastery (the desire to learn, explore and be creative) and purpose (the desire to matter, to contribute to the world).

All three apply to our adventure. So, for me, this observation is “dead on.”



One story from our trip so far: In front of the sidewalk of the house across the street from where we stayed in Chico was a giant wind chime. In fact, it was five times larger than the largest one I had ever seen. Towards the bottom, like all wind chimes, it had a wind catcher attached to a rope that, if pulled to one side, caused the wind chime to make a sound.

Would you walk across the street to pull the rope to see what sound the giant wind chime makes?

Our landlady had lived across the street from the wind chime since 1987. When I asked her if she had ever pulled the rope, she was a bit perplexed that I would even ask the question. No, she had not, even though it was sitting there, looking right at her, for decades.

I asked my wife if *she* would pull the rope. Like the landlady, she would not.

So I guess we can divide the world into two groups: those who would pull the rope of a giant wind chime and those who would not.

If you don't pull the rope, of course, you'll never know the sound it makes.

Would you pull the rope?





Why We Will Be Driving Through Mexico for the Next Year: A Road Trip Series

The Mexican border agent took a quick look at our over-sized van and motioned me to pull over to a special inspection area. Then, he asked me to open the rear doors. What he saw next was a cargo area so fully stuffed that you would have a difficult time adding a tennis ball.

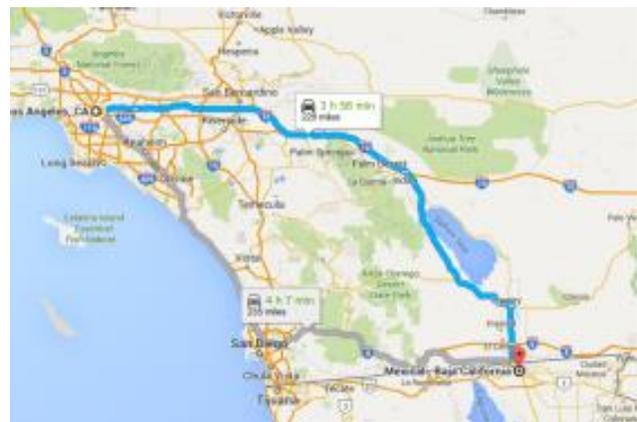
“I’m sorry, señor,” he said, “you either have to unpack the van to let us see what you have in all those boxes, or go to another point of entry where they have an x-ray machine.” Given that unpacking and re-packing would probably take about 3 hours, there were no guarantee I could figure out how to fit it all in again, and it was already 90 degrees and rising where we were on the California - Mexico border, the second option seemed to make more sense. I got back into the van, waved goodbye, and drove off to try at another spot.



What had brought us to this point? Why, exactly, had my wife and I left the comfort of our four bedroom, air conditioned home, complete a pool and all our stuff, in order to drive through the desert to this hot and sweaty place, and then hope that a random border official would grant us permission to pass into his country?

I’ll tell you.

As Vice President of Business Development for [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), I have spoken with more than 500 expats, read more than 8,000 answers to the most often asked questions about moving abroad, conducted an extensive study about life abroad, and written dozens of articles that have appeared in national publications, so most people would call me an expert in living abroad.



However, I had never done it myself.

This May, we were going to change that, as my wife and I would attempt to cross the US – Mexican border with our two dogs and as much of our belongings as we could cram into a big, white van.

This is the first article in a series, in which I invite you to follow our story as it unfolds. Because we're just beginning our journey, I have no real idea what will come next or how it will end, so we will find out together.

I hope you find our journey entertaining and useful. I'll do my best to bring you along with us and give you a realistic a feel for what it's really like, and I'll write about our experiences as close to the time they happen as possible, so you can see what we thought at the time, as opposed to how we remember events later.

But before I pick up our story at the US-Mexican border, here's some background that will help you place our journey into context and maybe even expose some things you and I have in common. I was born in 1957, right in the middle of the Baby Boom. I'm married, and have two adult children who live in Los Angeles. Up until a few months ago, my wife and I lived in the house I described. We speak very little Spanish.



As a businessperson, I've always been fascinated by what economists call "arbitrage," which I'll define for our purposes as buying or selling to take advantage of different prices in different locations. (Arbitrage is what made the Renaissance explorers and many other traders rich.) In short, arbitrage is sort of like magic, if you can pull it off. In this case, arbitrage would be the ability to live a better life in Mexico for less money.



Arbitrage is what got me interested in the concept of living abroad, and what motivated me to found Best Places in the World to Retire. After three years of running the site, we had mountains of evidence that one could live a much better life for the same money abroad, but this evidence was all from other people.

The time had come to subject ourselves to the same experiences to see if we got the same results. In addition, on behalf of all the visitors to our site who are considering moving to a place like Mexico, I felt we had to answer questions about safety from firsthand experience. As Americans are led to believe, would our van with all our possessions be stolen immediately upon crossing the border with us left at the side of the road? Would we be held up at gunpoint or kidnapped? Would we be caught in the crossfire of drug smugglers? I needed to find out directly, and I will report to you exactly what happens.

Given that the cost of living is a key component to our story, I'll share with you some of our average monthly costs in southern Arizona:

Electricity... \$275

Water... \$130

Gas for the house... \$80

Cable (Internet, TV, phone)... \$180

Property tax... \$480

Health insurance (just for catastrophic; \$10,000 deductible)... \$436*

*Will probably rise to well over \$1,000 per month over the next few years.

Here were our objectives:

- Reduce or eliminate as much financial risk as possible (and thereby benefit from a huge increase in peace of mind).
- Pay less day-to-day for a higher quality life.
- Experience life in different places, meet new people, experience new cultures; test our ability to meet new challenges and as a result grow new competencies and confidence; develop a greater understanding of other people, the world, and ourselves; and basically experience life on a more meaningful level, all before we were too old to enjoy it, or too old to even do it.



Our plan is to drive from place to place, starting in Mexico, and to stay in vacation rentals for about two months at a time, all for about a monthly rental cost equal to just our former monthly house utility expenses and property taxes. While doing this, we plan to be in or very close to world-renowned vacation places where people spend hundreds of dollars a night and have to hurry to experience as much as they can as quickly as they can before getting on a plane to go back home. In contrast, we planned to be living close enough to experience the same thing, but at a MUCH more leisurely pace, and to live much better than we did before, all for a daily housing cost of about \$40.

Our plan is to drive and spend time in the places below, places along the way, and places close enough for day trips:

- La-Paz, Cabo San Lucas
- Puerto Vallarta

- Lake Chapala / Ajijic
- San Miguel de Allende
- The Yucatan Peninsula, including Merida (and the beach communities around Merida such as Celestún, Sisal and Telchac, known as Costa Yucatan), Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, etc.

After we're done, we will either continue with our new lifestyle, find a place to settle down, or come back to the US. Whatever we choose, I'll let you know.

So we sold our house in a moderately good market, and put into storage or gave away everything that couldn't fit into the largest van I could find that I assumed my wife would drive. I took the proceeds from the sale of our house and diversified it into several classes of assets that could better withstand a variety of macro-economic problems I see as happening only in a matter of



time. Before leaving, I contracted for the purchase of a much better health insurance plan (an international plan) for \$222 per month for both of us.

Here's a summary of what I accomplished:

- Risk from prices falling in housing market: gone.
- Paying for maintenance and things breaking at our home: gone.
- Monthly expenses including property tax but not including mortgage of well over \$1,145 per month: gone.
- Having to do chores to fix and maintain things almost every weekend: gone.
- Health insurance cost for better insurance: lowered by \$258 a month, which is more than 50% less.
- Clearance for a great adventure with peace of mind: just beginning.

It was a really good start. The next challenge would be getting past a border agent and into Mexico.

(Map data 2016 copyright Google INEGI)

Experiences Crossing the US-Mexican Border at Mexicali (or is it Calexico?)

Whoever chaired the city naming committee for the Calexico – Mexicali area was too clever by half. Calexico (a mash-up of “California” and “Mexico”) is on the US side, while Mexicali (a reverse mash-up) is on the Mexican side. Or is it the other way...

In any event, what strikes you as you travel through the general area is how much blending there is of the two cities. We felt we needed one, final, all American act before crossing into Mexico, so we stopped at the Wal-Mart about a mile or so from the border on the US side. In the parking lot, we passed perhaps two dozen people, all Hispanic, all of whom were speaking Spanish. Once inside, I asked the cashier where they kept the caffeine gum. She looked at me with a quizzical look, but didn’t speak. Not only didn’t she understand English, but I guess she found it odd that I did.



We had been told by the Mexican border official that we had to go to the next point of entry to the east. Unfortunately, it wasn’t on our map, and Google didn’t know it existed. After verbal instructions by a US customs official, an unanticipated detour and zero signage until about a half mile from the border, we stumbled upon it.

The temperature was rising and we had a deadline. Pretty much everyone told us not to drive in Mexico after dark, so we had to completely clear the border and be on our way to San Felipe (about 120 miles away on a road I knew nothing about) within the next two hours. I pulled up to the Mexican border agent, rolled down the window, smiled, and prayed he wouldn’t ask us to take out all our cargo.

“Hi,” he said, “I’m Jorge.” (So far, so good.)

“Pull over there for inspection.” (Not so good.)

We were entering under a temporary residence visa, so we had to make sure to go to Immigration at the border, and we weren’t sure where it was. When I asked Jorge, he became visibly pleased, broke out in a large smile and informed us that he would be the one



helping us. (My first friend in Mexico.)

The side arm-carrying female border official who came over to do the inspection was quite a bit more serious. I dutifully opened the back doors of the van, upon which, a high up and poorly placed bag fell out and almost hit her. While she didn't burst out laughing, she didn't handcuff us either, so I figured that was good.

She asked very politely if she could look into various containers, and asked me if we were bringing gifts. My assumption is that the van was so large and so incredibly cramped that they were either looking to see if we were illegally importing goods to open our own well-stocked mid-sized store, or smuggling in items for some other purpose.



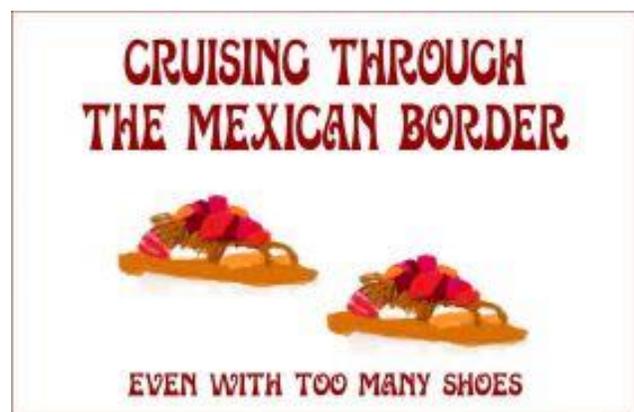
I told her that all the items were ours and we were bringing them for our one-year tour of Mexico. She turned, tilted her head to one side, raised one eyebrow and, her eyes fixed on me, she paused. My assumption was that her look of incredulity was on account of the sheer volume of items. The first container she opened contained a portion of my wife's shoes—about 18 pairs. She looked down, then looked at me... and waited. Either she thought she had caught me in a lie, or otherwise was silently asking why one woman needed so many shoes.

"Who are these for?" she asked.

"They all belong to my wife."

She didn't answer. She just looked at me behind her sunglasses, expressionless. I guess she was waiting for me to crack under the heat of the day and the pressure of the situation.

Then, it hit me how I could prove that all these shoes belonged to one woman. "Look," I said, "they're all the same size!"



Jet Metier / BestPlacesInTheWorldToRetire

OK. That container passed. Next, she climbed up and tried to look into several other containers in turn. She made a strange motion with her hand that needed no

interpretation. She had cut her finger on one of our containers and was bleeding.

When my wife quickly appeared with the first aid kit, applied antiseptic and carefully bandaged the border agent, we saw the agent smile.

There would be no further inspections. We had passed.

Next, it was time to visit Jorge.

Jorge is one of those larger, jovial people who you just immediately like. On the other side of the counter, he carefully and deliberately placed two forms right side up for us on the counter, one in front of me and one in front of my wife. Then, he gave each of us a pen.

“Number one,” said Jorge, pointing to the place on the form, “your first name.” He then patiently waited for us to finish writing before proceeding.

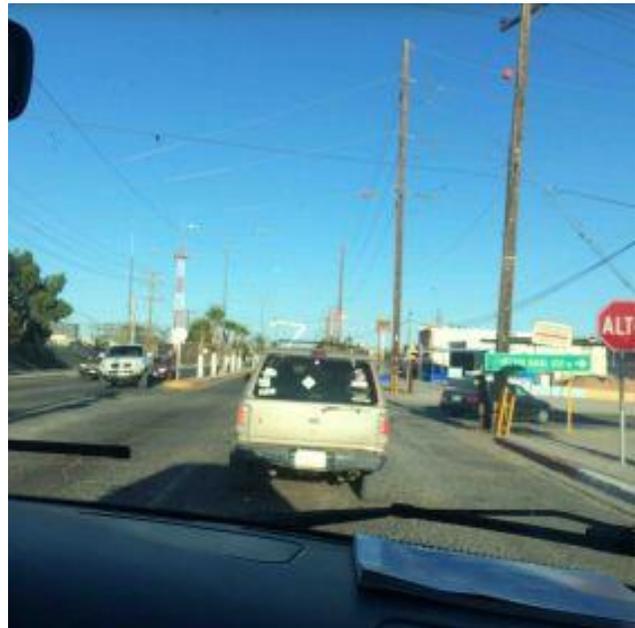
“Number two, your last name.”

I loved it. It went on like this for about 5 minutes, with Jorge making absolutely certain, with the patience of a saint, that we would fill in the form correctly. Then, he left with the forms.

In about five minutes, Jorge returned, but with a sad look on his face. Evidently, we had filled out the forms improperly, and it was his fault. He apologized, brought out new forms, and then said, “Number one...”

Even with the finger injury to the border agent and Jorge’s very patient, meticulous style, we were finished in less than 20 minutes. We pointed the big white van south, and entered Mexicali proper. At 3:15 on Monday, May 19, we became expats.

You may remember the game “Where’s Waldo”, in which you try to find a particular sort of goofy looking guy wearing what looked to me like a white and red striped Victorian England sleeping cap in a very busy drawing with lots of people and lots of activity. It’s not easy, which is sort of the fun of it.



In Mexico, the stop signs say “Alto” on them. I believe I stopped at the first two or three, but then, to my complete horror in pretty heavy traffic, I barreled right through the next one at about 35 miles per hour, with my wife yelling about half way through the intersection, “Alto! Alto!” I didn’t know how she had learned to speak Spanish so quickly. Perhaps I would have stopped a bit sooner had she yelled something like “Stop sign!”, but that’s another story. In any event, the drivers around me didn’t seem phased at all, and no one even honked.



After I calmed down and the thought of being in an accident within minutes of crossing the border and / or having my first encounter with a Mexican police officer and / or Mexican jail had diminished, we decided to coin a new game: “Where’s Alto?” In addition to how the alto sign and Waldo’s hat shared the same red and white colors, the reason is that the stop signs in Mexicali are about 2 feet lower than we’re used to in the States, and placed further back off the intersection. Some are faded, and many of them can easily be obscured by a truck that isn’t even that tall.

The second Spanish word my wife learned that day was “tope”, which she usually pronounced “TOW-PAY!!” “Tope” is Spanish for “speed bump”, many of which are not insignificant and not obviously placed, at least for an American. After you’ve hit a few topes at full speed, you’ll learn to respect them. The one to the right and above is very mild. There is no uniformity.

So, we proceeded along, with cries of “alto!” and “tope!” periodically jarring my sensibilities. Lucky for us, we had cell service at the border, so we had Google maps well up until the time we hit the main highway, and it was very unlikely we would get lost on the way to San Felipe.

(Map data 2016 copyright Google INEGI)

Driving From Mexicali to San Felipe in Baja California: Why Is This Man Laughing?

Two bodies of water surround most of the peninsula of Baja California. On the eastern side is the Sea of Cortez (also known as the Gulf of California), while the western side faces the more familiar Pacific Ocean. These watery expanses merge at what looks like the large, natural arch you've seen pictures of at Baja's southern tip, Cabo San Lucas, about 750 miles roughly south of the US-Mexican border. At its widest, the peninsula measures about 85 miles from side to side, and, depending on the route you take from the north to the south, you can experience both coasts, sometimes several times.



We decided to begin our journey on the eastern, Sea of Cortez side of Baja for several reasons, including that, being originally from Los Angeles, I was horrified by the certainty of having to endure mind-numbing, bumper-to-bumper traffic for the hundred plus miles driving through LA and San Diego, and then, topping it off with the possibility of a multi-hour wait to cross into Mexico at Tijuana.

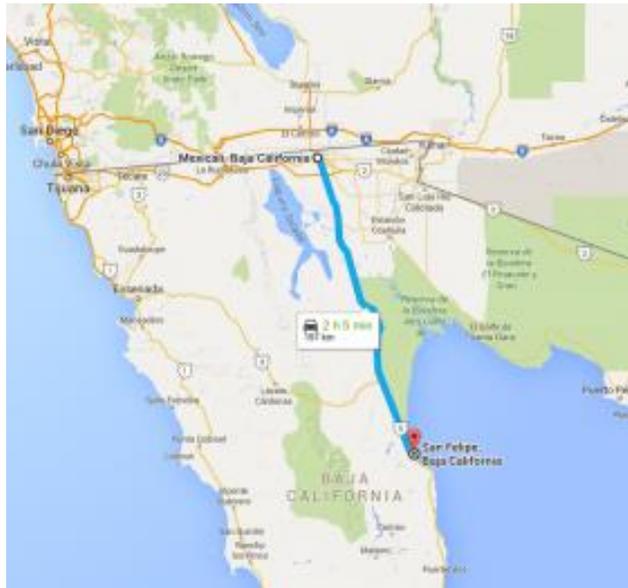
But why drive at all, instead of flying? Here are just a few reasons:

- We have two dogs.
- We have LOTS of our stuff with us, including clothing, kitchen items, beach chairs, a shocking quantity of women's shoes, etc., all of which, if we have with us, can make life much more convenient (not to mention, more stylish).
- We could enjoy the little, out of the way places we would otherwise just fly over and completely miss.
- We could get a much better, more authentic feel for places by driving there, as opposed to the almost surreal experience of getting into a large tube, waiting a few hours, and then being deposited into a completely different place. Much of life is in



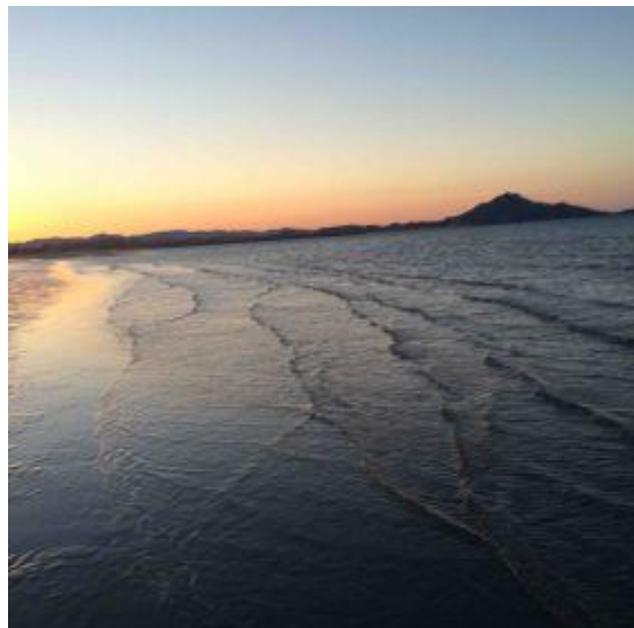
the journey, not the destination. How far are the places we will be visiting from each other? What are the places along the way? How does the topography change? How do the people change? These things can only be experienced and understood on the ground, along with the investment of the time it takes to do it.

As I settled down and relaxed into the drive, it dawned on me that Baja is a land of bared contrasts: parched and dusty brown desert opposed by stunning, sharp blue and blue-green ocean; flatlands that extend for miles that butt up against sheer mountainsides; what looks like vast and untamed emptiness that is suddenly replaced by civilization.



It also dawns on you during a multi-day drive like this that, compared to the US, Baja is not judgmental, and it doesn't coddle you, either. People do pretty much what they like (of course, other than hurting each other). Baja is a place of fewer laws, rules, regulations and HOA meetings, fewer road signs and guardrails, and an expectation that you can take care of yourself without having to be nagged, hectored, and generally told what to do. At least in the less Americanized areas we drove through, Baja is more like the US West of the past than the US West of today. Baja treats you like you are a competent adult, as opposed to a clueless child. Baja doesn't tell you the answer; it tells you that you're smart enough to figure it out for yourself. For this American, the feeling from this is liberating.

I'll have more on the driving conditions later. For now, I'll start with if you decide to drive Baja, don't bring your nice car; bring your good car. Bring a car that is in very good condition with very good tires, and axles that can withstand lots of jarring. Your car will get dirty and it will get scratched. Your windshield may get pitted. If you have a nice car, after a while, you won't be happy with how it looks, but if you bring a good car, almost all the time you will be happy with how reliable it is.



Down Mexico 5, San Felipe is your first real glimpse of the Sea of Cortez, an easy 2 1/2 hour drive from the border. Like much of Baja, until

you get to the ocean, the landscape looks like Southern Arizona, with the difference that, unlike in the US Southwest desert where the landscape continues for hundreds of miles, in eastern Baja, it is replaced often with a flat, blue, glimmering sea, many times, in magnificent bays. Think: Tucson abutting the tropics.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, so I can compare the typical beach-going experience in Los Angeles with what we experienced when we arrived in the beach town of San Felipe. Here were just a few differences:

- Instead of having 10,000 people in my field of view, I saw perhaps 10.
- The sand is very white, very flat, and the beach is wide. You can walk out into the ocean for 20 yards or more and still be standing. There were tiny little waves (if you could call them waves at all).
- The water is clear.
- The water is warm.
- There was no charge for parking.
- I wasn't thinking about leaving early or staying late in order to beat the traffic.
- We had a superb meal at the Hotel El Cortez right on the ocean for about \$12 total for both of us, tax included.
- I laughed a lot more.



If you are like me, when driving through Baja and arriving at San Felipe, there will be an equal sense of serenity and joviality that comes over you when you realize two things:

1. You are in a spectacularly beautiful place that you used to have to experience as a traditional vacation of a week or so and have to pay for via a second mortgage.
2. Your cost to be in and experience this place is less than if you had stayed home.



That explains the laughing.

Given that the Sea of Cortez is in the east, the sun sets over the mountains and rises over the ocean, so it was this sunrise over the flat, blue, clear water that greeted us on our first morning in Mexico. We spent a few hours leisurely walking with the dogs on this wide, sandy, almost deserted beach with its free parking and warm water, then packed up, and headed south again.

In our next article, I'll describe our drive south from San Felipe, and why most people don't do it.

(Map data 2016 copyright Google INEGI)

Driving Highway 5 South in Baja from San Felipe, and the Lake that Wasn't There

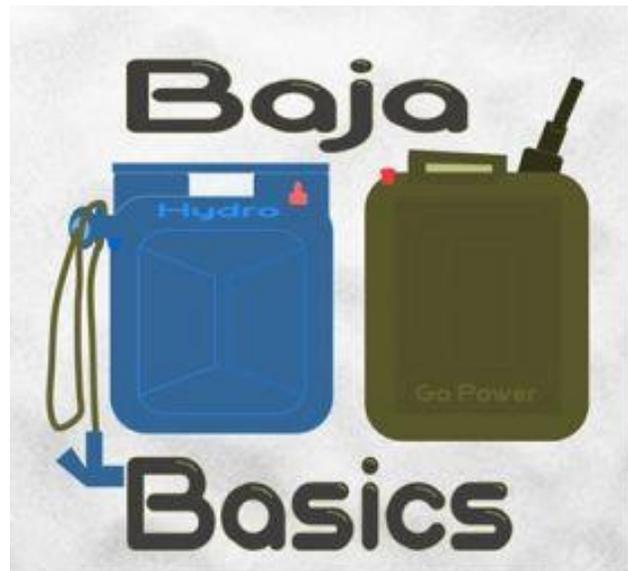
Most people think that the most important Spanish phrase you could learn is “¿Dónde está el baño?” (Where’s the bathroom?), “¿Cuánto cuesta este?” (How much is this?) or even, “Camarero, dos margaritas más, por favor” (Bartender, two more margaritas, please). While all these are very good to know in appropriate circumstances, my view is that the most important phrase to learn while driving south from San Felipe through Baja on Highway 5 (pretty much the only road you can take south from San Felipe) is “Tanque lleno” which, loosely translated, means “Fill ‘er up.”

The reason is that, in this area, there are long stretches with few gas stations, so we made sure our “tanque” was very much “lleno” before we left.

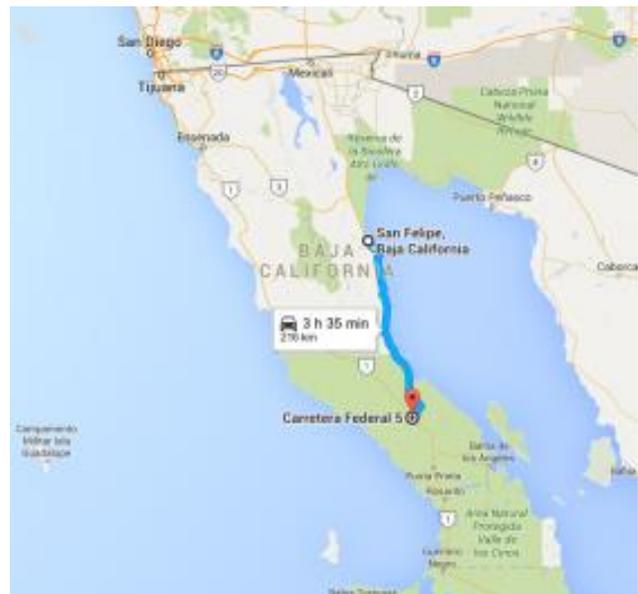
It’s not that we weren’t warned about taking Highway 5 south. Many people warned us, including the owner of the Sandollar Beach Resort in San Felipe, where we stayed and which we highly recommend. But could we discount this man’s warning? Was he some type of dilettante who scared easily? Not likely, given that he had made his living crop dusting in Northern California and currently rode dirt bikes for a hobby. 99%+ of the people driving through Baja take Highway 1, but we took Highway 5 because it took less time overall and we wanted to see things off the beaten (or even paved) path.

We weren’t disappointed.

Upon leaving San Felipe and heading south on Highway 5, you pretty much immediately lose whatever cell signal you may have had. At this point, you don’t care. The Sea of Cortez is on your left, as you come upon a series of beautiful, secluded and seemingly untouched beaches and bays with white sand and blue ocean, almost always completely empty of people, many times with islands dotting the horizon and sometimes with islands close enough for an easy kayaking trip from the shore. You just can’t see and experience these gems if you don’t



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drive it or sail to it, and it's hard to keep your eyes on the road as you are treated to one spectacular and inviting beach and bay after another. This stretch of the road is not maintained flawlessly, but it is paved well enough, given the small amount of traffic it carries.

After being treated to these delights, Highway 5 and the coast diverge, as the highway heads almost directly south while the coast turns slightly eastward. A little while later, with very little fanfare (and just a little sign with an arrow on it), you're directed onto a bone jarring, teeth filling-loosening, rutted, rock and dirt road that continues this way for many miles. Along the way, there are cut-offs that either 1) you should take; or, 2) are meant for construction equipment and may terminate in a dead end or in a sharp decent down a ravine that, if you make a wrong move, they may not find you for months. Given that there are generally no signs to let you know which road to take and it is so deserted that there is no one to follow, you make the call. If you're wrong, don't worry; you won't be subjected to ridicule from other drivers, because there are virtually no other drivers there to honk and point. You just find a place wide enough to turn around. I'm not certain if I remember vultures circling above, but I may have.



On one such fork in the road, my wife and I made a full stop right in the middle before one such fork and were debating which one of two roads to take. We essentially flipped a coin and then started on the one to the right. As out of a Twilight Zone episode, two Mexican men appeared over a hill, walking towards us. They were well dressed, in polo shirts and long pants with crisp creases. Both looked completely fresh, in stark contrast to their dusty surroundings. They called for us to come over, so we bumpily approached at our normal speed in this area, which was about 10 miles per hour.



The men said their car had blown a tire some ways back (which is really not hard to imagine), and they were walking for help. (Yes, it's that deserted.) We asked if we could give them water or food, which they declined, but they asked if we could give it to the first man's wife and the second man's father, who were back at the car. We all agreed, so we bid farewell, and they passed behind us, disappearing in my side view mirror, as we jarred forward in the opposite direction. About 5 minutes later, we came upon the broken down car and delivered the

breakfast bars and water, which, although they didn't speak English, it was clear that the recipients were very grateful to have.

Depending on your religious beliefs or lack thereof, you will either pray or hope real hard in this area that you don't break down like the people we passed. It's not that no one will help you. Of course they will; it's the nature of the people in this area to help. It's just that breaking down would be really inconvenient.

Irrespective of language or culture, many things are the same, like how people respond when driving about 20 miles or so on a deeply rutted, rocky road. For example, about half an hour later, we came across another car going in the opposite direction, at about the same speed as us. Given our less than race car velocity, that we hadn't seen another human for 10 minutes, and the fact the driver had rolled down his window and was waving at us to stop, we stopped. In broken English, the man driving (who was clearly the husband and father) asked, "How much further to the end?"

It's at times like these when you have a choice to make: tell the truth, or something that will encourage people and make them feel better. We chose the truth. "About an hour," we said.

The groans from the unseen children in the back seat and the wife in the front were unmistakable, in any language. The man driving looked crestfallen, as would any father and husband who had promised his family a nice drive in the country only to subject them to miles and miles of bumping.

"But it's worth it!" I said, trying to make the best of it.

Then I asked, "How much further until we reach the end?"

The husband / father said, "About half an hour."

Immediately, the chorus of wife and children let it be known, in any language, that it was their opinion that it was much further than half an hour. The husband / father grimaced, nodded at me (one husband / father to another), waved meekly, rolled up his window, and soldiered on.



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One of the advantages of going so slowly in this area is that we were able to grasp the enormity and engineering complexity of the construction project we were seeing in the making. They had already built immense concrete structures to move water; there were gigantic drains, huge trucks, etc.

On the map, we knew that, to mark the end of our unimproved ordeal, almost exactly in the middle of Baja from side to side, we would see a pretty good-sized lake on our left, marked as “Lake Chapala”, which would be where Highway 5 terminated into Highway 1 in a very distinct “T”. We would simply make a left onto Highway 1 (the highway taken by those 99%+ of the people who drive south through Baja) and merrily be on our hopefully very smooth way.



There is no lake. There isn't even a swamp. It's bone dry in every direction. There was, however, a distinct “T”. It was so unremarkable (and so unsigned) that, even though it was unmistakably a T in the road, I needed to make sure we were in the right place. The only sign of civilization I could find to in which to ask was a tire workshop just off the road facing the T on Highway 1, with three dogs guarding the place and two men working in the back, all of whom looked surprised when I approached.

I made friends with the barking dogs and asked the men if we were in the right place. One spoke very good English and told me that we were.

I pointed to the map I had brought out of the van for verification. “Where is the lake?” I asked, as if, if it were on the map, it just had to be there.

The man looked at the map, showed it to his friend, and they both laughed a knowing laugh. “It dried up decades ago.”



When I remarked that it might have been a good idea to remove the lake from the map, of course, he agreed, and told me the story of a woman who had driven for hours just to paddle on the lake that was not there.

I then offered that it would be a good idea to have a sign at the T.

He agreed again.

So, with nothing to mark the successful completion of our ordeal and safe passage other than three dogs, two men and an incorrect map, onward we drove on Highway 1 south, on a very good road, towards San Ignacio.



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Next stop: a yurt and a lake in the mountains and beaches so awesome they defy description.*

*But we have pictures.

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Highway 1 in Baja: From a Yurt in San Ignacio to the Perfect Beach South of Mulegé

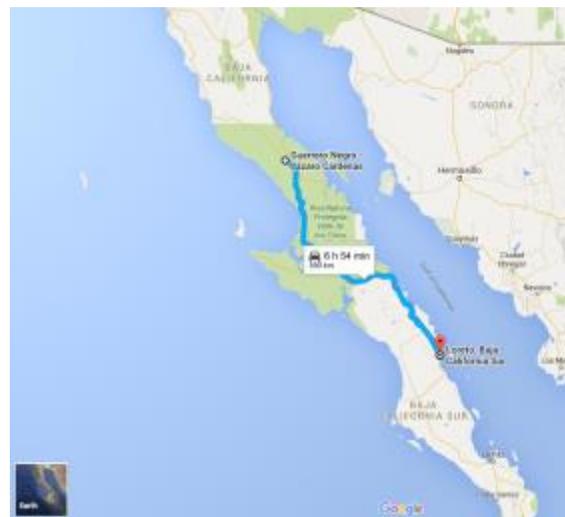
Driving south on Highway 1 from after it intersects Highway 5 is fairly uneventful, if by “uneventful” you mean “the hundreds of times when you’re confronted with the fact that even a slight miscalculation on your steering wheel will result in certain death.” A half inch to the left, and you’ll crash head-on into a semi barreling towards you at 60 miles per hour. A half inch to the right, and you’ll go over the roughly 12-inch shoulder to plunge either into a ditch, or down a canyon. (I recommend relaxed concentration, razor sharp reflexes, and hands at 10 and 2, just like your driver’s education instructor told you.)



For most of the trip, Highway 1 is just two lanes; the one going your way, and the one with possible death hurtling towards you. Both lanes look to be narrow, and the shoulder varies from what seems like about a foot in width maybe a few inches. Don’t let anyone tell you that Mexicans don’t know how to drive; they’re excellent drivers in general and, given the width of the trucks, their speed, and their very small margin for error, Baja truck drivers are first rate athletes.

You cross from Baja Norte into Baja Sur at Guerrero Negro, on the western, Pacific side of Baja. We didn’t stop, because we had a reservation that night at a yurt (yes, you read that right) in the tiny community of San Ignacio and didn’t want to add darkness as an additional thrill to our periodic near-death encounters.

San Ignacio has less than 1,000 residents and is about in the middle going east and west on the peninsula. Even though Wikipedia will tell you that San Ignacio has an elevation of just above sea level, it has the feel of being up in the mountains. It’s definitely much cooler than being at the ocean (my wife wore a hoodie, even in late May) as the desert landscape is replaced by the unlikely sight of tightly packed palm trees and a lagoon.



More than likely, the only yurts you'll find in San Ignacio will be at Ignacio Springs B & B. Although my yurt experience is very limited, I can report that these yurts were very comfortable, with a couch, a bed, and a full bathroom. Given that we were traveling in low season, our yurt was right next to the lagoon, and we could easily have taken out the kayak that was left for us steps away from our front door.



We drove the very short distance to town, which has a town square in front of a beautiful and very gold church. The size and impressiveness of the church would lead you to believe that there were more people living in the area in the past than now. As the only ones at what looked to be the nicest restaurant in town, we sat down to dinner outside and had a fantastic and what at that time seemed to be a surprisingly inexpensive meal. (We were in Mexico for just two days at that point, so we hadn't yet become accustomed to the countrywide 60% off sale.) We were right next to the main street, with local townspeople walking by and smiling at us and children venturing shy waves, all set against the sounds of the occasional rooster crowing. It was nice and cool and in front of the restaurant was what looked like a beautifully done slate patio / sidewalk. San Ignacio had the feel of a place that responds only to natural rhythms and is not concerned with the issues of more modern and more hectic life. My wife and I agreed that, given how out of place we must have looked there, someone taking a picture would think we were eating dinner on a movie set.



Back at our yurt and thoroughly content in this pleasant, unhurried town, we sat on the wooden benches next to the lagoon and watched the stars, as several ducks watched us.

Starting Day 3, we headed almost due east, where we came across the port city of Santa Rosalía, on the other coast, the Sea of Cortez. My wife said that the town had a Caribbean feel to it, with architecture similar to what you would find in New Orleans. It also reminded me of a well-kept cowboy town because, instead of the block buildings we were becoming more accustomed to seeing in Mexico, Santa Rosalía had wooden buildings and red brick buildings with wooden signs and balconies, and because of its remoteness, Santa Rosalía had a Wild West frontier feel.

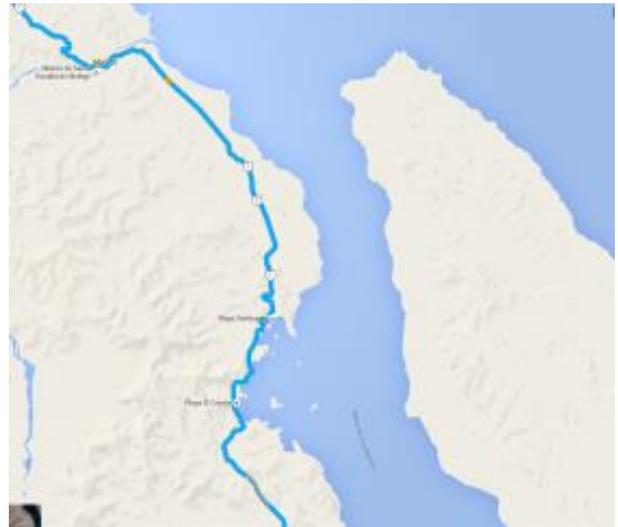
Further south, you will run into Mulegé, which looks like a portion of a South Pacific island that been cut out and set on top of Baja. There are palm trees everywhere, set inside a strict demarcation the existence of which probably has something to do with water. We didn't stop, because we wanted to visit the next beaches that were so highly recommended.



We were not disappointed.

On the Bahía Concepción about 20 minutes south of Mulegé are a series of the most sublime beaches you will find anywhere on the planet. Rubbing our eyes and trying to comprehend and to process the postcard perfection we saw to our left, we turned off the highway and approached the first beach, Playa Santispac. Several cabanas beckoned us, set against dark and light blue shimmering water and perfectly white, powdery sand. In the near distance, we could see a peninsula. To the side, several islands dotted the horizon. Farther away, was the other side of the bay.

In between us and the object of our immediate desire was a smiling young man standing next to a sign that had handwriting on it informing us how much it would cost for the dogs and us to enter. Quite frankly, I don't remember the amount, other than it was very reasonable. We paid our pesos and he let us in. There were perhaps six other people on the beach that was several hundred yards wide. We pulled our van directly up to side of the cabana, turned it off, and looked at each other.



We had arrived.

Within three minutes, a man appeared with Ceviche for sale for some very small amount of money. In another few moments, another vendor drove up with ice cold drinks and ice cream. All prices were Mexican scale. It's like you've been placed in the middle of a Corona commercial, but much better, because it's real. You have no concerns or worries. Given the accident of you being an American, you can easily afford your day at beach perfection. All you have to do is to sit back on your chair in the shade of your cabana, decide what to eat or drink from the traveling vendors, swim in the calm, clear water with your dogs, take a walk along the almost completely deserted shore, admire the view, and appreciate how you are able to

experience what in the past was almost impossible to achieve and now you are part of.

That night, we spent in Loreto, and the next morning headed to what would be our home base of operations for the next six weeks; a tiny fishing village south-east of La Paz.



(Map data 2016 copyright Google INEGI)

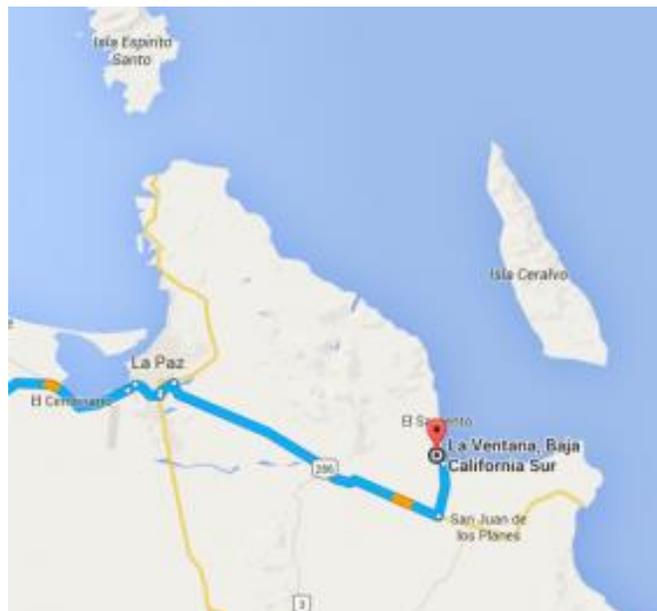
Arriving in Our Little Village in La Ventana Bay, Just Southeast of La Paz, Baja California, Mexico

As you progress south on Highway 1 in Baja, you know you're starting to enter La Paz because, just like in any other part of the world I've visited, as you enter a more densely populated area, the road adds lanes on your side, in this case, from one, to two, and then, eventually to three.

The first major thing you see when you arrive driving south on Highway 1 into La Paz is... Wal-Mart. So we had driven 842 miles into Baja from Mexicali to La Paz, experienced beautiful beaches we previously didn't even know existed, seen both the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez, stayed overnight in a yurt, drove 20 + miles on unimproved road, braved the terror of passing semis on a road with almost no shoulder or guardrails, all to arrive... at Wal-Mart.



This Wal-Mart looked strange for two reasons. One was that, since leaving Mexicali several days earlier, we had not really been in an area populated enough to support a large store of any kind. The other reason it looked so strange was that it didn't look so strange. It looked... like Wal-Mart. [Just like the one we stopped in just before crossing into Mexico 4 days earlier](#). It was like we had driven through Baja to find the place where the universe had folded over onto itself.



We certainly didn't see the need to stop in Wal-Mart, so we continued. We passed Sam's Club and Home Depot, and in the distance, we could barely see a Starbucks. (I'm not making this up.) We were instructed by the vacation rental management company to look for a large supermarket called Soriana, which we soon found, right next to a huge, modern movie theater. (Among the other movies they were showing was something about Tortugas Ninjas.) We parked the van in the shade for our dogs, slightly opened the windows, and joined the procession into the store.

Once inside, there were some minor differences comparing to a typical large supermarket in the US, but not many. The biggest difference was that the produce and meats were priced per kilo (2.2 pounds), and the prices, which were slightly lower on many items, and denominated in Mexican pesos. The reason I mention what should be the obvious fact that the prices were in pesos is that there was so little else that was really significantly different, so it almost surprises you that they ask for payment in pesos.



We had installed an app on our iPhone called Converter, which was very helpful understanding pricing in dollars and per pound. Another app we had installed would have been helpful with translation, except that our cell service didn't work in La Paz. This seemed odd, because, before leaving the US, I had signed up for Sprint Open World, which advertises that it works just as well in Mexico (and for no additional charge) as it does in the US. Well, in the La Paz area, it doesn't work well. It only barely works at all, sometimes. It turns out that, in Mexico, Sprint partners with MovieStar, which, although it proudly announced itself on the display of my iPhone and let me know it had 4 bars, was pretty much useless. (I'm told that the only cellular service that works in Baja Sur is TelCel.)

We paid for our items in this well-lit, very modern, clean, well-priced supermarket, joined the dogs, and started towards our rental home, just south-east of La Paz, about 40 minutes away, if you don't make any wrong turns. After asking for directions several times (of course, GoogleMaps didn't work because we couldn't get a cell signal), we finally got on what seemed like the right road, which quickly decreased to two lanes, and then back to one.



It was mid-day, so we weren't too concerned about running out of daylight. We could easily make out the cows crossing the road, as the pavement changed from rough, to having big potholes, to being newly paved, to not paved at all, and then back again.

Of course, we missed our turnoff, because we didn't see any sign. The only reasons we suspected we had gone too far was that it was taking too long, and we were now in an

agricultural town called Los Planes that was definitely not on the sea. We turned around, identified our missed turnoff via some signs that advertised several businesses in the area that were much more visible coming from the other direction, drove through an incredibly beautiful valley of cardon giant cactus (very similar to the saguaro you see in Arizona), and then, to the little town of La Ventana, right on the sea of Cortez.

We bounced over several topes (speed bumps). Some were marked, and some were not. After being in Mexico for a while, you start to get a feel for where most (but definitely not all) of where the topes will be. It also wouldn't surprise me if they put just a few topes in random places just so you will drive more slowly in general. For whatever the reason, it was good to drive slowly through La Ventana.

Taken at a more leisurely pace, and with the anxiety of not knowing where we were removed, we could see that the bay was really quite spectacular. Just as one gets accustomed to seeing one's children and each of one's children is beautiful in their own way, we had become accustomed to seeing unanticipated bay after another unanticipated beautiful bay on our drive through Baja, and each one was beautiful, but, if you took the time to notice, different.



The coastline of La Ventana waves back and forth gracefully, and as you drive and gain or lose a small amount of elevation, different views are revealed. Directly in front of the bay, about 9 miles away, is Isla Cerralvo, which creates a channel for about half of your view. On either side, the rest is open sea. The water is so completely flat that it almost looks like a big lake.

To get to our rental, we had to drive about 5 minutes from where the road became unpaved, and then make a left, up a hill for about a hundred yards. From there, our 3 bedroom / 3 bathroom home with a very small pool (\$1,200 / month) had more than a 180 degree view of the bay and the island. You actually had to turn your head from side to side to take it all in. Dotted around the immediate area in between vacant lots with native plants and the

occasional cow where very impressive homes that it turned out were owned by people from Calgary, Canada.

Here is where we would spend our next six weeks, visiting the beach directly below our home as well as the surrounding beaches, the almost complete quiet, take a trip to Cabo, eat fabulous meals at 60% off, enjoy the rhythm of sea and life in a fishing village, the calm, clear water by day and the stars at night. It's also where we learned what it's really like to live in a small coastal village in Baja Sur. More on that next.



(Map data 2016 copyright Google INEGI)

Tips and Observations About Driving Through Baja California, and the Release of Your “Inner Mexican”

Driving...
in ...
Mexico.

These three words are enough to strike fear into any news watching / Internet reading American. We are led to believe that we would either be kidnapped or just plain murdered within minutes of crossing the border. Even Mexicans who lived in the US advised us against driving in Mexico.

So, in order to add some firsthand experiences into the mix, and at the risk of contradicting common wisdom, I can at least report what we found.



Driving In General

One of the advantages of actually going to a place as opposed to hearing about it is that you find out that many of the stereotypes you had about it are not true. As one fun example, you may remember [the song “Low Rider” by War](#) and made very popular in a movie by Cheech and Chong. If you don’t, here are the relevant lyrics:

*Low rider don't use no gas now.
Low rider don't drive too fast.*

I definitely saw low riders in LA, where I grew up, but I didn’t see any in Baja; not one. In fact, when driving, as opposed to seeing Tommy Chong, it seemed like everyone was Mario Andretti. On the highways, Mexicans drive very, very fast.



Driving Tips

Quite often, you will find yourself on a non-divided highway (no median; just some paint on asphalt separating you and oncoming traffic); one lane in your direction, one lane in the other, and close to zero shoulder. Driving In front of you will be a truck or some other vehicle going slower than you would like to go with it’s left turn signal on, yet, you don’t see any place where

he or she is going to turn left; there may not even be an intersecting road for 20 miles. What does it mean? It means that the driver is signaling you that it is safe for you to pass on his or her left. Is it? Your call. How do you know if, instead of signaling you that it's safe to pass, a left turn signal means that the driver is planning to actually turn left, which would result in an ugly crash if you were in the process of passing at the same time? There's no real answer to this, except for context. Good luck, and have fun.

When you come to a 4-way stop, it doesn't really mean, "stop"; it means, "slow down just enough to take a look at crossing traffic, and if no one is there, just go right through". The only time anyone ever honked their horn at me in Baja was when I stopped... at a 4-way stop. I almost got rear-ended. By the way, this explains how, when I didn't see the 4-way stop in [Mexicali when we first crossed the border and blew right through it](#), no one even reacted. To them, I was just driving normally.



The only exception to the rolling 4-way stop is when there is a car actually coming from the right or left. Then, you slow down a little more and, if they got there first, you let them pass. Coming to a full stop in any situation seems to be optional, but may actually be dangerous because if someone is following too close to you and doesn't expect your full stop, you could get rear-ended. It's generally best to keep some forward momentum.

There are lots of one-way streets. How will you identify them? Sometimes, there's a tiny, obscure sign. Many times, there's not. Just look for other little clues, like all the cars being parked in one direction (although many times, this is not definitive), or, more definitively, two cars side by side coming directly towards you at 40 miles per hour with no place for you to go but backwards. This happened to me several times, more than once in front of a police officer. Everyone just shrugs it off and moves on. Just find a place to back up or turn around.

If you see a car coming towards you on the other side of the highway with its emergency lights blinking, they're most likely trying to tell you that there are cows or other livestock in the road up ahead. Slow way down and look for farm animals. Then, after you see them, put on your emergency lights for a while as well, to warn drivers coming from the other direction. This happens all the time. Here's a portion of a conversation between my wife and me as we drove to Cabo San Lucas:

Me: "It's a really deserted road."

Jet: "Yes; it's just us and some cows..."

Me: "... that may make a cameo appearance every one in a while, just like in an Alfred Hitchcock movie."

Jet: "Yes, and just to scare you."

Funny as the horror movie analogy may seem, if you hit a cow at 50 miles per hour, you won't be laughing and it won't just scare you. It could total your car or worse. Be mindful of crossing livestock!

In some very odd places, the left turn lane is off to... the right. You pull in, wait for the light, and then cross traffic, hoping that everyone understands. They do, but you won't.

Were we never stopped by banditos, held at gunpoint, carjacked, kidnapped or had our throats cut. Not once.

If you are like me, after being in Baja for a while, you will see a change in how you drive. For me, being in Mexico has released my "Inner Mexican." I love not really stopping at stop signs and pulling into traffic without too much decorum other than a friendly wave... after the fact. Driving like this may horrify you, but personally, I like it.

Next, we'll take you to some great beaches...

The Most Magnificent Beaches of La Paz, Baja California Sur and Surroundings

Within the creation of any great work of art, you can usually see certain elements of that great work in several previous works, but none of those previous works have all the elements at one time. It is the same with great beaches. You probably have your own list of the elements that make up a great beach. Here's the list for my wife, Jet Metier:



- Warm weather.
- A cove or a bay, perhaps with a view of an island.
- Warm, clear water (preferably different shades of blue).
- White, powdery sand.
- Gentle access (no hard slopes), and easy to walk on.
- Clear skies.
- Few people.
- Safe conditions.
- Clean, with a place to put trash.
- Quiet
- Unthreatening marine flora and fauna
- A place where the dogs can play safely (not be attacked by other dogs, get swept out to sea, etc.)

Once you're in Baja for a while, you can get greedy and add a few more. For example:



- Shade, either naturally occurring, or a palapa.
- Available services such as clean bathrooms, food, water, showers, etc.

Baja California, especially on the eastern, Sea of Cortez side, has various quantities of these elements in great abundance in many, many locations, so it no surprise that, every once in a while, through random chance or some other means, all these elements come together to create what could be called "the perfect beach." Here are just a few of the contenders that we

visited during our six weeks in the general La Paz, Baja California Sur area, keeping in mind that we visited from the middle of May until the beginning of July, which is off-season, and that there are probably many, many more great beaches we don't know about.

La Ventana Bay

No surprise here. My wife picked our house in part based on her criteria above. From the house we were renting, I could walk directly down the hill about 7 minutes and be at the beach. There, I could release our two dogs, who would play in the surf or chase birds, because there was usually either no one there, or just one or two other people, for miles. However, other than our rental home just up the hill, there were no services.



On a whim, I decided to put on a diving mask and try snorkeling. Being from Southern California, I was immediately astounded. Within water just two feet deep, I saw several varieties of fish. Within 5 feet depth, I saw coral. If you wanted to, you could just stand in a few feet of water, put on a mask, stick your head in the sea and feel like you were in a giant aquarium.

Fishing boats passed in the near distance, and the shores of Isla Ceravlo loomed about 9 miles away, so clear that you could make out the beaches and where dry streams met the sea. If you walk or drive to the north just a bit, you come to Hot Springs Beach, with its built in palapas and naturally occurring hot water coming through the sand. If you venture further on the completely unmarked dirt road perhaps just a mile or so, past even the randomly appearing homes without city water or electricity (some,



surprisingly quite big and nice), you would come across beaches that you would swear if you didn't know otherwise had not yet been seen by humans. They were raw—coral on the sand, rocks, and no marks of civilization whatsoever. People travel a long way to go to a place that others have not, and yet, although it wasn't true in this case, it certainly felt like this was one of those places.

Balandra

When you enter La Paz, drive to the malecon and turn right, after a left onto another road a few miles further, you'll soon be winding around several coves with mangrove areas near the road, and continuing out into the sea, with flat, clear, shallow water. It is a kayaker's paradise, although we saw very few kayakers. In fact, we saw very few people at all, as one beautiful beach after another rolled by on our left. Every once in a while, you would see a restaurant on the shore, with palapas and perhaps some campers. The sea would be glistening as birds stood on exposed rocks perhaps 40 yards from shore.

The most famous of these many beauties is Balandra, and if you've seen a picture of a beautiful beach near La Paz, you were probably looking at Balandra. As we pulled up to the parking lot, there were around 30 cars, which was more than we were used to seeing. There was a concession stand selling dresses and hats and another that rented umbrellas for shade, which was a bit odd, because there were several palapas available at no charge.

Like many of the other bays along the way, the perfectly clear water in Balandra is about two feet deep for what seemed like more than a hundred yards. You can see people 50 yards away, in the sea, standing, talking with one another while holding drinks, or floating by on a raft just a bit higher than knee level of the people standing in the water. We took off our sandals and walked in. Within a few feet, I saw what looked like a green snakelike fish wiggle by at about 10 miles an hour.



We didn't see bathrooms, it was too crowded for dogs, and we didn't see any food concessions, but it was quite impressive and worth seeing.

Tecolote

Given that Balandra was not for us, mainly because we couldn't let the dogs out, we continued on the road to see what we could see.

No more than 10 minutes later, the road dead ended at Playa Tecolote. As you arrive, you have the choice of one large restaurant to the right, and one to the left. In either restaurant, if you

buy a meal, you get to use the palapa and their bathrooms. If you don't, there are still many places further to the right or left you can use for free.

We tried each of these restaurants on separate occasions, and both were very, very good, with prices higher than we had become accustomed to in Baja, but perhaps 50% or less of what you would expect to pay in a beach area in Southern California, but with no charge for parking. You can use the bathrooms (not fantastic), get a great meal, shade, and enjoy the white sand and clear, clean, flat water. You can even rent a kayak for a very reasonable amount, and a jet ski as well. However, even with all these services, there were very few people there; perhaps 25% of capacity, at most. At both restaurants, the waiters loved our dogs and called them by name. We were able to take long walks completely undisturbed. My wife had sea bass, which came as an entire fish, for about \$7.50. She loved it.



You can watch the [video of Tecolote here](#).

Bahia de Los Sueños

In my wife and my opinions, I saved the best for last.

In order to get to Bahia de Los Sueños from where we stayed in La Ventana, you have to drive to the same road to get to the intersection where you would make a right to get to La Paz, but instead of making a right, you make a left. This takes you through the agricultural area of Los Planes, and then, to more and remote areas. You can go to the public beach to the left, or you can go just a bit further, over a cattle guard, and approach a guard with a gate. We were told to tell him we were going to the restaurant, which we did, and which was enough to get him to lift the gate.



We drove on dirt roads for about 8 minutes or so (of course, no guardrails, steep drop-offs, no signs, many alternative choices, etc.), and then, we saw a small sign, which we followed. Suddenly, appearing before us were elegantly placed palm trees, a nice place to park in the shade over powdery white sand, and a large building. I walked up the stairs, past the three pools and a group of about 10 people eating lunch on the patio of what looked to be about a 5,000 square foot game room with a bar extending almost the entire left side, and kitchen in the back. There was a pool table, other games, and above, on the open second floor (the ceiling must have been close to 30 feet high), ran an elaborate miniature train. To put it mildly, this is not what I had expected to find in this remote place. It was like Citizen Kane had come to Mexico and opened his home to the public. What was this place at the end of the dirt road?



The waiter explained that it was a restaurant, that the boutique hotel was up the paved, palm tree shrouded walking path, and we were welcomed in the restaurant... with our dogs! When we sat down, they moved an umbrella and brought the dogs water. Then, came the menu. Although the prices were more than we were used to in Mexico (and in US dollars), it certainly was reasonable. I ordered a steak sandwich for \$12. There was no charge for parking or the magnificent view, which we could see through the palm trees.



Over time, we learned that, not only could we use their bathroom at no charge, but also all the facilities of the hotel were available to us. On a single day, we used their towels, lawn chairs, umbrellas, showers, three pools (one infinity), I went snorkeling, stand up paddle boarding, kayaking, and walked on the beach for miles with the dogs with close to no one there, all at no charge other than our meals. Never were there more than seven people on the

beach. Not only did I use the slides into the pool, but so did the dogs. It was like Club Med without the beads. Almost spontaneously, with no one even there, as I was swimming in the clear, blue sea and contemplating my next activity, I exclaimed to no one in particular, “This may be the perfect beach.” And for us, it was.

You can watch the [video of Gran Sueños here](#), including our dogs using the slide (yes, you read that right).

Are there more beaches like the ones I describe above in the La Paz area? Yes, we visited more than we have space to describe here. Also, I am quite certain that, given how all the components of the perfect beach are in abundance in this area for probably more than a hundred miles, there are many, many more, some perhaps even more beautiful. We just haven't seen them yet.

Observations About Baja Mexicans and Baja Mexican Food

One of the objectives of our trip is to experience firsthand what it would be like to live in different environments abroad, irrespective of what we thought we knew beforehand. We dubbed it the “Try Everything So You Really Know What You’re Talking About and What You Like Tour”, or for short, “You Don’t Know Until You Go”. Part of that experience was to get a feel for the locals. Herewith, our view of Mexicans and Mexican food.



The Mexicans in Baja are Nicer Than Typical Americans in the US

Virtually everyone you pass will say “hola”, or “Buenos dias / Buenos tardes / Buenos noches”, and it doesn’t seem to be perfunctory or insincere. Perhaps I’m just naïve, but I don’t think so. It doesn’t look like they’re smiling just to try to sell me something. Why? Because in fact the vast majority wasn’t trying to sell me anything; they were just walking by.

Here are some other incidents I remember just in six weeks that cause me to come to this conclusion:

- We were walking on the beach in Tecolote ([Tecolote video](#)), just southeast of La Paz, and came across three young men and a young woman who were just setting up. It was probably obvious to them we were Gringos. In halting English, after saying hello, one of the men offered us a beer. (That's their picture at the top of this story.) When we demurred, he tried again. Finally, a bit exasperated, he brought out his trump card: “But it’s Tecate!”
- Something similar happened when I was visiting Bahia de Suenos ([Bahia de Suenos video here](#)), a gorgeous beach with an upscale, American-priced restaurant called Gran Sueños about half an hour away from the little village where we were staying. The beach has public access. I ran into a young family in which the husband / father told me



he worked in construction, so, by US standards, he couldn't be making a lot of money. Just a few moments into the conversation, they offered me a beer out of their ice chest. When I thanked them but refused, they offered a soda. About half an hour later I saw this husband / father at the bar at what for him would be a pricey restaurant. He had ordered beer (at US prices) to replace what they had drank, which is all the more remarkable when I considered how much money in his terms that beer he had offered me had cost him.

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- We had driven to the parking lot of Baja Ferries to ask questions about taking our dogs. Two men in the car next to us had evidently seen our Arizona license plate (or us) and as soon as we got out of the car, one of them asked us in not perfect English if we needed any help. Was he employed by the ferry company? No. Was he in the hospitality industry or trying to sell us something? No. He was just an ordinary Mexican trying to help out some evidently bewildered-looking Gringos.



- I went to ask the veterinarian in our very small town, Christian Pozo if he knew a place I could rent some kennels for our dogs because the ferry requires them. He said he didn't know any place to rent them, but they would probably be cheapest to buy at a members' only big box store at which he was a member. When I told him I wasn't a member, he told me he would buy them for us the next time he was there and we could just reimburse him for them. Would your vet do that for you? Later, when he discovered that I wasn't clear on certain procedures on the ferry because I didn't speak Spanish very well, he told me not to worry. He would call the ferry company the next day and ask them on our behalf. All I had to do was to come back and he would answer my questions, of course, at no charge. ([YouTube of interview with Dr Pozo here.](#))
- When we were getting our visa paperwork, we had to find a store with Internet access, which we did. The clerk (who spoke close to zero English) spent on and off an hour or so to help us understand the forms. (Did you know that if you're from the US, your nationality is "Estadounidense"? I certainly didn't.) When we tried to give her 50 pesos (less than US \$3) for her trouble, she refused. It took us several additional minutes to talk her into it. (That's a picture of her by the cash register.)

- If you don't speak good Spanish, but you're polite and try, if your experiences are like ours, the Mexicans will be incredibly happy to help you. Almost all of them will also tell you that they understand and appreciate your difficulty, and try to commiserate with you by saying that it is hard for them, too, as they are trying to learn English. When I point out that I'm in Mexico, so it is my obligation to learn their language rather than theirs to learn mine, they usually get embarrassed and don't respond.

Stereotypes About Mexicans

In the six-plus weeks we were in Baja, here are my impressions about the stereotypes of the typical Mexican:

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- Mexicans are lazy. I saw Mexicans working in construction 10 hours a day, six days a week, and then, help their family build onto their home on Sunday. Several I met had more than one job. I had described the car wash owner / restaurant manager / co-owner of a pastry shop earlier ([here's the YouTube video of our interview](#)), but Orlando, the man who took the prize for the most jobs (at six), was the one who showed up at 9 PM with his water truck to fill our pila (large container of water). You can see the sign with his six businesses in the nearby picture. Did I see Mexicans sometimes take a rest during the day by doing as little as possible? Yes. And you would, too, if you were working in 90+ degree weather with high humidity for 10 hours.
- Mexicans are bad drivers. This one requires some nuance. In Baja, there are two types of drivers: 1) skilled; and, 2) severely injured or dead. They are generally good drivers who, in my opinion, take too many chances. And a full stop would be nice sometimes. (Tips on driving in Mexico [here](#).)
- Mexicans are dishonest. More than once, I was asked by a waiter if I had intended on leaving as large a tip as I did. Others refused money. A man collecting trash on a beach



I was visiting walked the 100 yards to my location just to ask me if the shoes he had found earlier that day belonged to me. His picture is nearby.

Mexican Food

Mexicans really know how to cook. And bake. In the entire time we were in Baja and on the ferry, the only average meal we've had has been on the ferry, and for a ferry, it was pretty good. The restaurants are fantastic, and, if you stay away from Gringo places, you'll pay almost embarrassingly low prices for great food. Also, the portions are even slightly bigger than American portions. The second-best hamburger I ever had in my life was at Las Palmas, in La Ventana, for 70 pesos (about \$3.75). To her surprise and delight, my wife kept ordering fish she never would even have asked about in the States because it would have been "market price"; i.e., too expensive. 140 pesos (a little over \$7) for yellowtail. 160 pesos (a little over \$8) for sea bass.



Perhaps one of the reasons why the food is so good in Mexico is that it is so fresh and everything, it seems, is made to order. Even the tortillas are great, once again, almost certainly because they are so fresh. We became fans of a local tortilleria in La Ventana, where they showed us the production process and even let Jet try making some. ([YouTube here.](#))

The prices in the restaurants are generally much lower in the non-Gringo places in Baja California than in the US and the prices at the supermarkets are just a little lower, so it's almost cheaper to just eat at restaurants than to buy your food and cook it yourself. One of the exceptions to this was one day, where at two different supermarkets, I saw a several elaborate and decadent cakes that looked to be maybe 10 inches to a foot in diameter, and about 5 inches tall for 50 pesos each (about \$2.75). ([Video of shopping and the cakes here.](#)) Unfortunately, we could only eat one at a time. These were on sale, so the usual price was about double that, at just about \$5.50. In addition to these silly prices for cakes, the pastries are great, and the cost is about 40% less than in the US. Don't go to Mexico and expect to lose weight.

We have three words to describe the pastries we've had in Mexico:

1. Phenomenal
2. Cheap
3. I can't wait to eat another one

Next, I'll describe some "must know" tips about traveling and / or living in Baja California.

Useful links: [Best Places in the World to Retire - Mexico Q & A](#) – [Expat Stories](#) – [Best Places YouTubes](#) – [Best Places Facebook](#) – [Download this book for free](#) – [Best Mexico Movers](#) 270420-a

Tips and Observations About Living in Baja California for Six Weeks in a Little Mexican Town

Here is some flavor of what it's like to live in a small village in Baja California Sur for six weeks and some tips that could save you lots of aggravation.

It's Just Like...

Renting our home in La Ventana for six weeks was just like camping, except without the bugs, uneven and hard sleeping services, the work setting up and breaking down, everything being dirty, and very dicey bathroom and shower accommodations.

Watching the NBA Finals Series at Las Palmas, a local restaurant in La Ventana, was just like watching it in my own house, if my own house was right on the beach so it had an incredible view of the sea and an island in the distance, and people were bringing me great food at 70% off what I would expect to pay in the US.

A Potpourri of Tips and Advice

- Your pants. If possible, wear cargo shorts or cargo pants because they have more pockets, especially on the sides and in the front, and get the ones with pockets that close. If you're like me, you would like separate, secure, easy to access and easy to remember places to store: 1) wallet; 2) keys; 3) passport; 4) phone; and 5) camera (if you're not using the camera in your phone), etc. If you always put each of these items in the same pocket, you can free up mind share to worry about other things or just enjoy yourself more. (Your shorts don't have to be green, but you will fit in better.)



- Plan B. Always have a Plan B. Ask yourself, “If this doesn’t work, what will I do then?” Here are some examples of Plan B’s that served us well:

Have a backup hotel (or two) that accepts dogs if you couldn’t make it to the one you planned. Know the address and how to get there, phone number, who you talked to, if they have a vacancy, etc.

Have cash. What if the vendor doesn’t accept credit cards (many don’t); your card doesn’t go through (happens all the time in Mexico); someone steals your credit card number so your credit card company cancels your card (happened to us). Also, Mexico is more on a cash basis than the US or Canada.

Have ATM cards that were issued by different banks. If anything goes wrong with one bank or card, you can use the other one.

Have duplicate ATM and credit cards. Yours may get stolen, lost or unusable because it’s scratched. Give the other one to your traveling partner and you keep a duplicate of theirs.

When you get to a place, as soon as possible, know where the doctors and vets are. If they will give you a phone number, have it with you.

Have extra water. What if you’re in a place (like much of Baja California) that has its water trucked in, and your storage container (“pila”) runs dry? Do you have enough stored water to drink? Do you have extra water to flush a toilet? If you lose power, you probably won’t have any water, because the water probably works on an electric pump. If you have municipal water, this is less likely, but it does happen.

Have all important papers scanned, stored on your computer and stored remotely (for example, on DropBox). Examples include your birth certificate, marriage license, passport, drivers’ license, health



insurance cards, ATM cards, credit cards, and proof of car insurance. In addition, make a hard copy and take all copies with you.

Get an ATM card that has privileges at a popular Mexican bank, with no fees to make withdrawals. For example, I use my Bank of America ATM at Santander (a bank in Mexico with lots of branches) at no charge. If I use another ATM card or go to another bank, the charges can range up to several percentage points and an additional \$3 to \$5 each transaction.

Get a credit card that doesn't charge a fee for accepting payment in pesos, like my American Express PROPEL 365 card from Wells Fargo.

Have double... no, triple the amount of medicine you think you'll need until you can refill it. This also includes items like contacts for your eyes, if, like me the ones you have are disposable. Also, if you have an issue like lactose intolerance, make sure you have enough pills to last you much, much longer than you anticipate. (At this point, it looks like Mexicans have no problem digesting milk, so I can't find any Lactaid at all.)

Not all of these things are likely to happen, but will one or more of them happen when you're traveling? My bet is that it will. And it's best to be prepared, so it will barely faze you. Nothing I wrote above is difficult to do, takes a lot of time, or costs a lot of money.

Safety

At this point, we don't have much to say about safety because it hasn't been an issue. In preparation for the trip, we purchased security cables with combination locks (we used the same combination for all of them) that easily attach our computers to heavier, larger objects. The brand we purchased is made by Sendt, which we highly recommend. It's easy, fast, and cheap to do, and would be silly not to.



Other than that, we don't flash our cash, our van has been very dirty (not 100% by choice) so it blends in as well as a huge, extended top van could, and we've primarily been in small towns. We have never (not even once) feel threatened or had anything stolen. On the contrary, the Mexican people have proven to be extremely honest. (See [my previous article about the Baja Mexican people.](#))

Pay With Pesos

The first reason to pay with pesos is that it is more likely you're getting the Mexican price; i.e., the lower price; i.e., not the Gringo price.

The second reason to pay with pesos has to do with the exchange rate, which you should know. Currently, the exchange rate is close to 19 pesos to 1 dollar. This can play to your favor. For example, most Mexican vendors now will use the exchange rate of 17 to one or even worse because most Gringos pay in dollars. As an example, if an item is 170 pesos, the Mexican vendor may tell you that the exchange rate is 17 to one and ask for US \$10, which most Gringos pay. However, at the real exchange rate of 19 to one, that 170-peso item should only cost about US \$9.



If you know this, you can often play the game in reverse to your advantage. For example, I recently had lunch in Cabo San Lucas at a place where lots of Gringos go and ordered food for US \$10. Near the cash register was a sign that said that the exchange rate was 17 to 1. I asked nicely if I could pay in pesos. "Of course," they said, so I handed them 170 pesos, or the equivalent of US \$9 for a US \$10 meal. Is it a big difference? No, but it does add up, and frees up more money for good tips.

For the Same Lifestyle, it is Much Cheaper to Live in Baja

[In the first article in our road trip series](#), I stated that one of our objectives was to see if we could live a better quality of life in our opinion for less money by using vacation rentals in Mexico. The results for the "less money" part of the experiment are very impressive: we reduced our expenses by 62%, all while reducing the risk that goes along with home ownership, getting seriously ill in the US and having the cost wipe us out, etc. As for our quality of life, there is absolutely no comparison—our six and a half weeks have been fantastic.



Many Things Are More Fearsome In Anticipation Than In Reality

Afraid to cross the border with your pets? Afraid to drive In Mexico? Afraid to be in Mexico if you can't speak Spanish well? Afraid to step on a scorpion? While of course, it is prudent to plan for each of these things, if you do plan, these things tend to be much less fearsome in

reality than when thinking about them in the abstract. Each one of these things happened to us or me personally (the scorpion sting), and not only were they much less scary in reality than we had assumed, but after they're done and you've successfully dealt with it, you feel really good about yourself. (By the way, I had thought that if a scorpion stung you, you would be writhing in pain as they took you to the hospital. In reality, at least in my situation in Baja California Sur, a scorpion sting about as bad as a bee sting. Within a few hours, I had completely forgotten about it.)



Mastery of New Things

Whenever you come to a new place, whether it is in the US or other places, there is a natural element of stress, anxiety, etc., because you don't know where things are, how things work, etc. The more differences there are, the more stress and anxiety there is, so moving across the street would be less stressful than moving to San Diego, which would be less stressful than moving to Mexico.

What you'll find after you figure out how these things work, is that most things aren't that difficult at all; they're just different. (After all, the people who live there do it all the time and they're not all that much smarter than you, are they?) After you learn how things work, not only will you experience a diminishing of the anxiety and unhappiness you had before these events, but your unpleasant emotions will be replaced by a sense of accomplishment, competence, and even mastery that makes you happier and more at ease in all aspects of your life than you were before. (Even going to the grocery store is not that scary, [as this video shows.](#)) So as far as going to new places, experiencing new things and mastering new skills, I highly recommend it.



Join the "I Know Baja Club"

There are so many misconceptions about Baja, especially with regard to safety and overall living conditions, that most people are afraid to go, or have no desire to go. As a result, the beaches are less crowded and the prices are lower. We ran into many, many people who know this little secret and either live in Baja or come to Baja all the time to enjoy its many gifts. I named them, “The I Know Baja Club”. They’re having a really great time at really bargain prices. As people find out the truth, more people will come. (For some reason, the Canadians seem to be ahead of the curve on this, given how many we met.) My advice is to enjoy it while you can and there’s still lots of misinformation about it... just don’t tell anyone else.

So this marks the end of our six and a half weeks Baja experience. I say “experience” because it really was. Did things go wrong? Of course they did. Was everything perfect? Of course not, and I hope I didn’t convey that. Here’s what I assume is an incomplete list of what went wrong:

- They wouldn’t let us through at the first border crossing.
- It was hot.
- The water went out in our rental.
- The power went out in our rental.
- The Internet didn’t work in our rental.
- The road wasn’t paved in certain areas.
- Someone stole the number off my credit card
- I stepped on a scorpion.



Did these things bother us? Of course they did. Did their occurrence keep us from enjoying our overall experience? No, they did not. Almost each one was an opportunity to learn something, and none of them left a lasting scar.

Perhaps the main reason these things didn’t ruin our experience is because, overall, there was so much to like. As you consider whether you would enjoy something like what we did, ask yourself today, as you read this, “In five years, what will I remember about my last six and a half weeks?” If your answer isn’t as good as what you would remember if you experienced something like what we had and wrote about and created YouTube’s on up until now, perhaps you may want to consider something along the lines of our trip.

Next, my wife and I, our two dogs and our big white van take the ferry from La Paz, Baja, to Mazatlan and drive to a town just north of Puerto Vallarta. It should be interesting... and fun.

Two Squished Dogs, Some Quick Kennel Assembly, and a Cruise Through the Sea of Cortez on the Baja Ferry from La Paz to Mazatlan

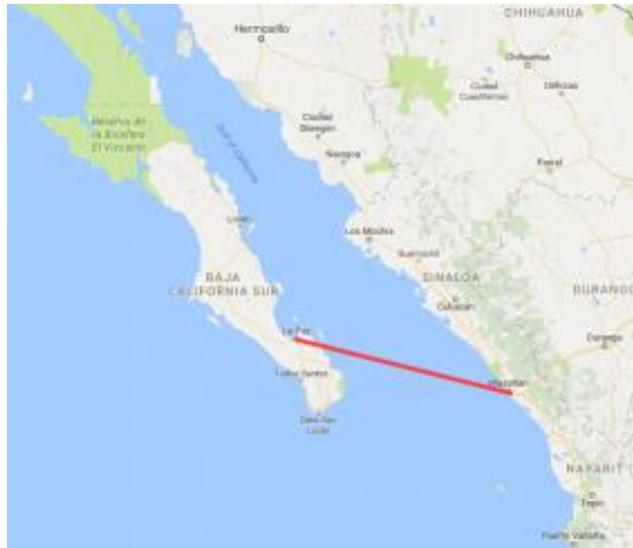
Even though we thoroughly enjoyed our six-plus weeks in Baja (my wife, Jet Metier, wanted to buy some land there immediately), it was time for us to move on to experience new things. The desert and relative isolation we enjoyed as newbies in Baja would have to be gently placed into the past as we ventured forward to new experiences, also in places we had never been-- the jungles and more populated areas of mainland Mexico.



If you're driving, there are two ways to get from Baja California Sur to the mainland of Mexico: turn around and drive north almost all the way back to the border, or take the ferry. Even though we would have enjoyed the trip back, we opted for the ferry.

Several times while at our rental home in La Ventana, we had to drive the 40 minutes to the immigration office in La Paz to work on our visas. From La Paz, it is a short distance to the [spectacular beaches of Balandra](#) and [Tecolote](#), which we were very happy and eager to visit.

To get to these beaches, we were told to just go to the La Paz malecon (boardwalk along the sea), and turn right, which we did. Almost immediately, we were on a sparsely populated, curving road that intermittently took us through desert hills to right past several breathtaking beaches (not all of which are famous or even often visited), and back to desert hills again. Then, without warning other than some signs, we were very suddenly confronted in this landscape by the smokestack of a good-sized ship; not as large as a cruise ship you may take in the Caribbean, but to us, shockingly large, given that we hadn't seen anything like it for more than a month and that it seemed to just appear out of nowhere. Then, after rounding another hill, the very modern facilities of Baja Ferries would come into view. As a result of seeing this several times, we knew exactly where we would have to go to catch the ferry.



Mainly because of our two dogs, we had done a lot of planning before taking the ferry. Given that the English version of the Baja Ferry website is not very good, we were fortunate to have the help of several people, including [the vet in La Ventana, Cristian Pozo](#), who called the ferry management office for us and translated what they said; [Alfonso Galindo](#), who patiently walked me through the Spanish website so I could buy our tickets; and the very nice and knowledgeable woman at the ferry office we talked with who spoke very good English when we visited the ferry facility on one of our beach runs three weeks earlier to confirm everything (again).



The ship would leave La Paz at 8 at night and arrive in Mazatlan around 8 AM the next morning. Total miles traveled would be around 260. The charge for my wife and I was the equivalent of around US \$60 each. A vehicle of up to 19'6" (which is exactly what our van is; I measured twice) would be the equivalent of about US \$145. (The reason I measured twice is that, for a vehicle even one inch over 19'6", the price jumps to about US \$480.) We could either chose a stateroom for about \$42, or we could sleep wherever we could find a place. Given that the stateroom came with it's own private shower, beds, bathroom etc. (and the low price), it wasn't a close call: we chose the stateroom. There was no charge for one of our dogs and I forgot how much the other cost us, but it wasn't much. So, the total cost for a nice cruise in the Sea of Cortez for two adults, two dogs, a vehicle no greater than 19'6", and a stateroom for a 12-hour journey would be a grand total of around \$315. To my way of thinking, it was a great deal. They even gave us meal tickets included in the price.

Each of our two dogs would have to spend the entire trip in their own kennel, which we had to buy specifically for this purpose. (You can't rent them. I tried.) Unfortunately, we had so completely packed the van that the kennels didn't fit with everything else. The only solution would be to disassemble the kennels and place the parts next to the dogs on the middle seat, which reduced their sitting space by about half. Just to make sure nothing unanticipated would happen and to improve my speed, I practiced un-assembling and re-assembling the kennels. I assumed the people at the ferry wouldn't be too happy with me doing this and in the process holding up their operation, but that they would probably have to allow it, given that there wouldn't at that point be much of an alternative, so I didn't ask ahead of time if it were OK. (I have always found that it is more effective to ask for forgiveness than permission.) Our dogs would be



squished in their seat with the disassembled kennels as we drove to the ferry, but the drive wouldn't be that long.

I bought the ticket for the standard-length vehicle at the standard price (once again, following my rule about asking for forgiveness), and examined our van for any signs that it would appear to be larger than 19'6". All that I could think of was to remove a side step that was bolted on before we purchased the van in order to help people in. We had never used the step, so in order to make the van seem less commercial, I took it off.

We arrived at about 6:30 PM on a weekday and found zero waiting. They weighed our van (quite heavy), and charged us a small surcharge. I didn't see anyone with a tape measure, which was a relief.

Then, they waved us through.

I felt \$335 richer.

Life was good.

Next challenge: figuring out what the heck to do, which is confusing in a port area with two people and two dogs in any language. I'll spare you the details, but it turns out that after getting all the paperwork straight at the office, my wife (with her rollaway bag that she discovered no longer rolled) had to go to a waiting area to pass inspection and later to board with the passengers who were not driving vehicles. Later, she would have to take a shuttle to the ship. For my part, I drove our very heavy and fully loaded van with two squished dogs and two dissembled kennels towards the ship.



If you've never been to the hold of a ship, I can report to you that it's pretty hot. And, with dozens of trucks alternatively backing in and driving into position and of course there being no windows, the diesel smell and effects are pretty strong. All this was all the more so for me personally, being that, after parking the van where they motioned me, I had to jump out, break their protocol, remove the two disassembled kennels, and very quickly re-assemble them while hopefully no one got too annoyed at any delay or break in standard operating procedure.

I got to work, off to the side, working as fast as I could, while a few curious workers tried to figure out what I was doing, with me sweating fairly heavily and trying not to notice that my eyes were stinging. Happily for me, not only weren't the workers annoyed, but they evidently

took pity on me, as one of them helped me carry the kennel parts to an air-conditioned part of the ship, where, in a more cool and clean air environment, I put them together. I then went up and down the ramp to put the two kennels in place so they faced one another, got our dogs, and introduced them to where they would be staying for the next 12+ hours. Our dogs' kennels were on a narrow passageway with five other dogs, each in their own kennel, lined up single file, all of them quiet and seemingly content in an air conditioned part of the ship with food and water for the journey in their snug sleeping quarters.

Everything on the transit performed like clockwork. The ship looked new and was immaculately clean. Everything worked. The shower was great, especially after my sweaty, eye stinging kennel assembling exercise. The views from the deck as we got underway at sunset were beautiful, as on the right we could view from the sea those beaches we had enjoyed so much from the sand.

Dinner was served in a large dining room, where we stood in line, cafeteria style, to choose our main dish. Dessert and drinks were extra. There was even a duo (who were pretty good) to entertain us. I tried getting Jet a glass of wine but the bottle had a dry cork, so we settled for a beer between us. Cost for the beer: about a dollar.

There were lots of families, many of which did not have a stateroom and instead brought their own bedding, pillows and comforters to sleep on the deck or in the lounge area. Then, as night fell, with Baja in our wake behind us, we were at sea.

Jet had taken a Dramamine to quell sea sickness but she could not sleep because the ship rocked too much for her. As for me, I slept fine. (Maybe I was just tired from all my recent exercise.)

As the dawn approached, from the deck, we could see the outline of the shore north of Mazatlan, framed in a red sky. Broad, flat areas were interspersed by mountainous outcroppings and buildings so tall and so relatively isolated, that you can make them out even from the distance of the ferry.



To say our dogs were happy to see us would be a very big understatement. Very happily and with great energy into the van they went, to await my kennel disassembly, and then to be squished again, but in a very welcomed and familiar environment.

Jet had to wait in another line and go down many flights of narrow and steep stairs (Jet recommends not to wear heels) to get to the hold of the ship. Once there, she was helped by ship workers who offered to carry her non-rolling rolling luggage twice: once, after the stairs, through the cargo area, and the other time, from the dock to the exits; help that she very much appreciated. She spotted me because of our tall van, across the street in another parking lot, and walked to us.



As I drove our van out of the hold and past the guard gate, our tires rolled for the first time on mainland Mexican pavement. We were in Mazatlan, and ready to drive to our next home.

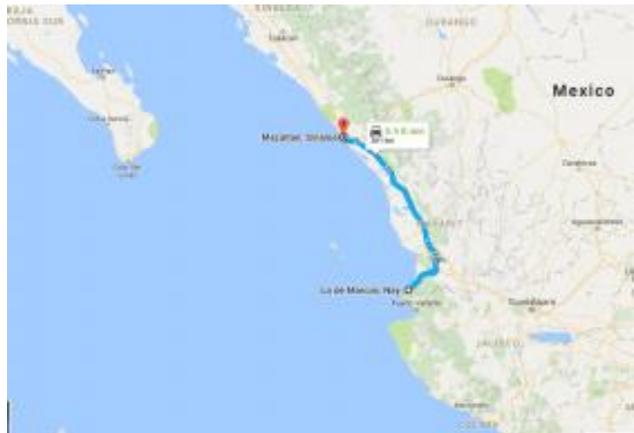
The Drive from Mazatlan to Lo de Marcos, Nayarit: Confusion, No Shortage of Dried Shrimp, and Then the Prize in a Disneyland-like Jungle

So there we were, in our van, after taking the Baja Ferry from La Paz and disembarking at the port at Mazatlán.

Given that we had just spent more than six weeks in the Baja California desert, even in the parking lot of the harbor in Mazatlán, we were struck by the profusion of plant life. Palm trees, vines, and other types of jungle shrubbery seemed to be growing everywhere, sometimes on top of each other, successfully utilizing any amount of even the smallest patch of what looked to be very rich soil and plenty of moisture. We couldn't tell if they were planted, or just grew. The hills in the far distance were completely covered with greenery. Even in the parking lot of this typical harbor in which "create beautiful surroundings" did not appear to be a high priority, parts of it were indeed beautiful. It was also very noticeably more humid, which of course, you need in order to get all the plants.



Very unfortunately, our plans in Mazatlán fell through at the last moment, which is a big shame, because from the little we could see of it, Mazatlán looked beautiful and interesting. Our next stop would be Lo de Marcos, a small, mostly Mexican seaside town in the state of Nayarit, about an hour north of Puerto Vallarta and about four hours from where we sat, a bit lost already, at the port in Mazatlán.



Jet and I looked at each other.

It was time to go.

After several guesses, we figured out where to exit, and made a right onto a busy two-lane road.

Now what?

As we had so many other times in Mexico, we found our way through a combination of “The Five Methods”:

1. Several paper maps, none of which were especially good, useful, or even accurate.
2. Google Maps (doesn't work without a cell signal, so good luck with that if you have Sprint / Moviestar as we did) and / or Sygic, which is an app for your smartphone that's supposed to work without a cell signal. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's accurate, and sometimes it takes you on route so strange that it strains credibility so much that you wind up not trusting or using it.
3. Asking people. Some know where things are, and some don't. Some who don't, admit it, while others just tell you to “continue derecho” (“continue straight,” which we heard all the time and is a good laugh, especially when there are dozens of choices to make along the “straight” path other than just “continuing”). “Asking people” was also a bit of a challenge for us, given that our ability to speak and understand Spanish is limited.
4. Knowing and applying basic geography, which works great for general directions. For example, we needed to go south, so we just kept keep the Pacific Ocean to our right.
5. Dumb luck, combined with being observant. We used this a lot, and it was amazing how often it worked. More than once, we would be blithely driving right past our intended final destination, discovered that we had indeed already arrived, and made a hasty turn into the closest parking spot. Success!



The area around the port is pretty chaotic, with of course, very few signs (actually, I don't remember a single one) to help you to find your way. Of course, we got lost, and as a result, we were treated to an unscheduled tour of a pretty seedy side of Mazatlán around the

port. Crowded one-way streets were filled with any combination of pedestrians going in all directions, stationary carts, little cars, large buses, bike-drawn carts, and now, for the surprised local inhabitants who strained to see us, an unlikely addition— our very large, white van with two lost gringos and what looked to be two dogs in the middle seat. Any port I've ever been to has its shabbier areas, so we weren't surprised. Never, however, did we feel as if we were in any danger.

By employing each of our Five Methods to various degrees, we eventually made it to the turnoff to the entrance of the toll road. The sides of the entrance were jam-packed, shoulder-to-shoulder, with vendors hawking everything from mangos to dried shrimp. Given that many of them appeared to be selling the same exact same type of mangoes and dried shrimp as the others and there was no real reason to choose one vendor over another, each one would try to make eye contact and motion me over, as if they were hailing me as a long lost friend. These are very hard working people with lots of stamina and a great attitude.



After paying our first toll and being let through, it appeared before us: a beautifully maintained, un-crowded, smooth highway, with not a pothole or errant cow as far as the eye could see. Upon fully comprehending the full ramifications of this, Jet searched for and found her Andrea Bocelli CD, which we could now enjoy, given that, rather than bumping along on roads alternating between each imaginable state of repair and disrepair, this one was almost silky (or at least, after experiencing a lot of the opposite for almost two months, it appeared that way).

I don't know if the highway had signs displaying a speed limit, but if it did, it didn't seem to matter. Evidently, our 70+ miles per hour was way too slow, if we were to judge by the quantity of vehicles passing us.

In Baja, the road terror we generally experienced was the result of two lane highways having shoulders measured in inches with sheer drop-offs measured in tens of yards, all the while huge trucks barrel towards you at 60 miles per hour from the other direction with almost no room for error.

On this toll road, they had devised a new game to play. There were shoulders on each side of the highway that measured about half a lane, so on each side, you would have your lane, as well as about half a lane to the right. The other side of the highway would have the same thing.

Any vehicle that is not going well over 70 miles per hour would drive slightly to the right and straddle the combination of the shoulder and their one lane, so the lane marking the left edge of the shoulder would be in about the middle of their vehicle. When you come across one of these slower moving, straddling vehicles, you are expected to pass to the left, which of course, would cause you to take up about half of the lane coming in the other direction. The result would be a virtual middle lane, jointly shared by traffic in the process of passing in both directions.

This setup encouraged a lot of passing, which happened continuously. If a car was passing from the other direction and didn't have enough time to pull back into its lane before it hit, let's say, you, you would be expected to move over in your lane to occupy your half of the shoulder, which would enable three cars to occupy two lanes and two shoulders. This works well if you're paying attention and have nerves of steel. Of course, if you were passing at the same time as a car coming in the other direction was passing, you would both be in the virtual center lane at the same time with a combined impact speed of perhaps 140 miles per hour. (Four cars in three lanes; no good.) If this happened, your day would probably be ruined.



We continued like this for a few hours, until we came to a construction area in what looked to be a fairly unpopulated area. Almost magically, though, the vendors appeared on the side of the road, brilliantly taking advantage of the fact that we had to slow down or even stop for the construction, which made it even more convenient to buy their dried shrimp. I love these people!

In a few more hours, we got off the toll road and onto a public road with the more familiar very small or non-existent shoulder setup. After traveling through a highland area through what looked to be the good-sized town of Tepic, we began to descend towards the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, there are several charming, little towns, some of which sold coconut water along the side of the street, which [we were very happy to try](#).

As we got closer back to the ocean, the vegetation got more dense, as we plunged deeper into the jungle. It was like a magical ride at Disneyland where the ride takes you to a themed area that doesn't really exist in real life as you experience it at Disneyland, but is meant to represent a type of place. Our ride was through the jungle, and we were indeed experiencing it, in real life.

Along our path in many places, the trees from each side of the road formed a canopy for us to drive through, gently but fully engaging our senses. We not only saw the jungle, but as we rolled down our windows, we could feel its wonderful dampness infused with fresh oxygen and smell the combination of musky, decomposing old growth and many times, sweet and fragrant flowers, all while being serenaded by an Italian tenor. Given the sheer, almost shockingly beautiful area we were experiencing, a great calmness overcame us. As the yogis would say, we took a “cleansing breath,” as our minds cleared, our anxieties melted into the profusion of various palm, mango, papaya, and flame trees all being climbed upon and clinged to by jungle vines, and our desires turned to just relaxing and enjoying the drive. (“Enjoying the drive” is quite an experience for someone like me, who left LA in part because of how much I hated to drive there.)



Time after time, blind curve or not, cars and trucks passed us. Evidently, the long-time residents of the area or those coming from other parts of Mexico such as nearby Guadalajara were not in as calm a mood or were perhaps not as impressed as us with where they were. I guess this is because they see it all the time.

After passing by the beach towns of La Peñita and Guayabitos, we came across a single sign that announced Lo de Marcos. We turned right and peered for the first time down the main street of the little town where we would be staying for the next week.

Where the Jungle Drips into the Pacific: Our First Day in Lo de Marcos, Nayarit

In the period of less than half a day, our senses and emotions had experienced quite a workout. In the morning, we were on a ferry in the Sea of Cortez, headed towards Mazatlan. In Mazatlan, we were treated to an entirely new concept: jungle in an urban setting. From there, we had found the toll road, breezed through green and wooded highland farmland, and then gradually descended into a profusion of jungle, not only on the sides of the road, but overhead, as we glided towards our destination: Lo de Marcos, in the state of Nayarit.



In contrast to our state of serene enjoyment of the road and scenery, the Mexicans in the other cars appeared to be fully engaged in a game equal parts “chicken” and “Russian Roulette.” With the curves, trees and vines, not to mention several large trucks, visibility on the two-lane road (one lane in each direction, with just a normal width shoulder on either side) rarely extended more than 50 yards. At about 45 miles per hour, we were among the slower moving vehicles. Time after time, even on blind curves, not only were we passed, but we were several times treated to the spectacle of three or four cars ahead of us pulling into the opposite lane passing three or four other cars and trucks all at the same time, which not only provided close to zero margin for error, but demonstrated a remarkable faith in the driving ability of all involved. (The picture to the right is of a two lane highway; one in each direction.)



It crossed my mind that perhaps we didn’t know how to drive in Mexico; that this was perfectly safe driving behavior, and we should learn their ways, in this case, of driving. However, this well intended and open-minded proposal was shattered by the reality of several crosses and shrines along the road (evidently the result of someone dying in a traffic accident at that place) and the no less than the three accidents we witnessed in various stages of cleanup. Considering this, decided to maintain our driving cultural bias and keep to our own lane at our standard Gringo speed.

As we slowed down from cruising speed and turned right just past the one sign that marked the town in which we would spend the next eight days, we were suddenly immersed into another setting altogether: a small, rather traditional Mexican village that had not yet been changed very much at all by expats, or at least it seemed. We rolled forward at the normal speed in

these types of towns of about 5 – 10 miles per hour, oscillating our heads side to side to take it all in, pretty much the only vehicle we could see moving, at 3 PM in the afternoon on July 6.

Cars and trucks were parked in various directions on either side of the main street. A few people walked by, but not many. On the left side, was “Tacos Diane”, one of many astoundingly surprisingly great and sophisticated restaurants we would be eating at that were really not much more than a few white plastic chairs next to old tables placed in an extension of someone’s side yard, with their home just feet away or attached. To the right and left were various smaller grocery stores, boutiques, ice cream shops and pharmacies, and the place where in a few days [I would get my hair cut](#); some open, mostly closed, either because it was low season, or siesta time.



The entire length of the town from the main road to the Pacific is less than three quarters of a mile, so you could walk it comfortably in 20 minutes. Quite easily, we found the owner of our property management company, [Armando Contreras](#). Outside his open doors slept a larger, skinny, brown dog that seemed to like to hang around Armando’s office, but didn’t belong to him. Inside were Armando and one of his very helpful, young assistants. A minute or so after our arrival, an old, smaller dog appeared from the back that Armando had rescued from a nearby town several years earlier. Even though there was no air conditioning and it was in the late afternoon in early-July in a Mexican seaside village carved out of the jungle, Armando looked completely comfortable and fresh in his long pants and polo shirt.



We followed Armando in his car as he rambled along a cobblestone road, which alternated between areas that could fairly be

described as “maintained” and areas that could not be fairly described that way. The town of Lo de Marcos could be characterized the same way: some of it is very well kept and even shiny and new, and some of it is not. In fact, some of it is completely abandoned, with jungle reclaiming the terrain, over what looked to have been at one time, very nice hotels, providing silent witness to what was most likely a past more glamorous than the present and big dreams (and perhaps big money) that had fallen by the wayside.



Within a very short time, we came to a full stop in front of a large, black gate that would provide entrance to our van, surrounded by a solid wall that looked about 10 feet tall. There was literally no way anyone could know what was behind this formidable enclosure / barrier without opening these gates, walking through the locked side door, or parachuting in.

As Armando opened the gates for our van and we rolled in, we were treated to the front of the house, which was all garden and designed by a very talented landscape architect, whether he or she called themselves that or not. (Here's a [video of the Lo de Marcos garden](#).) Of course, it would be easier to create a lush, beautiful garden with the plenty of choices of plants, trees, vines and flowers that one would have in this setting than in others, because this setting had plenty of water and sunshine, warm temperatures, and what looked to be very accommodating soil.



Within the confines of the two bedroom two bathroom house and circumscribing walls was a small but very usable pool, an outside bathroom, and an outside sink and shower (which I enjoyed many, many times), and a large, covered mirador (rooftop area with a view), complete with furniture and bed.

After unpacking just a portion of our clothes, I searched out the beach, which was just one vacant lot away. Especially compared to the [magnificent beaches we had experienced in Baja California Sur on the Sea of Cortez](#), I expected to see a rather boring Pacific beach.

I was wrong.

I stood in the middle of the sandy beach at Lo de Marcos, 20 yards from the Pacific. To the right and the left, perhaps a 20-minute walk in either direction, were hills that formed the boundaries of the little bay. The hills were filled with all sorts of jungle vegetation, some managing to secure their roots in the smallest and least likely of areas. Where these hills met the ocean, there was no sandy beach, as in places, the jungle dripped into the sea.



Towards the bottom of the hills and just yards from the beach, were palm trees. After taking it in with appreciative and somewhat awed silence for a few reverent moments, I made the four-minute walk back through the empty lot and to our rental home. “You’ve got to see this,” I said to Jet. “It’s a lot nicer than you think.” (You can see a video of the garden and outside of the house here.)

Inside the house, Jet’s experience had been a bit different. She had seen something crawling by in the bedroom that looked like about a four-inch crab, evidently as surprised by Jet as Jet was by it. (Well, perhaps Jet was more surprised, because she had never seen a crab inside a house before.) There was also the largest moth we had ever seen by a factor of about five, quite dead. It also must have measured four inches across. Even though I found it odd to think so, to me, this moth this moth was quite beautiful, with its triangle-shaped aerodynamic body adorned with intricate and rich tones of brown and black.



Welcome to your home in the jungle.

As luck would have it, the day we arrived was Wednesday, which Armando told us was special, because every Wednesday, there would be a

band playing in the square, with dancing and food vendors. After our initiation to the beach, it would be a nice way to get to know a bit about the town and its people.

Upon arriving at the square at about 8 PM, we met the only expats we would see in Lo de Marcos in over a week, sitting outside at one of the many little restaurants across from the square. We took the table next to them, and sat down. They laughed at Jet's story about her horror at seeing the crab and told us there was nothing to be worried about. As if to emphasize their point, right about at that moment in front of the restaurant, another crab ran over Jet's feet. Of course, she screamed, but recovered soon enough. More laughter from our new expat acquaintances. Oddly, we would see no other crabs for our entire stay in the state of Nayarit.



The expats told us what to order: a “volcano,” which I would describe as a very glorified tostada. As for the beer I wanted, they told us that the restaurant didn't serve it, so I should walk next door to the little store and buy it there. “Won't the restaurant be upset if I do that?” I asked. The reply: yet more laughter. I certainly wasn't at a typical restaurant in the US where you can't bring anything in.

As the expats left, the four completely different looking dogs that were patiently attending them, looking for a handout, dutifully and cautiously arrived to try the same with the new people in town. Perhaps we would be a “soft touch.” The “volcano” turned out to be absolutely delicious, and the beer was cold and perfect (and very cheap, because I had purchased it from the store). The total cost for the meal was around \$4 for both of us, beer included.



So there we were, eating fabulous, ridiculously inexpensive food, drinking cold beer, with four dogs patiently and cutely waiting, sitting across from the square, listening to the band, watching the people dance, all in the warmth of a Lo de Marcos, Mexico, summer evening.

We were going to enjoy our next 7 ½ days.

What it's Like To Live in Lo de Marcos, Nayarit, a Little Seaside Village About an Hour North of Puerto Vallarta

We had loved our six weeks in the little coastal village of [La Ventana, in Baja California Sur, on the Sea of Cortez](#). Now, as our tour continued, we would have the opportunity to experience another little village, Lo de Marcos, in Nayarit, about an hour north of Puerto Vallarta, on the Pacific Ocean. While Baja was majestic, with mostly barren, expansive landscape, harder edges, and gorgeous contrasts, Lo de Marcos was vivid, infused and saturated with color. In Lo de Marcos even the air was thicker and carried with it the smells of the jungle. Lo de Marcos had a more obvious density of life than Baja. Baja had vast emptiness to appreciate, punctuated with stunning vistas, while Nayarit was filled in.

Lo de Marcos is a small place. From our rental home, we were able to walk to the town square in a little more than five minutes, and to the beach in about three minutes. Even though we were only in Lo de Marcos for eight days, we got to know quite a few people by name, not only because they were friendly, but also because we saw many of them regularly.

Lo de Marcos was even less expensive than Baja California Sur. Something that looked like a tostada that they called a volcano and was enough for an entire meal was 15 pesos (about 82 cents). A half-kilo of corn tortillas (more than a pound) was 7.5 pesos (about 41 cents). Fruit stands were everywhere along the main road to and from town. One of our favorite purchases was star fruit, which cost 5 pesos for two. In the States, one star fruit would cost more than a dollar. Here, it was about 13 cents, and even then, I believe the Mexicans may have thought they were overcharging us because, as we were told after my wife Jet asked, star fruit grew on the trees in



many of their yards. Personal services were cheap, sometimes ridiculously so. I got a [really good haircut for 50 pesos](#) (less than \$3).

We ate creatively prepared, very tasty, complex and fabulous food in Lo de Marcos, as well as freshly squeezed juice every day. My favorite was a green blend the ingredients of which I couldn't make out from the Spanish-speaking proprietor of the juice stand. There was also a lot of carrot juice, orange juice, and nanche juice, which is made by putting the entire nanche fruit in a standard blender, pits and all, then adding water and a little sweetener. They put it in a big container and spoon out the juice. It has a unique and interesting taste I really liked.



Like all the beaches we saw in Nayarit, Lo de Marcos was [bracketed by two hills that extended into the Pacific](#). The hills were completely blanketed with jungle growth, right down to the water. In between the hills was the sandy beach that, if you were walking briskly, you could span in about 20 – 30 minutes. Up from the beach was the town, which measured a little more than half a mile from the main road to the water. The town square was roughly in the middle. That was it.

Our house was one block from the ocean on a road that paralleled the beach. I could walk onto that road facing towards the ocean, and see the hills on each side. On this uncrowded road going in either direction were people, un-accompanied dogs that walked with an earnestness that looked like they were late for an appointment, the occasional car, ATVs, and people on horses. Our realtor, [Armando Contreras](#) told us that, if we followed this road a mile or so to the south there was a very nice, secluded beach called Venado that you couldn't get to by walking along the beach. So off I went, down the road, with our two dogs.



The road was flat for a while, but then began to rise as I started up the first hill. One of the advantages of walking as opposed to driving is that you enter an environment more slowly and quietly, and without the barrier provided by the windows in your car and your speed. You are much more “in” the place, rather than just “going through” it. In this state, I could see and more fully understand that the areas immediately to the side of the road looked to be in their natural state, with a profusion of jungle plants; palms, trees and vines with huge, broad leaves, all respirating in the thick, somewhat humid, warm, jungle-scented air. Standing still, I could hear distant birds squawking and the buzzing and chirping of insects. As I looked at it, it occurred to me how difficult it must have been for the first people here (the ones before the roads were put in) to get anywhere; they would literally have to cut their way through the jungle, hack-by-hack and step-by-step. Now I know why the machete was invented.



Quite unexpectedly, I came across about a dozen [horses off to the side of the road, grazing in the jungle](#). Perhaps this would not be odd to other people, but to me, who was used to seeing horses in more scrub or chaparral territory, it was strange, indeed. The entire atmosphere, not only what I saw, but the overall feel of the environment and the quiet, idyllic nature of it, especially with the horses, gave the area a natural, innocent, “Garden of Eden” feel.

As I walked by, very modest houses partially hidden from the road by the jungle appeared sporadically, as did very impressive gates that allowed no viewpoint or entry whatsoever. The “Big Gate People” would have their paradise to themselves. Every once in a while, I could see a large house on a hill with what I could only imagine would have a magnificent, panoramic view. Back on the road, some of the homes of even the poorer people had the equivalent of a “no trespassing” sign, the meaning sometimes amplified by the presence of several dogs. One house advertised that the owner sold popsicles, although it didn’t appear as if there would be a lot of traffic to support his business. Overall, even in the late afternoon, the road was fairly dark, owing to the huge and densely growing foliage on each side and overhead.



Then, off to the right side, the jungle gave way to a vista that looked like it could have been a location spot for the movie Blue Lagoon. It looked like the area right in front of the road had been cleared, so I could clearly see that this piece of land had its own, private little bay, with a white, sandy beach, gently lapping waves, and palm trees placed in just the right spots ([video here](#)). To the right of it was the relatively flat jungle. To the left, was a hill. On the land was a tiny house with bicycle in front of it, another tiny house with bananas growing next to it, and in the front of the gate was a sign that said it was private property. Who could possibly own such a perfect place? And if they could afford it, why was their house so small?



As I wondered these thoughts and took it all in for several minutes standing in front of the no trespassing sign, I saw in the distance a man coming towards me. As he came closer, I saw that he didn't seem to be upset with me looking at his property, so I waved and eventually offered the standard "Buenos tardes." He spoke no English whatsoever and my Spanish is limited, but I could tell that he was inviting me in, an invitation I accepted, along with my two dogs. His five dogs were curious, but he kept them away.

It turned out that he was very happy to show me his land, and was quite pleased with how much I liked it. "I liked it" is a bit of an understatement, as to me, it may have been the single most tranquil and gorgeous beach home property I had ever seen this side of Bora Bora. As we communicated the best we could, the sun began to set over the Pacific in front of my new friend's little private beach, so I took a few more pictures, thanked him, and headed home. That day, I never got to the beach Armando had recommended.



While I had found an amazing beach, Jet had found something else: what she was convinced was a huge, mangy, long tailed rat, walking on the telephone wires in front of our house. She was to see this "rat" several additional times during our stay, which is ironic, because I never saw it at all. I guess people just tend to be on the lookout for what they fear. (To see what the "rat" was, [see this video](#), as our gardener Victor, and his wife, Rosario, explain it.)

It was hot in Lo de Marcos in July, but not unbearable. It was nice, however, to have air conditioning on demand. Like the house we stayed in at La Ventana, there was no central air conditioning like you may have in the US. Instead, they have wall units (mostly in the bedrooms), which were very efficient. Unfortunately, one of them wasn't working, so we got to meet what eventually were [three air conditioning repairmen](#), who could not have been nicer or more pleasant, as they struggled to fix our air conditioning while being on the roof over the period of several days. One of the reasons it took so long was that every time they found they needed a different part, they had to drive (one of them had a motorcycle) to La Penita, which is about 10 miles in each direction. (That's one of the repairmen to the right, with Jet, wearing a very authentic t-shirt from the Philippines-- Jet's birthplace-- although he had no idea what it pictured.)



Not only is Lo de Marcos small, but it also retains its farming heritage in a very central way. For example, one day, on my way to get one of those great juices, I saw a [cattle drive... right through the middle of the town square](#). No one was surprised but me.

It was in this same town square that, eight days earlier, upon our arrival, we witnessed the townspeople who were then all strangers to us dancing to the surprisingly good music of a government provided band, so it was only fitting that on our last night in this wonderful little town of Lo de Marcos, there was dancing again. This time, however, we were no longer newcomers and not all the people dancing were strangers. As we came across Victor and Rosario, [Victor asked Jet to dance, which she did](#), thereby placing a bittersweet, bookend finale to our time there. We would love to come back.



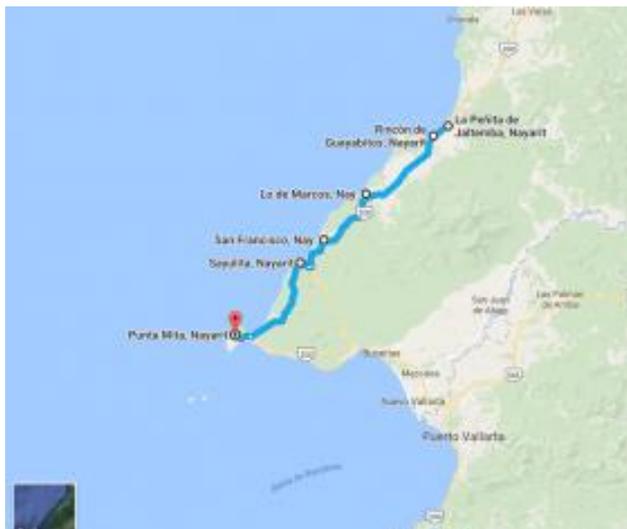
The Six Sisters of Nayarit, Mexico: La Peñita, Guayabitos, Lo de Marcos, San Pancho, Sayulita and Punta Mita

We wanted very much to visit the towns just to the north and south of [Lo de Marcos, in the state of Nayarit](#). How could we not? Lo de Marcos was beautiful, exotic and interesting, the people were friendly, the food was great, and we had never been anywhere else in the area. We had only eight days in which to explore before our deadline to leave for the Central Mexican Highlands.



From side to side, Lo de Marcos is only about a half a mile wide, from where you can watch the sun set as it plunges into the Pacific Ocean on the west, to where the town effectively dead-ends into the main road to the east. This main road runs roughly parallel to the ocean and connects the areas from the north (from where we arrived, originally [disembarking from the Baja Ferry in Mazatlan](#)) to the south, to [Puerto Vallarta](#), about an hour away by car. From that road, we could visit several little beach towns, roughly 30 miles from the one furthest north, La Peñita, to the one furthest south, Punta Mita.

One of the reasons we were so happy to explore the area is that [the main road is wonderfully beautiful](#). From the sides of this road, jungle vines, palm trees and broad-leafed plants accompanied us on all our journeys, and at various times, formed a canopy overhead through which we and the other cars and trucks passed.



For us, this stretch of road was very relaxing, but evidently less so for the other drivers. Even though there was only one lane and a small or non-existent shoulder in each direction, we were treated to the

fairly constant spectacle of cars passing us, and each other, irrespective of whether there was enough visibility to do so safely.

And it's not as if there weren't any accidents. In our short time there, we saw several of them in various stages of cleanup, as well as several shrines and crosses along the side of the road. It seemed to me as if every driver must be either a 17 year old boy or someone with severe intestinal distress racing to the next baño, which made it even more surprising when I looked into several of these cars and saw how absolutely ordinary and nonchalant the drivers were—middle aged men with their families; pleasant looking, well dressed women; older, bored looking couples; all with nary a hint on their faces of the terror that I would think a person would naturally feel at times when, within seconds, one could be involved in a fiery head-on collision.



Starting from our rental in Lo de Marcos, we would visit five other towns along the main road. Like six sisters who were raised in the same home with the same parents and later went out into the world to start their own families in their own homes with their own styles and personalities, each town had a similar core and common foundations.

Each started out as beautiful young women, blessed with good genes. Physically, with the exception of Punta Mita, the land that would eventually become these separate towns each had their own outcroppings dense with jungle on each their north and south sides demarking their Pacific boundaries, and each had a sandy beach in between. Later, as people arrived, they would evolve into small villages with similar but not exactly the same culture and food. As time went on, some of their distinctive inherent traits would make the differences between them just a little more pronounced, for example, as Sayulita or Punta Mita was just a bit better for surfing than the others, so they developed into surfing destinations with a bit more of a surfing personality. Also, chance would play its part, as one town became more well known on account

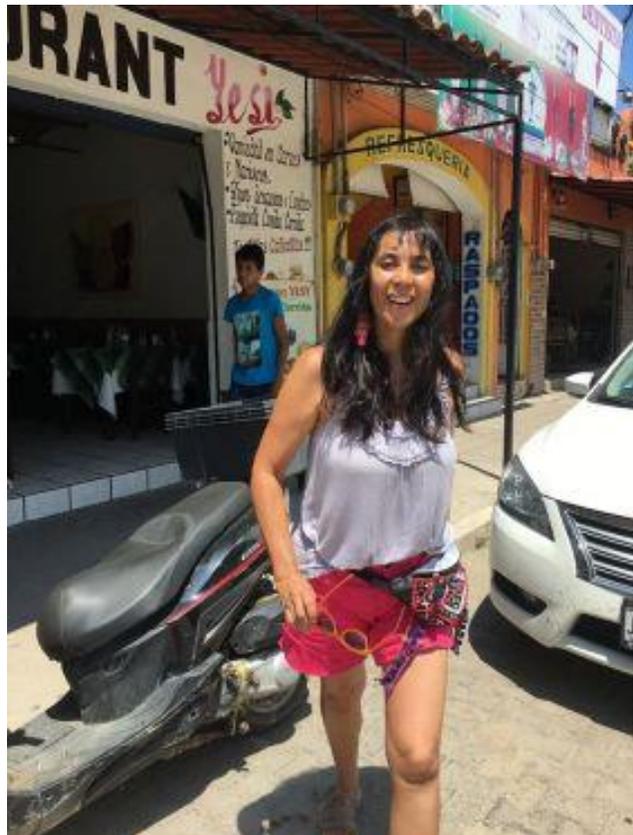


of a particular person who liked it or publicized it, or a successful businessperson happened to choose one town over another.

Furthest to the north, La Peñita is the town that everyone in Lo de Marcos went to when they needed something, whether it was [a part to fix our air conditioner](#), or to ship a package. The La Peñita Nayarit sister was reliable and helped the others in a workmanlike manner.

Coming from the main road, La Peñita took little time to introduce itself, as almost directly off this road, a large bronze bust announced that we have arrived within its confines. As we turned in, our large white van was fairly immediately placed onto a road that resembled an elongated oval, like a racetrack, except that this racetrack had all sorts of different vehicles on it, from passenger cars, to delivery trucks, bicycles, people, tour buses, etc., and all were moving at about 4 miles per hour, or at times, stopped altogether.

The traffic was one way around the oval. In the center of the oval was a very pleasant park with benches, grass and trees. There were essentially three lanes around the oval—one on each side where you could park; and the one in the middle, in which you drove, very slowly. People were busy moving around everywhere, in every direction. The stores and restaurants were all open and doing brisk business. Many were two floors high, with balconies, from which proprietors or customers watched the commerce below. Business looked good.



Through a stroke of incredible luck, a delivery truck pulled out just ahead to the left of us and then revealed the object of our immediate desire: a parking space just big enough for our van. Not people to pass by such an obvious gift, we took it, got out, and, scanning the scene from the park median, pondered our next move.

Directly to the right, across the street, stood Restaurant Yesi, which looked nice, but not particularly unique among all the other restaurants. Given that we were hungry and had no reason to prefer one restaurant to another, we entered.

After ordering our food, I went to check out the back, where, in the open kitchen, in between joking with each other, four or five spirited and friendly women chopped and cooked. One of them was creating a juice out of a small, yellow fruit we had first seen in Baja, called

nanche. [Here's the video of the women showing me how they make it.](#) My wife, Jet Metier, describes the experience of drinking agua de nance in the same video.

Then, ten minutes later, in that place, Jet Metier had what she told me was one of the best meals she had ever experienced. She was flabbergasted, and also quite happy. So much so, that she went back to the kitchen and asked them how they did it, [which they showed her.](#)



The next town to the south of La Peñita, before Lo de Marcos, is Guayabitos. Guayabitos is the Nayarit sister who married a traditional Mexican man and enjoys leisure time with her traditional Mexican family. Like La Peñita, there were few expats in Guayabitos, but unlike La Peñita, Guayabitos was geared more towards vacationing. There were lots of condos and “bungalows,” which we were told were hotel rooms with kitchens. The streets were paved, as opposed to cobblestone, and all around, there were lots of shops to buy items for the beach and lots of mid-range Mexican-style hotels. Mexican families and / or friends gathered together on the beach under large umbrellas. Guayabitos was bustling, very pleasant, and looked to us that it became exactly what it always wanted to be: a very nice, beautiful place for a relaxing vacation experience for people closest to it.

South, after Lo de Marcos, the next town is a bit of an internal contradiction, starting with its name. Some people all it “San Francisco,” which is how you will see it on a map, but most everyone who knows it calls it “San Pancho,” which is what the sign on the road says. San Pancho does not immediately give the impression of being high end, yet it has a polo club (yes, you read that right), and yoga and Pilates studios. This is the Nayarit sister who is a bit Bohemian.



San Pancho has a very interesting, and from what we could tell, unique architectural style. We saw several palapas on platforms, with unlikely, imaginative, rounded edges on several of the buildings and stairways. Both Jet and I liked it a lot. We didn't see many people and it was fairly quiet. (Perhaps most of them were in meditation class.) Even with all this ambiance and higher end set of services, we saw very few expats; most of the people seemed

to be local Mexicans. In search of lunch, Jet and I found a park with big shade trees where the local Mexicans hung out.

It was mid July, in the middle of the day, so it was hot. Directly next to the stand where I ordered tacos and where the proprietor added about 10 degrees to the heat by cooking, seated on a cheap plastic chair and eating her lunch, was a perfectly made up young Mexican woman, about 25 years old, in business attire, accompanied by what was probably her male business colleague in similar attire who was probably in his early thirties. Her make-up and clothes were impeccable. He, with his perfect haircut, wore long sleeves. In contrast, I looked like a complete slob, and I was probably perspiring quite a bit. Both this young woman and her lunch mate looked as fresh as if they were dining in a nice restaurant in Aspen on a spring day. As I tried, through sweaty, stinging eyes, to figure out how they could do this, Jet appeared with her lunch find, which she loved.



Sayulita, the next beach town to the south, is the youngest Nayarit sister, and the one who married an American and is raising a mixed family. Sayulita is bustling, youthful, hip, energetic, and successful. There are bars and cafes everywhere. [Upon arriving at the beach](#), you are beckoned by rows of massage tables with crisp, white towels, under tasteful, blue awnings. We couldn't negotiate on any of the items in the stores or stalls because there is way too much demand for that; they just politely move you away and talk with the next customer. Packs of young people wearing shirts with the logo of a surfing school assembled on the sand for surf classes. We had lunch in a fun restaurant overlooking the beach. Like all the beaches so far, it was very pretty. Amenities were everywhere. If you needed to rinse off from the ocean, there was an outdoor shower. Care for an alcoholic drink after your surfing lesson and massage? There was a great bar on the beach, complete with a bartender and his parrot. It was daytime, but I assume that at night, there's a good amount of partying.



Punta Mita, the southernmost town we visited, was the Nayarit sister who married a tech mogul. As we arrived from the mountains, the road broadened so that it had two very well maintained lanes on each side, with an equally well-maintained, grassy, tree-lined median. Unlike La Peñita, there were no benches, because no one was supposed to be on the median; it was for looking at only. Like many wealthy areas, in this area of Punta Mita, there were virtually no locals to be seen anywhere, but we did see a good amount of service vehicles. On this road, to the right was what we suspected to be an enormous, very upscale housing development. The reason I write that we “suspected” what it was is that we couldn’t really see anything except for a tall wall.



Eventually, we got past the mystery very high-end housing development, the service entrance to the Four Seasons, and the entrance the customers take, and then, to the left, down a small hill, was a shopping area reminiscent of La Jolla. If you’ve never been to La Jolla, it’s nice. Everything is clean, very high end, and politically correct. The place softly but confidently exudes success and privilege. There were several shops and restaurants facing the water. We visited one, walked to the back, and looked for the ocean.

From where we were, it wasn’t really that pretty. Unlike the other Nayarit sister towns, this one didn’t have the outcroppings and it didn’t have the sandy beach. It was actually a bit rocky. We were told that it had great surfing, but it didn’t that day; it was flat. Underwhelmed but certain that Punta de Mita was quite spectacular in other areas, we decided to go to the Four Seasons to see what we assumed would be a much better beach from there. Up to the guard building we drove, extremely confident we could just say we were visiting the restaurant, and gain entrance.



We were wrong.

No one without a previous reservation would be allowed in.

We were given very polite but firm instructions on how to turn around and go back, which we did, returning to Lo de Marcos. We'll have to visit the Four Seasons some other time; perhaps after a wealthy tech mogul invites us.

(Editor's note: Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates had recently made a substantial purchase in Punta Mita, which we were told, had changed everything.)

Our next stop would be the Central Mexican Highlands, with what we were told was the second-best weather in the world.

The Road from Nayarit, through Puerto Vallarta, to Lake Chapala and a Great, Big House for 60% Less Than a Tiny Hotel Room

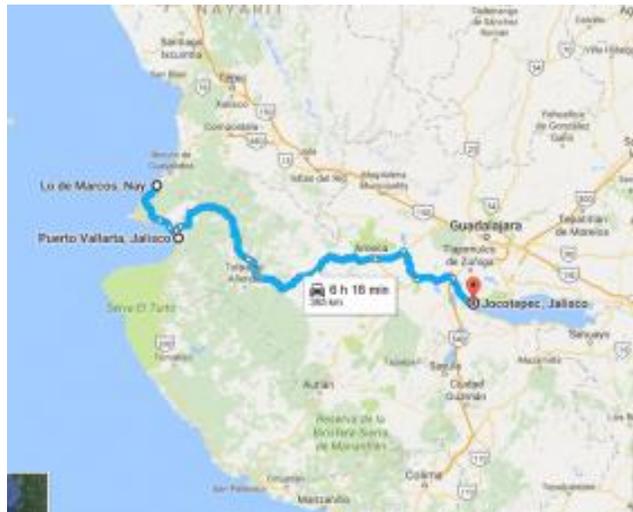
When doing a road trip anywhere, and especially in Mexico, the ability to improvise and adapt are traits that come in handy. Case I point: unfortunately, our much-anticipated plans to visit [Puerto Vallarta](#) fell through, so we would have to content ourselves with a “drive through.”

In the lavish and lovely garden area in the front of what had been our [Lo de Marcos home](#) for eight days of various parts serenity, adventure, discovery and enjoyment in the greater Nayarit beach area, we packed our van so tightly you couldn't add a toothpick. We then manually swung open the tall, black gates from our beach house to the road, drove a few feet, closed the gates behind us, and after five minutes of rumbling along the cobblestone streets of Lo de Marcos with our very heavy and very full van, made a right onto the smooth highway to head south towards Puerto Vallarta, slightly more than an hour away.



For several miles, the road was quite familiar and rural, with just the one lane in each direction, as we passed by [the little beach towns of Nayarit we had visited before](#), but this time without turning in. Around Sayulita, instead of making a right and heading towards the beach, we continued more inland, and more directly south.

About a half an hour later, we could glimpse the Pacific again in the distance around Bucerías, where we were now traveling on one of two lanes going in our direction, and with a median as well. Some impressive buildings began to appear along the road and especially in the near distance, along the shore, amongst the rest of what we had come to know as more standard issue construction in this part of the world.



As we approached Nuevo Vallarta, north of Puerto Vallarta, the scale and feeling transitioned at an accelerated pace. Even from the main road, everything became bigger and neater and newer. It reminded my wife Jet and me of Irvine, California, which, if you haven't seen it, is a

huge master planned area carved out of Southern California. Everything was more substantial and corporate. Gone were the little shops we were so accustomed to seeing further north in Nayarit.

Even the Alamo car rental was huge. The Home Depot was huge. The Mega supermarket / super center looked large enough to be its own mid-sized city and to have its own zip code. The roads were clean and orderly. The lanes were wide, with a generous shoulder off to each side, and adorned with beautiful palm trees, all appropriately placed and manicured. We drove for what seemed like ten miles before seeing our first piece of trash. The car dealerships were massive, new, very shiny, very clean, and very welcoming. For our part, we were a bit out of place. After all, we had less than an hour before emerged from a little town where we had eaten street tacos for 8 pesos each. I almost felt like we should get our van washed.



Technically, Nuevo Vallarta is in the state of Nayarit, so as we continued on to Puerto Vallarta proper, we crossed into Jalisco. Massive hotels appeared, as did an international airport and a marina. To paraphrase Dorothy, from The Wizard of Oz, we certainly weren't in Lo de Marcos any more.

Unfortunately, we couldn't stay in Puerto Vallarta even long enough to get out of the van, because we had to be at our vacation rental in Jocotepec, a little more than five hours driving away, before nightfall. So after some interesting driving experiences (i.e., [everyone making a left from the right lane](#)) and a very short, [drive by tour of part of the beautiful central area](#), we reluctantly bid farewell to the shining, bustling city we had not the time to explore as it deserved, and pointed our van roughly east, up into the mountains, to the Central Mexican Highlands.



Climatologists tell us that, all other things being equal, the temperature will drop as your elevation increases. This sets up a very happy possibility for areas closer to the equator, where, at sea level, it can be quite hot, especially in what we would consider the summer months. For example, in mid-July (which is when we were traveling), the Mexican state of Jalisco contains both sea level Puerto Vallarta (average daytime high, 93 degrees Fahrenheit), and, at about

5,000 feet, the Lake Chapala area, with its average daytime high of 81 degrees.

We were eager to experience this drop in summer temperature ourselves, so eastward, on Highway 544 we went. For most of the way, we were treated to very lightly populated farmland interspersed with jungle, amongst large, verdant valleys and high mountains. The traffic was light. With a one hour stop for lunch, roughly five hours later, we were within an hour drive of our destination for the day, the mostly Mexican town of Jocotepec, at the west end of Lake Chapala.



Driving from sea level in Mexico to the Highlands in July is almost like cheating nature, wherein you know some special trick or technique to go from being at over 90 degrees, to a much cooler place. Perhaps it was just us, but the difference in these Mexican mountains, at about the same elevation as Denver, Colorado, seemed to be a lot more than 12 degrees cooler. As we approached closer to Lake Chapala, it started to rain lightly. Jet very happily pulled out the sweatshirt she had been saving for the occasion.

Lake Chapala is the largest lake in Mexico; about 50 miles from west to east, and for the areas with which expats are most familiar, about 5 – 7 miles from north to south. The center of expat activity is the village of Ajijic, on the northwest shore of the lake, about 11 miles east of our first home rental in Jocotepec. While there are several notable concentrations of expats dotting the area, in general, the farther from Ajijic, the lesser the proportion of expats. “Lakeside” is the name most often used to encompass all the towns from about Jocotepec on the west, to the actual town of Chapala, on the east, about 45 minutes to an hour away, depending on traffic.



Our objective was to experience several versions of life at Lakeside, which is why we began with Jocotepec, the least expat dense area around. We directed our large, white van down the main road in Jocotepec on what became a very narrow, cobblestone street. Jocotepec looked to be a working town, with not much of what one would expect in a more touristic place. Incongruously, there was what looked to be a brand new Santander bank, in glistening marble and white. Shops were right on the street, just like in Lo de Marcos, but unlike Lo de Marcos, Jocotepec had multiples more people and traffic. Many of the streets

were by necessity one-way, for the simple fact that the road wasn't wide enough to accommodate parked cars as well as two-way traffic.

After somehow finding ourselves in the most improbable part of town—what looked like several modern homes owned by foreigners—we found our way, up a one way street towards the mountains just to the east of another one way street going the other way that we would take us back down to the village. At the last moment, we made a quick left and then a right, where we stopped the car, got out, and confronted two huge, metal, darkly painted gates took in the overall scene.



Across the dirt road, three vastly different-looking dogs very slowly approached us, as the two families that lived in the two houses across the street watched us, somewhat expressionless. The family closest to us included three or four young children, who, with their parents, sat on the steps to what looked like an opening without a door. One of the children sat in her play car. Just up the hill was a middle-aged couple, who, although certainly poor by US standards, were obviously much better off financially than their neighbors. With a hearty “Buenos tardes,” from Jet and me, everyone smiled cautiously and returned our wave and greeting. Of course, we had no idea what their experiences were with the previous renters or the owner or managers of the house, or what our new neighbors expected from us.

Into one of these gates to our rental home was a door cut out for people. We rang the bell. Almost immediately, the door for people opened. Inside, was a small woman who introduced herself as Gabby, the housekeeper. Gabby welcomed us to what would be our home for 10 days. We got back into the car while Gabby walked back through the door and opened the gates to reveal what was inside.



Just like in Lo de Marcos, what we saw next was a very pleasant surprise. Other than the gates, a wall made of rocks and concrete that was probably on average 10 feet high and about half a foot or more thick surrounded the entire perimeter of the property. The grounds looked to be about half an acre, with huge trees. We drove slowly on the driveway / small road that ran from the gate almost to the other edge of the property. The house was perched to the left, on the high ground, so far back in the property that the rear wall of the house was in many

places the same as the back wall of the property. In front of the house, to our right and left as we drove in, was our own very large, very private garden, which, as we came to a stop, was now bisected by our car, which was under a tree. Gabby shut and locked the gate.



We got out of the car and walked up the steps to the home itself, and stood on one of the many patios and looked south, away from the house. There, through the enormous trees, was the lake, and on the other side of the lake, we could clearly make out what we were told later was the volcanic-looking mountain called Garcia. As we turned around, behind us to the north were incredibly green and towering mountains, so steep they looked to be almost straight up. The house itself looked to be around 3,000 square feet. Our two dogs were obviously thrilled, as they got to work exploring the enclosed yard. So were we. We would be able to enjoy all this for about 40% of the average price of just a tiny hotel room in the US. You can see [a video tour of the garden by Jet Metier here](#).



Next, I'll tell you about life in the mostly Mexican town of Jocotepec, just adjacent to the famous expat destination of Ajijic.

Living in Jocotepec, on the Shores of Lake Chapala: Beauty, Free Enterprise, and Some Cupcakes

If you're like me, with typical middle-class US suburban experiences and sensibilities, when you first arrive at Jocotepec, you are confronted with several things that just don't seem right.

For starters (and this is not unusual for Mexico), what was to be our home for the next 10 days did not have any internal hallways. All the rooms were placed at the far rear of the property, closest to the mountains, so that the back wall of each room was also the rear wall of the lot, and had zero windows in that direction.



After living within this design just for a bit, I can report that what to a North American would at first seem to be a terrible way to arrange a house [was actually a really good one](#). With the entire house only one room deep, there was plenty of natural light from the ample windows facing the yard, and a [spectacular view from everywhere in the house](#). Also, placing the house at the far rear of the lot made the lot seem enormous, as opposed to having a typical North American arrangement, where we are concerned about curb appeal and place the house towards the middle of the lot with traditional front and back yards. Our home in Jocotepec had only one yard and no curb appeal whatsoever. In fact, it had no curb at all and you couldn't even see the house from the street. All you saw from the street was a huge, very imposing wall surrounding the entire property with equally imposing gates.



However, once inside these walls, the world changed.

Inside the walls, [our Jocotepec yard was filled with serenity, beauty, wonder and interest, in all fields of view, near and far](#). The home was elevated in the foothills around Lake Chapala, so in the distance, through a huge pine tree and other varied and majestic tropical trees, we could see the glistening lake. In the far distance, our eyes were drawn to what looked like a volcanic mountain called Garcia. At 9,000 feet above sea level and 4,000 feet above the shore of Lake Chapala, it was not unusual for the top of Garcia to be obscured by clouds. In the foothills of

Garcia, even from our vantage point across the lake in Jocotepec, we could clearly see agricultural land. In the near field of our home, underpinning it all, was our lovely, large, and inviting garden, with a fountain, different levels, and all sorts of interesting and exotic plants and fragrances.



When you buy food in a restaurant in Mexico, be prepared to wait. The reason is that most [everything is cooked to order](#), even down to the tortillas, which are more often than not, handmade while you wait. As a result, when Jet, my wife, would ask me to walk down the hill to pick up another great meal, I would generally not return for half an hour: five minutes to walk to one of the restaurants, five minutes to walk back, and 20 minutes watching our food being cooked.

Arriving back to our private garden with the great setting and great views, Jet would usually have the table outside prepared and ready to go, where we would open the bags of food, complete with salsas and assorted accompaniments. Then we would enjoy creative, delicious, fresh food in a garden setting, with a monumental view, usually for less than US \$4 total for us both.

Given that we arrived in the middle of the rainy season, it would usually rain at night and sometimes in the early morning. Many times, we would wake up to our gorgeous garden, beautiful views of the lake and the smells of flowers, accompanied by gently falling rain with Garcia visible in the distance. The middle of the day was almost always rain-free. True to its reputation, the temperature ranged from what felt like about 65 in the morning to what felt like about 75 during the day. It was pretty idyllic.



As is the case with much of what we saw and experienced in Mexico, the beauty we were fully immersed in and enjoying behind our tall and imposing walls (all at about 30% of what it would cost in the US) was not equally experienced by many of our less fortunate Mexican neighbors. As is done in many places in Mexico, by both Gringos and Mexicans, the owner of the home we rented had created an oasis, but it was a walled oasis, complete with barbed

wire. On the inside of this oasis were our home, our garden, our dogs, and us. Immediately outside was a family that could very well have been squatters with less than clean clothes, and kids playing on a dirt and mud street that was not entirely free of trash.

To one degree or another, this was the case in much of Jocotepec. Some of the smaller homes down the hill from us had been beautifully and artfully refurbished, were kept immaculately clean, and had an expensive, freshly washed car easily seen through their security wrought iron gates. The house next door to that one may be close to a ruin. Next to that may be an empty lot gone to seed (which was usually beautiful) with horse grazing in it, or a home somewhere in the middle. This seemingly randomized urban revitalization appeared all around us, and was not confined to residential housing. More than once, walking down the street in what I believed to be a less prosperous area, I would be startled to come across an impressive, modern retail store, perhaps selling motorcycles or granite countertops, flooring and very high end plumbing fixtures, attended by impeccably groomed and dressed salespeople.

The sidewalks in front of each house or building looked to be the responsibility of the owner, because some were well kept, uniform and safe, while others were not. And, in front of a very high percentage of the buildings, the sidewalk continued the theme of the outside of the building. For example, if the outside of the building had slate interspersed throughout its walls, so did the sidewalk in front of the building. This was a nice touch.

The colors of the buildings were creative and wonderful. We saw all sorts of combinations

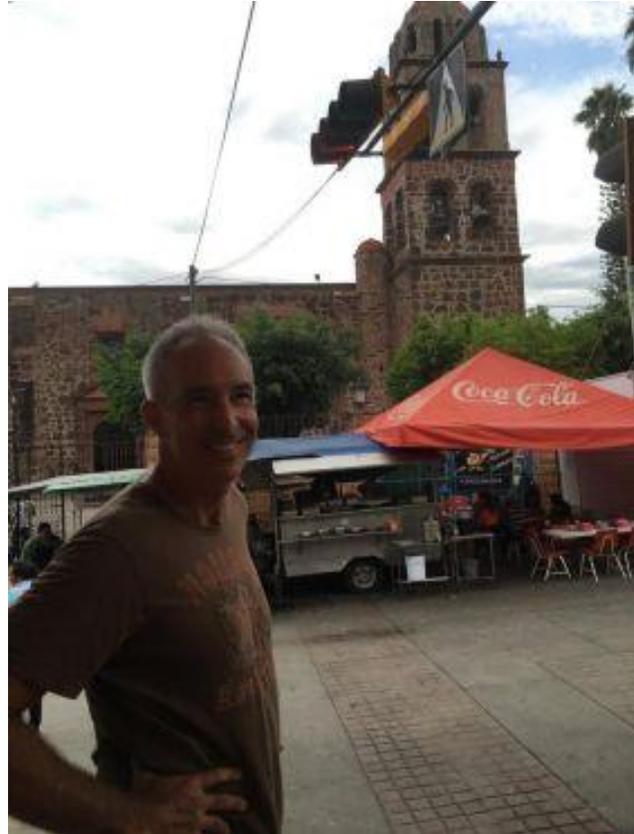


we had not only never seen before, but also never even imagined. And it all worked extremely well. Many of the buildings, even the humble ones, were very tastefully and artistically done, which showed that the people who owned most of the buildings in Jocotepec very much cared about the appearance of their home or business. It was wonderful to see.

The people of Jocotepec could not have been friendlier. In the short span of 10 days, I was on a first name basis with several people in the restaurants, an old man sitting on a chair I passed every day, and the man who ran an *abarrote* (a little convenience store) on the way walking up to our home. If he saw me walking by, he would greet me with, “*Qué tal, ‘Chook?’*” even though I had told him my name (Chuck) only once in our initial conversation. Regardless of what they have or don’t have, the people of Jocotepec are by and large happy, friendly, accepting, nice people. It’s easy to like them.

Next to the town square was the *mercado* (market), which was a real life example of unbridled free enterprise. From the street, I saw people entering empty-handed and people leaving with bags full of products. Inside, you could almost feel the energy. Everything and everyone was in motion; nobody stopped. Transactions took place quickly and without friction. Potential customers examined food and other items, asked for prices, made decisions to buy or to move on. Vendors in stalls accepted new inventory, scaled fish, cut chicken, and made fresh juice, all with practiced efficiency and no wasted motion whatsoever, multi-tasking while talking with customers and moving; always moving.

You could buy raw fish, chicken or beef, baked goods, juices, fruits and vegetables, and in the back, there looked to even be clothing and household items for sale. Observing the movement of people and goods was like watching the mechanism of a watch. Everyone knew exactly what he or she was doing.



[Here's a video of the mercado](#) and also of the delivery of whole sides of beef to the nearby butcher shop. For those who prefer to not see how their food is prepared, you may want to skip this, especially the beef delivery. As a carcass is carried on the shoulder of a man delivering it and I catch it on video, you can see the reaction of my reaction to it by a boy in a chair nearby, who laughs joyously at what I can only assume is his assumption of my shock.

Many Mexican towns along the water (and pretty much all large ones) will have a *malecon*, or some type of boardwalk along the shore. In Jocotepec, it was located a pretty good distance from [the square](#), which, from what I can tell in Mexico, always has a church. I couldn't easily find the malecon, so I asked another new friend of mine, Pancho, who ran Carnitas Los Panchos, where to find it. [\(Pancho serves great food.\)](#) Given that I was walking, he pointed me to a street right behind his restaurant that turned into an alley. The alley was not in a nice neighborhood, so I figured I was lost or that the malecon would be pretty shabby, but I kept going, anyway, to see what would happen. Then, the alleyway opened up and revealed the lake and the malecon.



It was quite an abrupt transition. I could almost hear the angels sing. While the alleyway was dingy and dusty with stray dogs and people standing around, and the mercado was a center of concentrated, energetic capitalism, the [malecon was peaceful, clean, relaxing, and very inviting](#). With the gentle lapping of the waters of the lake, Garcia in the distance, and the agreeable movement of the people, it was almost rhythmic, like what you feel and see snorkeling or scuba diving. Everything slowed down. Along the boardwalk, young lovers talking in hushed tones walked hand in hand next to the lake, while children played nearby. Old people on benches chatted in moderate tones to their friends or younger family members.



Very clean and very well designed, the malecon also had a good-sized park as part of it. Some children giggled and ran around in an area that randomly shot up water. Other smaller children played on teeter-totters. No one raised his or her voice and in this place the world obeyed a gentle, natural order. Everyone looked to be happy and at peace and clearly enjoyed their malecon. My assumption is that the people of Jocotepec were very proud of it. They should be; it was a delight to attend.

Later in the week, while we were picking up some great food at Carnitas Los Panchos, Pancho introduced us to two young women who were selling homemade cupcakes for 5 pesos (about 26 cents) each. In a nearby white, plastic chair, sat Pancho's grandmother, watching over the business and talking with customers about the old days. Given my revised sensibilities for what things should cost, the price of the cupcakes seemed high to me, so I didn't want to buy any. Ignoring me, Jet purchased a dozen, because she had other plans for them. She immediately gave one to Pancho's grandmother, who loved the cupcake, but, given how her face lit up, probably loved Jet's gesture even more. Into the van with the remaining cupcakes we went.



We rambled up the hill in our van towards our house with the big gates. Outside, as usual, were four or five of the neighborhood children, all under 8 years old in the unpaved street or standing around their very modest homes. We stopped the van as we always did, in front of our big gates, where we always greeted the neighbors and waved to them before we opened the gates, drove through, and locked ourselves in. Over time, the neighbors seemed less wary of us, and had become marginally friendlier.

This time, however, after stopping the van, we didn't walk through the gates. Instead, Jet approached the children across street, who had no idea why this foreigner was breaking protocol and walking towards them. A few feet away from them, Jet reached into the bag she was carrying and produced a box. Inside the box were cupcakes for the children.

After asking their mothers if they could have them, Jet passed them out. I don't believe I've ever seen wider grins, especially with icing all over them.

Next, we experience the world-famous expat haven Ajijic, and see if it's all we've heard it to be.

Our First Few Days in Ajijic: “Not Too Much”

Not even Goldilocks would have a problem with Ajijic. It’s “just right” and in the middle: not too cold, and not too hot. Ajijic is not too crowded, but with enough residents to have services: there’s a Wal-Mart close by, and dozens of great restaurants, day spas, etc. Guadalajara, at 40 minutes away by car, provides an international airport, high-end shopping, culture, first rate medical care, etc. just close enough to be convenient but not too close to be an imposition of any attendant urban problems on any real part of daily Ajijic village life.



Ajijic sits at about 5,000 feet elevation, on the northwestern shore of Lake Chapala. In front of the town, is the lake, the largest in Mexico. Behind the town are steep mountains with gorgeous trees, vines, and in the rainy season, waterfalls. The elevation drops the temperature from what it would otherwise be at this latitude at sea level, and then the lake moderates everything, making it cooler in summer and warmer in winter.



Nothing is harsh and everything is balanced. I asked a Mexican man who was born in the area a series of questions, such as, “In the summer, is it hot?”, “In the high season, does it get crowded?”, and “In the rainy season, does it rain a lot?” To these and other questions, his terse but completely adequate and accurate answer, in broken but understandable English, was the same: “Not too much.”

“Not too much.” That pretty much describes Ajijic and the surrounding areas of San Juan Cosala to the west, La Floresta, San Antonio, Chula Vista, Riberas del Pilar and Chapala to the east, and all the other communities on either side and in between, which collectively are called “Lakeside.” In the morning, while in Arizona or Baja the sun would come up quickly and with a blinding burst, at Lakeside, the sun rises gently, with a gradual transition to sunlight.

In addition to being agreeable for everyone, Ajijic is like a halfway house for expats, and there are lots of expats here.

On our very first day in Ajijic, while sitting outside at Maria Isabel, a very pleasant restaurant on the malecon overlooking the lake in Ajijic next to free, adjacent parking, finishing a very good, inexpensive, and very pleasing meal, listening to enjoyable, live music, we saw three women getting into their car while holding on to small instrument cases that my wife Jet recognized right away, because Jet plays the ukulele.



“Are those ukulele cases?” Jet asked, somewhat incredulously, looking up from the French dessert crepe with exotic fruits she had ordered in central Mexico.

“Yes,” came the response. “The Ukulele Club meets every Monday from two to four. There are 20 of us in the low season and 40 in the high.”

“But I didn’t bring my ukulele,” said Jet.

“No problem,” the woman said, “we’ve got them for rent.”

How easy is that?

In Ajijic, I found that I had a bounce in my step, because it’s just so... pleasant. It’s really pretty much perfect. Every once in a while, Jet and I would consider if the temperature should be a few degrees warmer or a few degrees cooler. More or less every time, we came to the same conclusion: it’s fine just like it is.



Nothing is harsh in Ajijic. There are no rough edges; only rounded smoothness and contentment. If Goldilocks were in Ajijic, all her porridge would have been “just right.”

Like pretty much all towns in Mexico, Ajijic has a town square, or plaza. Running along the west side of that square, going north and south, is Colon Street, which is what could arguably be called the main road in Ajijic, even though it is narrow and one-way. On Colon, from the carretera (the main road that parallels the lake) to the malecon (boardwalk / park area on the lake), are only five intersecting streets, so from top to bottom, Colon can be walked comfortably in 10 minutes. While what I'll call "Greater Ajijic" extends north, past the carretera into the hills and spans east and west for a couple miles in each direction, for the most part, when people speak of "Ajijic Village" or just "the Village", they mean this smaller, central area.



We rented a home in the village of Ajijic, about a 7-minute walk from the square, which made life even easier for us. Even though there are perhaps a hundred more places we could have visited, here are just some of the places we could walk to within 10 minutes of our home that we frequented somewhat regularly:

- Two separate seamstresses Jet and I both used.
- About 20 different restaurants, including two Thai; an all you can eat weekend buffet with a French cook (Mel's); Chili Verde (great sandwiches, fried fish, etc.; right on the square); the famous Ajijic Tango (Argentinian); a restaurant with a gorgeous garden called Peacock Garden, complete with strolling peacocks; a Spanish tapas place; high end, medium end, and inexpensive Mexican. (I didn't write "cheap Mexican" because the food in all of them was good.)
- A fresh bakery, just across the carretera.
- A commercial printer where I got my business cards made.
- Dr. George, a podiatrist's office I visited twice.
- Sky Fitness, which has a great view of the lake and where I worked out regularly and Jet may have walked into once or twice.
- Dr. Memo, our dogs' vet.
- Five or six little grocery stores.
- Total Body Care Spa, a place Jet or I got manicures, pedicures, facials and massages.



- Edith’s Salon, where Jet and I got our hair cut.
- The town square, which was beautiful and relaxing, with several restaurants, and dancing on the weekends.
- The malecon.
- Ice cream shops—several traditional and one that used goat milk.
- Lots of places to buy freshly cut fruit.
- Lots of bars, some with live music.

Taking a look at the list above, you may not be impressed, because many larger cities in the US and Canada have this concentration of services within walking distance. However, Ajijic is not a large city; it is a village. Also, unlike a large city in the US or Canada that may have this all within walking distance, in Ajijic, everything was extremely reasonably priced. Some quick examples:



- One hour visit to podiatrist: 250 pesos (about US \$13)
- One hour facial: 300 pesos (less than US \$16)
- Dinner with roaming peacocks: from 90 – 130 pesos (from less than US \$5 to less than US \$7)
- Seamstress to mend a hole in a pocket of one of my shorts: 20 pesos (about US \$1)

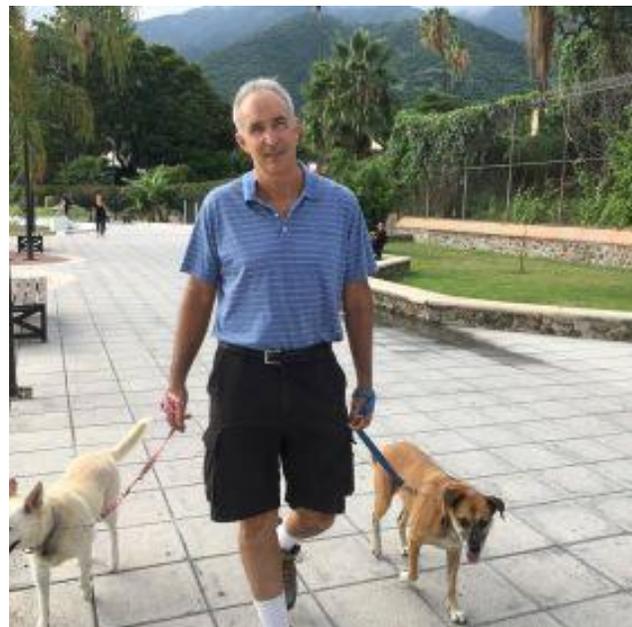
Here’s the event that set the tone for us in the Ajijic area, even though it didn’t take place exactly in Ajijic, but rather, in San Juan Cosala, about 4 miles to the west. We had just arrived in the Lakeside area and didn’t know what to expect. We were driving along the carretera and came across signs for a “tourist zone.” Standing on the dividing line between the two-way traffic the middle of the street for a couple blocks appeared several young men, each one motioning to us and other cars to visit their particular restaurant.



One of these restaurants had a sign outside that read: Mexican buffet. Since we liked Mexican buffets and, after all, we were in Mexico, we decided to try it. We parked the car on the lake side of the road, and walked over. To the right of us, not more than 50 yards away, were gorgeous, green mountains reminiscent of Hawaii. To the left, about 30 yards away, was the lake. In between, was the restaurant, called Bambu.



We walked up to the host stand, and looked down the stairs to see a series of tables with white tablecloths and umbrellas placed strategically around them, only a railing separating them from the drop-off to the lake. In the near distance on the lake, two men in a boat were net fishing. Birds flew by. One or two tables by the lake were open, so we could lay our claim to a lakeside dining experience. In the distance, past the shimmering water and net fishermen, were several looming mountains. Jazz music played softly, as waiters hurried about at a ratio of about one waiter for every two diners. There was an omelets stand, an older woman making fresh tortillas, juices, stews, gorgeous traditional dishes set in earthen pots, fresh fruits, desserts, etc., etc., etc. The patrons were all well dressed (except for me) and looked to be upper class.



Looking this scene, I figured that my “cheap Mexican restaurant” days were over. “Gringo style restaurant + ‘tourist zone’ = Gringo prices,” I thought, as I resigned myself to a much larger than usual outlay of pesos. Before asking the price, I did a quick comparison to determine what I would pay in the States and also what I would be willing to pay here at this restaurant. Lakeside dining, full buffet, Sunday morning. Humm. In the US, the cost would be \$30 or more, each.

I asked the host the price. “Cuánto cuesta?”

“Doscientos cuarenta,” came the answer. He was telling me that it was 240 pesos, or about \$12.50.

OK. Fair enough. Almost as a joke, I asked him if that price was the total for Jet and me together or just for one person: “Para dos?” I asked, smiling broadly.

“Sí,” he said, in a matter of fact tone.

I couldn’t quite believe what I was hearing.

I steadied myself. “Para dos?” I repeated, louder and clearer.

“Sí,” he repeated.

So there it was: \$6.25 each for a superb, lakeside, all you can eat, soft music playing, eating extravaganza in a “tourist zone”, including tax. Even in this great place, it was “Not too much!”



In the two months we were in Ajijic, we would visit Bambu six times in total.

Much more about life in Ajijic coming in our next stories.

How Ajijic & Lake Chapala is Like the Aunt You Always Wanted

Wouldn't it have been nice if, when you were growing up, you had an aunt who was always there when you needed her, who understood you, who always seemed to know what you needed and gave it to you, but who didn't ask for anything in return? The one who, if you got into an argument with your parents, you could go to? Who would not be judgmental, and would help to make everything right? Putting aside the lopsidedness of such a relationship, we came to view Ajijic as that aunt.

It started with a rather practical need. We had packed our big, white van with as much "stuff" as humanly possible, and this stuff was heavy, which, as we drove through the mountain passes from Puerto Vallarta to the Lake Chapala area, caused the brakes to wear down to the point that every time we approached a tope (speed bump), the van made a screeching sound loud enough to cause even nearby cows to cast a disapproving glare. Besides being noisy and a bit embarrassing, it was clear that we needed new brakes, and soon.

This, of course, presented a problem. We were less than 24 hours in a new area in a foreign country, while being in need of an honest, competent mechanic, quickly. How easy would that be? Well, it turned out that Auntie Ajijic and the local expats were more than able to smooth the way for us.

Within the period of 3 hours, when we were visiting our friend Mark O'Neill in his new home in Ajijic, I casually asked Mark's neighbor, Kenny Riemer if he knew a mechanic who fit the bill. Into his home went Kenny, and re-appeared



with a business card. Less than an hour later, I was screeching into the shop of Felipe Morales of AutoCheck, who, it turned out, had lived in the US and had [returned to Mexico because he found it to be a better place to raise his two girls](#).

Felipe is like a male version of that aunt I described. He listened to all my problems, and told me calmly that he would take care of it the next day. Here are the issues I presented to Felipe, along with the resolution to each one a day later, after Felipe worked on our van:

- When we were in Northern California, a mechanic told me I needed major work on the brakes that would cost \$1,200, plus more if he ran into anything difficult. Luckily, I decided to wait. Since then, as you might have guessed from the screeching sound, there was a new complication in that I needed the rotors turned, which would have to be done off-site, because the brakes were so large that Felipe didn't have the equipment to do it at his shop. Felipe drove to get the rotors turned in a nearby town, replaced the brakes, and told me he had no idea what the Northern California mechanic / crook was talking about.

NOTA DE REMISION

FECHA 19-Jul-16 DE 20 _____

SR.(S) Chuck

DIRECCION Ford E-350

REMITO A UD.(S) LO SIGUIENTE:

CANT.	ARTICULO	PRECIO	IMPORTE
	Front brake pads		900
	Seal		50
	Motor turning	120	240
	Labor		400
7	1/2s. engine oil	80	560
	oil filter		60
	air filter		130
	Labor		150
	Check evap system		150
TOTAL			2,640

AFRICA

- Our “check engine light” kept coming on and we couldn't completely fill the gas tank, because the gas pump would click off prematurely. I had been told in California that our van needed a \$350 part and the labor to replace it, for about \$450 total. Felipe found a loose tube and charged me 150 pesos (about US \$8) to fix it.
- A Midas shop in Tucson had changed the oil on the van. Felipe let me know that they only put in half of the oil our van needed and I had paid for, so when Felipe changed the oil, he put in the rest.
- Felipe's shop was about a half an hour drive from our first house rental in the area, in Jocotepec, so it would be a challenge for me to take a bus or taxi to pick up our van after

Felipe had worked on it for the better part of a day. “No problem”, Felipe said. Felipe and his daughter would deliver my van back to me, at no charge.

Total [amount paid to Felipe to solve all our car problems: 2,640 pesos](#), or about \$140, compared to more than \$1,700 in the US, and with free delivery and lots of pleasant conversation thrown in. I felt more than \$1,500 happier, and much more relaxed. Thank you, Felipe, and thank you, Auntie!



For several years, I had some sewing that needed to be done. The reason I never did it is that it always seemed like such a bother: find a place that did sewing, get in the car, find a place to park, drop it off, come back in a few days, etc. Well, I was in Ajijic now and with my Auntie, so those inconveniences were a thing of the past. Here’s how.

I casually asked the owner of the tiendita about a block from our rental home if she knew of anyone who could do some sewing. Of course, she did. (In Mexico, it seems like pretty much everyone knows someone who can accomplish whatever you need... and most of them seem to be relatives.) The storekeeper was the only one in her store at that time and couldn’t leave, so she gave me directions in Spanish that I understood well enough to know that the place I should go was to the right and close, but that was about it.



So out and to the right I went, searching for a store that looked like a place where sewing was done.

I didn’t see one.

All I saw was a bunch of small homes / small businesses and nothing resembling any place where the holes in the pockets of my shorts could be mended and the buttons sewn on. After

wandering around for a minute or so, I gave up and started to return home. As I turned to go, I saw running towards me a woman I had never seen before, shouting in Spanish. Evidently, she was speaking to me. After explaining in Spanish where the seamstress was in pretty much the same way the owner of the tiendita had (that I also didn't understand), she eventually realized that I wasn't dense; I just didn't understand Spanish.

Catching her breath, she motioned me to follow her. In through an unmarked, non-descript doorway we went, past some pinball machines and into an interior courtyard. To the right, inside a small home, was an older Mexican woman who was eating calmly, at least until she became startled at the approach of a large foreigner she had never seen before invading the quietude of her inner sanctum and breakfast. My new friend and guide (who's name I didn't even know) evidently explained to the woman what I needed. The older woman put down her tortilla. No problemo! I just had to show up the next day with the pants I wanted sewn, all about 5 minutes walk from our home. My only difficulty would be that I had to remember how to find it.

The next day, my new seamstress [fixed three pairs of shorts that had languished unused for several years for lack of sewing, all for 20 pesos \(about US \\$1.10\)](#) and close to no effort on my part. Problem solved, and I felt like I had three new shorts.

Some other quick examples:

- My feet had hurt me and I had some other foot issues on and off for more than a year. With the high cost of healthcare in the US, I was reluctant to see a doctor. Auntie Ajijic to the rescue! Walk six minutes to the



carretera (main road), and visit Dr. George, a modern chain of podiatrist offices. After showing one of the podiatrists my feet, he said they could fix it with a one-hour visit. Sheepishly, he said that, while the standard one-hour visit cost 250 pesos (about \$13), I had a bit of a more complex problem, so it would unfortunately have to be 300 pesos (about \$16). After taking a beat to understand what he was saying ([have a podiatrist fix my foot problems for about one tenth what it would cost in the US, all at a stroll's walk from my home](#)), I thanked the Lord and made the appointment.



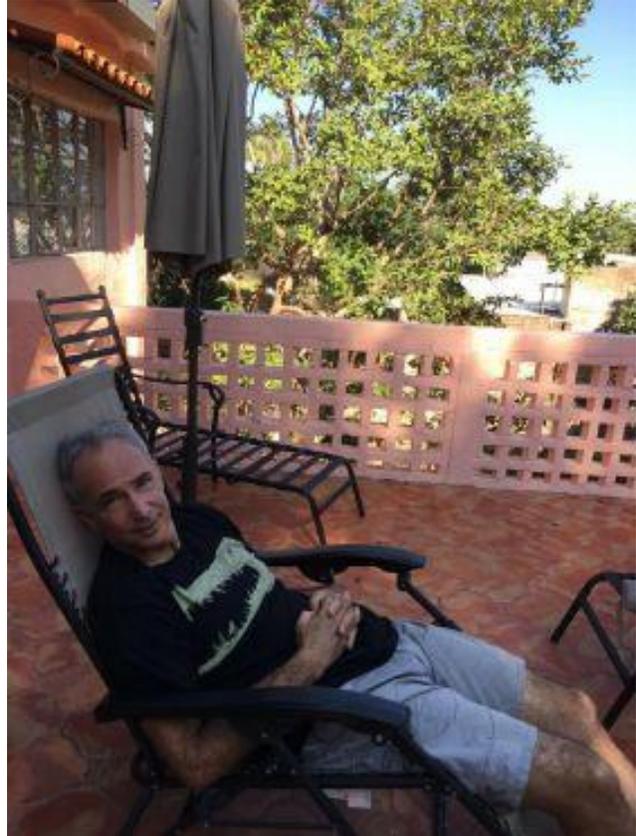
- One of our dogs hurt her leg, so after asking around, I was referred to the local vet, Dr. Memo. It was pouring rain, so I drove with my dog to the street where I was directed, to about where I was told was Dr. Memo's office. I couldn't find it, so I asked the first man I saw on the side of the road if he knew where the office of Dr. Memo was. "I'm Dr. Memo," he said. (Of course he was. This was Ajijic.) Dr. Memo showed me where to park next to his office, and immediately gave our dog a full examination. I was back on the road and headed to our house 15 minutes later.



- After getting our day-to-day needs taken care of at a hilariously low cost, it was time for some splurging, which we could now easily afford. Happily, Auntie Ajijic was ready. An eight minute walk from our home was Total Body Care, a place that, if you bought a package, provided facials for about \$16, as well as massages, manicures, and pedicures for similarly happy prices. We bought the package.

After a giddy week of getting pretty much all our immediate, seemingly intractable, some longstanding and what we thought would be expensive problems solved, it would be pleasant to have a nice brunch. Auntie Ajijic was ready.

- At about 10 AM on Sunday morning, upon opening the front gate of our rental home, we walked across the street, and within one minute, were [standing in front of the spread put out for Sunday buffet by the French chef Bernard, at Mel's](#), the restaurant owned by Bernard and his wife, Francine. In front of us was a fabulous all- you- can- eat- buffet that included European / Mexican hybrid specialties, favorite French fare, omelets made to order, and a dessert table that had everything from tasty tarts to decadent chocolate cakes. Chairs and tables were arranged around the courtyard, by the pool, and inside. The garden was fragrant and the food was delicious. The cost: 130 pesos each (about \$7). We ate so much that, after stumbling home (it was literally farther from our front gate to our front door than from our front gate to Bernard's omelet stand), my wife Jet, our two dogs and I took a long, satisfying, anxiety-free snooze.



Napping in the middle of the day? Don't worry; Auntie Ajijic said it was okay.

Ajjic, and the Livin' is Easy

If you're like me, you've got a song in your head pretty much all the time. Sometimes, you know why it's there, and sometimes, you don't. Sometimes, you don't even know where you heard the song.

That's exactly what happened to me towards the end of our stay in the Ajjic area, as I was walking back from the corner store with some pastries. If you've read [my first two stories on Ajjic and the Lake Chapala area](#), you know how I feel about it. In my head, I kept on hearing the beginning of the song from Porgy and Bess, "Summertime, and the Livin' is Easy."

Odd. Why would that song be playing in my head?

Then, it hit me.

Ajjic... and the Livin' is Easy! It's a perfect match!!



The reason is that the livin' in Ajjic is, indeed, very easy, so much so that I was able to come up with pretty much all of the parody lyrics while completing the five minute walk back to our rental home and then sharing a flakey breakfast with my wife, Jet.

Fairly quickly after that, just by asking around a little bit, I was introduced to a real musician, Paul Brier, who had written and performed professionally for several decades. This being Ajjic, of course Paul would work on our song by polishing up the lyrics, adding music and then perform it live with his band, The Great American Songbook, at The Bodega, a local expat hangout. Within a few days, three accomplished, professional musicians, Paul Brier (keyboard, vocals), Jimmy Bartow (trumpet), and Francis Dryden (drums) were soulfully vocalizing "Ajjic and the Livin' is Easy" live to a raucous, enthusiastic expat crowd. You can see [the video, "Ajjic and the Livin' is Easy" here](#). I placed the lyrics at the end of this story.

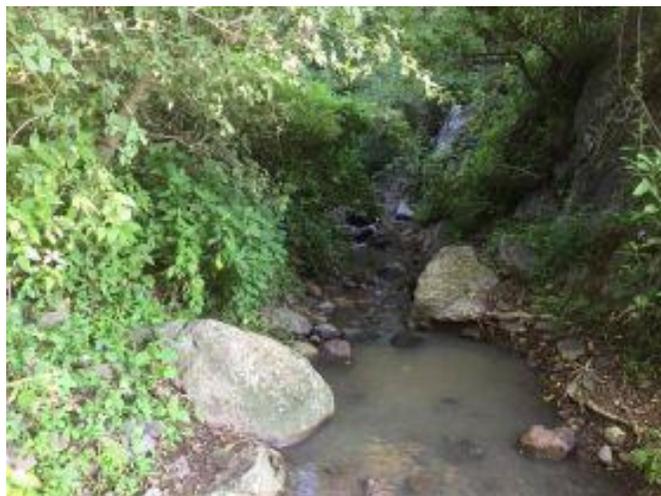


Coincidentally, in addition to music marking the end of our visit to Ajijic and the Chapala area, the beginning of it started out musically as well—at the Lake Chapala Woodstock Festival and Dance, on the very beautiful, garden grounds of the Lake Chapala Society, in Ajijic. Of all the popular expat locations we know, none have an organization as historied, comprehensive, well supported, well run and effective as the Lake Chapala Society. Upon paying a very modest membership fee, new and existing expats have access to what I'm told is the largest English library in Mexico, no charge exams for your eyes, ears and skin, you can listen to lectures, engage in workshops, attend seminars, meet with the US consulate, watch movies, etc., and most of all, be warmly welcomed into the community and made to feel at home. It's a great organization... and it's easy.



While it's true that many of the expats at Ajijic and the Lake Chapala area are older, many are not, and, judging from what we saw at the dance, irrespective of age, all know how to have a good time. The band, brought in from Guadalajara, was excellent, the food was great, and pretty much everyone participated and everyone had a good time. You can see the [Lake Chapala Woodstock Festival and Dance 2016 video here](#).

The weather is one of the primary characteristics of Ajijic that makes it so easy to live there. It's pretty much perfect. As a joke, Jet and I would sometimes try to determine whether the temperature should be warmer or colder. Almost always, the answer was the same: it's perfect as it is; we wouldn't change it one degree either way. With the windows open and the breeze coming in, it was almost like a gentle massage.



The hiking around Ajijic isn't easy for everyone, but many aspects of it were. It is difficult not to notice the verdant, tropical mountains just yards away from the town, so for someone like me who likes to hike, it

would be natural to ask for the location of the trails. The first person I asked gave me the name of the street I should walk up to join one of the trailheads, which turned out to be right next to the house we were renting.

Now that was easy.

I put on my hiking boots, walked out our gate, made a left to walk across the carretera (main road), and within 7 minutes, I was walking on a dirt trail alongside a stream in the jungle, but of course during 74 degree weather.

I was stunned by how glorious it was. The trail was impeccably maintained. As I walked past vines and tropical plants, I could smell the jungle, [not as intensely as in Nayarit](#), but pretty close. Other than hearing the gentle waters of the brook below as it meandered past smooth stones and a few fallen branches, it was silent; just as you would expect if you were surrounded by thick vegetation.

Of course, I had never been on this particular trail before and had no idea where it went. It was also a little odd to be by myself on a new trail in a new place in a new country, and in addition, it was getting dark. Would there be dangerous animals or unexpected sheer drop-offs? In the absence of information or someone to talk to, my mind wondered a bit. Would I run into marijuana growers who (at a minimum) wouldn't want me there?



I got my answer just a few moments later.

As I walked on, about 20 yards in front of me, in the middle of the trail, facing the other direction, sat one medium-sized dog. I saw him a bit before he saw me. Eventually, he noticed me, and got startled. Then, he ran towards me, barking excitedly.

I had to decide what to do.

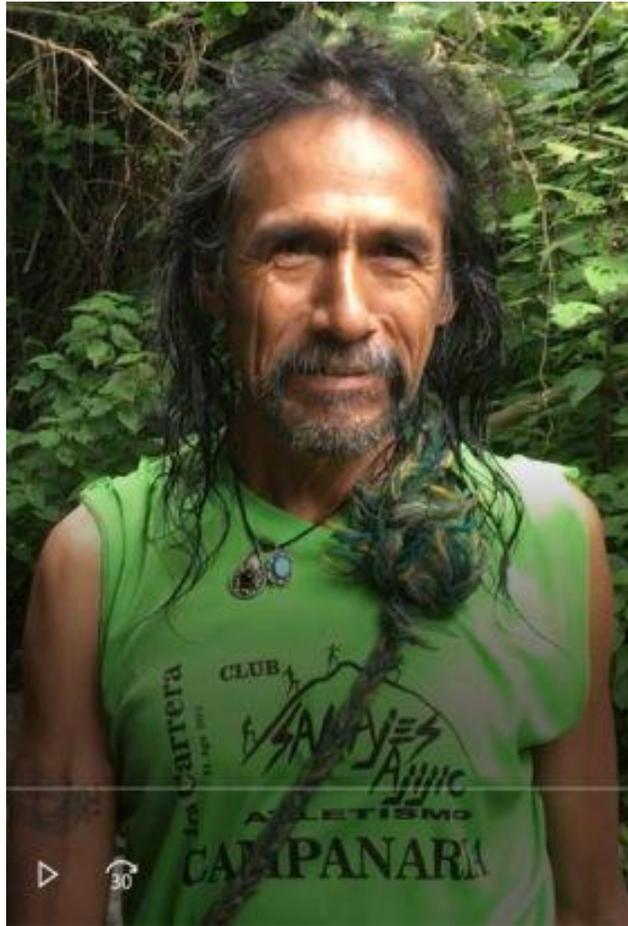
As I was deciding, I heard five or so other dogs start to bark nearby. Of course, they rushed towards me as well, barking but (good sign) not growling or baring their teeth.

As they circled me, I heard a human voice further down the trail rise above their racket. “Bienvenido!” offered the voice. Then, after a short pause, several more times, “Bienvenido! Bienvenido!” (“Bienvenido” is Spanish for “welcome”).)

The voice was coming from a slight man in his 50s with long hair and an appearance that caused me to think that he could be living in the hills with his seven or so barking dogs.

“Are your dogs friendly?” I asked from a distance, still surrounded by the dogs, in my very broken Spanish. He answered that they were, and with large, friendly arm movements, motioned me to come over. The dogs settled down.

I had run into Maurice. Maurice could not be friendlier, as he introduced himself and gave me the inside information on the best trails. He even offered to be my trail guide on a hike the next Saturday. I would speak with again Maurice many times during our few months in Ajijic. (It turned out he was one of the gardeners at the Lake Chapala Society.) [Here is the video I shot of Maurice that day.](#)



Ajijic has clubs for pretty much every interest. One of the clubs is the Ajijic Hiking Club, which has organized hikes twice a week. I went to join them on one such hike that started about a 10-minute walk from our home, right behind a doughnut shop on the carretera. Larry Laframboise and his dog Levi were our tour guides as we visited several waterfalls less than a 30-minute hike from the trailhead. It was sensational, and Larry was a great guide. [Video of our hike in the mountains and the waterfalls just above Ajijic here.](#)



The low cost of restaurants in the Ajijic area makes it so that if you don't want to cook, there is much less of a financial incentive to do so. For example, we went to the Wednesday tianguis (market) in Ajijic and for lunch, had 5 tacos total for the both Jet and me (we couldn't finish the last one) for 10 pesos for each taco, and the best aguas frescas of guava (what Mexicans call "guayaba") we had ever had, for 15 pesos. Total: 65 pesos (about \$3.50) for both of us.

This particular taco stand had several long tables for their patrons, with sets of six or seven different salsas and condiments placed every few feet. Directly across from us, an expat arrived and sat down with a bag of three tacos he had just purchased. Very methodically, almost as one would expect to see a religious ritual performed, he opened up each taco and placed inside each one a precise amount of his personal formula of the salsas and condiments. He would not be hurried; it may have taken five minutes as we watched him. Before he bit into the first object of his desire, he told us that this was his favorite place and he looks forward to coming each Wednesday. He then heard me tell Jet, that at the price of 10 pesos per taco, we could come here every Wednesday and both eat as much as we liked. All three of us laughed uproariously, and then bit into our respective unique creations.



The livin' in Ajijic is so easy that I believe it affects the culture (or perhaps it's the other way around). For example, here's the conversation I had in broken Spanish with the woman who did the [sewing on my shorts](#).

"Cuándo estará listo? (When will it be ready?)

"De la tarde" (In the afternoon.)

"A qué hora?" (At what time?)

"De la tarde."



“Sí, entiendo, pero a qué hora de la tarde.” (Yes, I understand, but at what time during the afternoon?)

“De la tarde.”

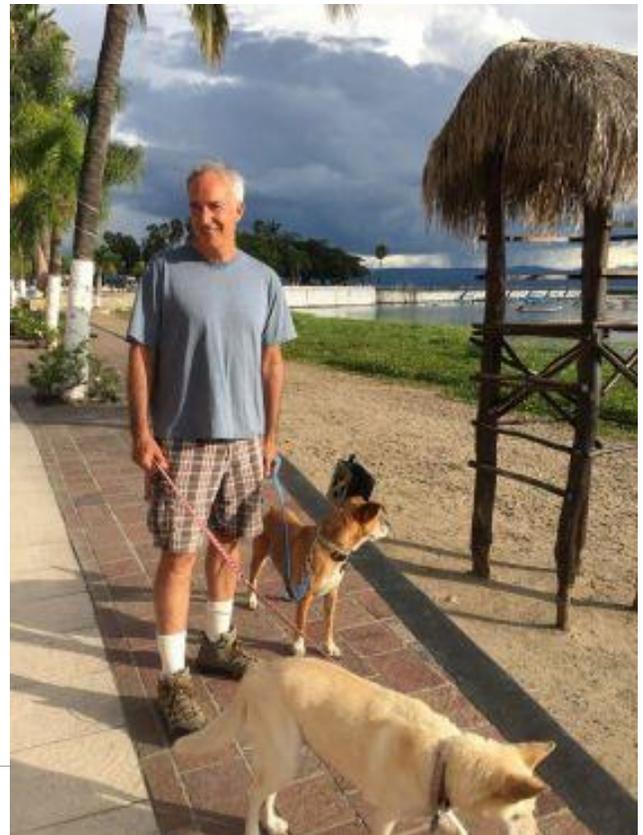
It was impossible to get a specific time from her. I had the same issue at the local grocery store when I asked when the fresh rolls would be delivered. The answer? You guessed it: “De la mañana.”

Even though it would not be possible to get specific times, we absolutely loved how easy it was to get things done and how cheap it was (see previous article, [“How Ajijic & Lake Chapala is Like the Aunt You Always Wanted”](#)). After immersion in this happy set of circumstances for a few months, we started to think “Mexican style.” As an example of an event that could trigger “Mexican thinking,” we needed to get some upholstery repaired on our van. In the States, it would probably cost around \$100 or more, and create lots of logistical issues. In Ajijic, I pulled into the local upholstery store about a two-minute drive from our rental, and asked them how much they would charge. “300 pesos (about \$16),” came the reply. “We’ll take it out of your van now and have it ready for you tomorrow.”

After banging into my head how easy this was, it occurred to me that, instead of searching everywhere for dog cushies and eventually having to buy an overpriced version at the local Wal-Mart (yes, they have one), we could just have dog cushies handmade for a much lower price and with much less hassle.

Now that’s easy.

After more than two months in the Ajijic area, it was time to bid farewell to our happy, easy home, and head 215 miles east, to the famous expat city of San Miguel de Allende. We’ll tell you about that next.



“Ajijic, and the Livin’ is Easy”

(Sung to the tune of "Summertime", from Porgy and Bess.)

Ajjic, and the livin' is easy,
Mountains high, and the lake is below.
8 or 9 pesos is what you'll pay for a taco.
(At the current exchange rate, that's 46 cents.)
So, rush, all you expats, get 'em while they're hot.

The weather is pretty much perfect,
No need for a "yacket"*,
But you can wear one if you like.
(Just in case you want to be in style,)
You can walk pretty much everywhere,
And you have any problems, the locals will be there.

You can afford a good housekeeper,
The facials are cheap, and your dishes are done.
If you want to go shopping, a Wal-Mart is near by,
It's hard to be stressed out, even if you try.

*"yacket" is the way someone with a Mexican accent would pronounce "jacket."

Music by Paul Brier and The Great American Songbook—Paul Brier, Jimmy Bartow, and Francis Dryden

Lyrics by Chuck Bolotin and Paul Brier

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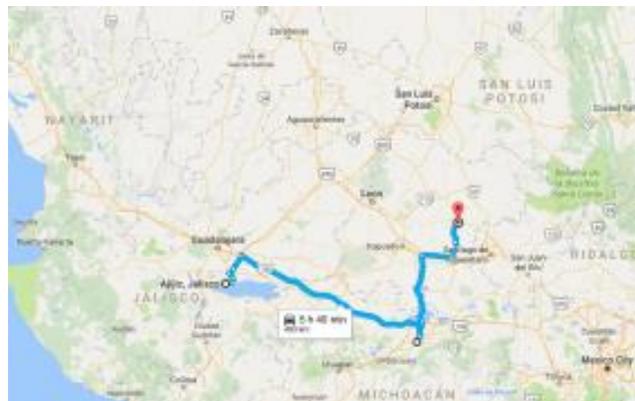
Driving from Ajijic and Arriving in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico: Cornfields, Transcendence, and a Nice, Planned Housing Development

As we left the tropical splendor of the Ajijic area and drove generally east, it didn't take long to be surrounded by farmland. Gently rolling hills dotted with trees reminiscent of Northern California chaparral lightly embraced vast, shallow valleys covered mainly with immense cornfields.



Consistent with a recurring theme for much of our road trip through Mexico, what we encountered on our drive from Ajijic through the Central Mexican Highlands was completely different than what you would expect when you imagine driving through Mexico-- the roads were good, the traffic was light, the temperature was in the high 60s to low 70s, and there were very few people anywhere to be seen. White, puffy clouds bejeweled the sky. Every once in a while, after literally miles of almost uninterrupted fields, we would see a small village on a nearby hill, but that was pretty much it. Other than that, from what we could tell, most of this part of central Mexico is essentially empty. There are an awful lot of incipient tortillas out there.

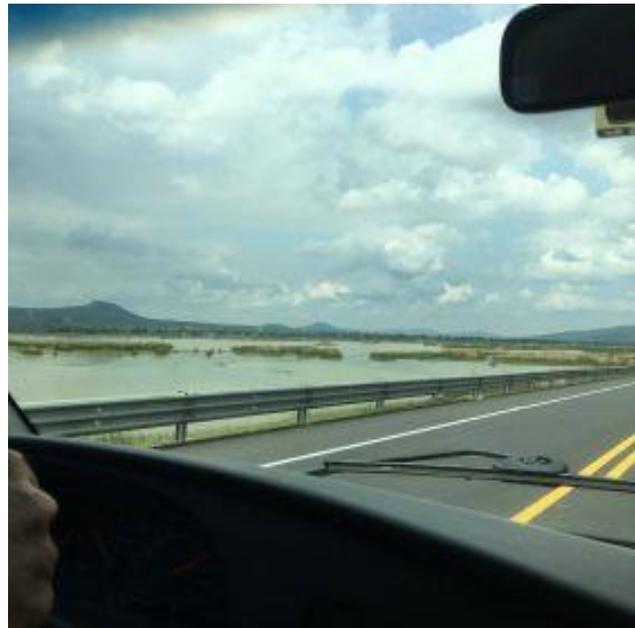
Several people recommended to us to visit Morelia along the way, which is why, on the nearby map, you'll see an area where we drove almost due south for a short while, and then doubled back to the north to continue our route to San Miguel de Allende. At the bottom of that foray is the city of Morelia. We were told to visit the downtown area, which would amaze us with its high-end shopping and sophisticated mien.



From what we could tell, it did have some tony shops, refined eateries and nice architecture to enjoy, but it was also filled with cars; lots of cars, and these cars were going very slowly, in extremely heavy traffic. As people walking by easily passed us and we crawled along for roughly half an hour in traffic sludge, we duly noted the refined shopping from the seats of our

van, then turned north and left as quickly as we could, which, because of the traffic, was not very quickly at all.

Morelia has a city center it would be better to visit on foot, after parking or being dropped off somewhere else or perhaps having a residence in the middle of it. It was a 2-½ hour detour we wouldn't do again. Once again returning to our main travel arc basically north and east, we were happily reunited with the gently rolling, open fields where we could breathe easily on open roads, edged with vast harvests of corn and marshlands with flocks of birds picnicking in the shallow water.



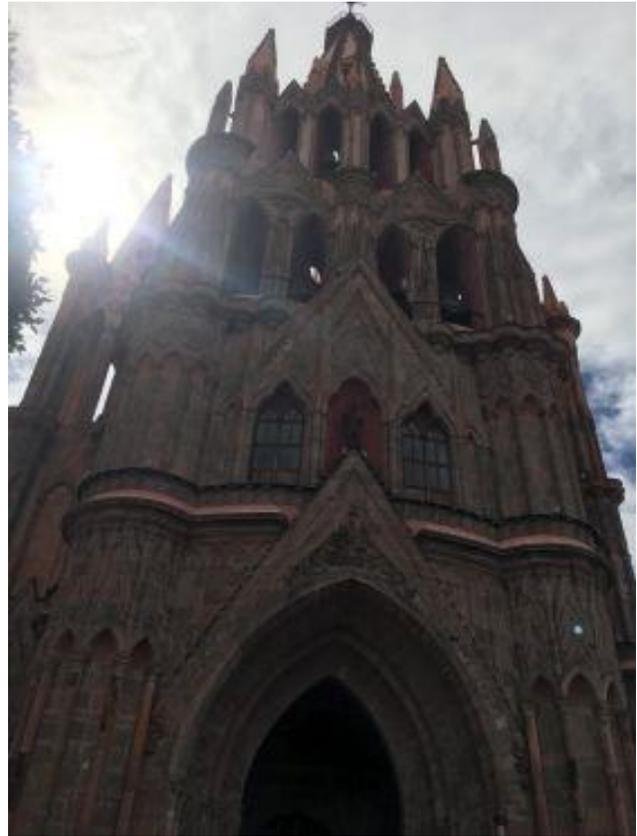
A few hours later, we approached San Miguel de Allende. Even though it is only 170 miles as the crow flies from Ajijic, driving to San Miguel de Allende was like leaving in September and arriving in November. The air was markedly drier, crisper and cooler, and the terrain and foliage took on the look of a high desert. Gone was much of the tropical feel we had become so accustomed to. The mountains became rounder and browner, the large leafed trees were absent and replaced by scrub, and the density of vegetation decreased.

If you're like me, when you've looked forward to visiting a place and studied and thought about it for a while, you have some preconceived notions of how it will actually be when you're really, finally there. This is especially true of any place that has a famous landmark uniquely associated with it. And then, when you finally see that landmark for yourself, you have to take a beat to appreciate the entire experience, including the thankfulness you feel for seeing it in person.



I took that beat when, after a bend in the road, I first laid eyes on the famous Parroquia of San Miguel de Allende. As we completed the final part of our journey that day, coming in from the west around sunset, it appeared, centered in the town, several miles away. Even from that distance, the Parroquia of San Miguel de Allende conjures up wonder and admiration for the indigenous bricklayer and self-taught architect Zeferino Gutierrez who is credited with designing the look that, more than 100 years later, we can all enjoy and be inspired by.

One of the things I have enjoyed most during our road trip is visiting the churches and attached town squares that are part of pretty much every Mexican city, town or village, irrespective of how few the inhabitants or how humble their resources. To me, these areas are testimonials to the aspirations of the people of that area, of their yearning and their very hard work and contribution of time and treasure to build something beautiful and lasting as a commemoration of their civic life and pride that will exist long after they are gone. Regarding the churches themselves, I would assume that one of the objectives of those who designed, funded and built the colonial churches of Mexico, or churches in any place, at any time, is to evoke a feeling of transcendence, of being closer to the heavens, and to ascend spiritually from the profane to the holy. That, they have done with the Parroquia de San Miguel Allende. It is a work of art.



One of the objectives of our road trip is to experience firsthand the different ways expats live abroad. Consistent with this objective, we checked into Los Labradores, a planned, gated community complete with guards at the entrance and located in the countryside (what the locals would call the “campo”), about a 15-minute drive from San Miguel de Allende centro.

Everything was very nice, very clean and very orderly. The architecture of domes, arches and miradors evoked the style found in the famous and iconic city center. There were several thermal water fed pools, a hotel, perfectly landscaped and varied gardens, smaller villas encircling several manmade ponds, fountains and aqueduct waterfalls, and areas with larger homes facing larger manmade ponds with bridges, spillways and streams. (You can see a video of some of the [pools in Rancho Los Labradores here.](#))



There was a restaurant on-site as well as a gym and a tennis court. There were even rooms to create your artwork, a meeting room, and stables for your horses. It’s exactly what you would expect from a very well thought out and very well executed planned community.

Of course, I have met more than a few expats who would recoil in horror at the prospect of living in a planned, gated community in Mexico.

“What’s the point of leaving the US?” they would ask.

“Why go to Mexico to live with a bunch of Gringos?” another may ask theoretically, their opinion based on incorrect information.

“You’re walling yourself off from the whole Mexican experience!” yet a third may yell in open disgust.

Even in the face of all this, we have a confession to make: we liked it.

At least in the case of Los Labradores, living in a planned community in Mexico is no more “walling yourself off” from Mexicans and Mexican culture than living in a planned community in the US is walling yourself off from Americans and American culture. A planned community is just different Mexicans / Americans and a slightly different Mexican / American culture.

The people we met there (expats and Mexicans alike) said that, though they wanted to enjoy what San Miguel de Allende had to offer, they wanted to do so from a place that was less noisy, aromatic, and crowded with people and traffic.

And let’s be honest. Everything in Los Labradores worked pretty much all the time, and when it didn’t, the management company was there to fix it. It was quiet, the trash was picked up, and everyone had beautiful homes and grounds. The gardens were trimmed and the birds sang.

What’s not to like?

As to the charge that Los Labradores didn’t afford the “real” Mexican experience, this isn’t true, unless by “real Mexican experience” you mean the experience of living amongst the lower socio-economic classes, most of whom, I would assume, would jump at the chance to live



in a planned development and escape their own "real" experience. The owners of Los Labradores are Mexican, as was our next-door neighbor and the people across the street. All in all, about half or more of our neighbors were Mexicans. They were just upper middle-class or wealthy Mexicans, all who enjoyed living in a planned community, just like there are many upper middle-class Americans in the US who like their US planned communities. In addition, in the five weeks we stayed at Los Labradores, we have never met a more kind, interesting, thoughtful group of people, expats and Mexicans alike.

And, we were able to visit San Miguel de Allende centro and the surrounding areas very easily. More about what it's like to be in and experience the famous expat destination of San Miguel de Allende centro in the next article.

San Miguel de Allende: A Colonial, Artsy Town Rich In Culture, Pageantry and Expats

When starting from where we stayed in our planned community in the agricultural countryside (“campo”), we would drive into the center (centro) of San Miguel de Allende in one of two ways, depending on whether we wanted to enter from the north or from the southwest.

If we wanted to visit from the north, we would turn directly onto Highway 51, which from the gates of where we were staying at Los Labradores is a modern two-lane highway with cars, trucks and busses passing each in very dangerous fashion on a very modern, asphalt-paved highway at more than 80 miles per hour. At another planned community called Ventanas de San Miguel (this one, complete with its own golf course), we would continue straight, then make a gentle turn to the right, go over a bridge, and join these very same vehicles suddenly rambling along at the more traditional 5 miles per hour on cobblestone roads.

If we wanted to enter from the southwest, we would do so via a roundabout next to a modern, very large grocery store called La Comer, which is completely at visual odds with what we would see as we exited the roundabout and ascended up the hill, on cobblestone roads and heavy pedestrian traffic, towards San Miguel de Allende’s iconic and otherworldly parish cathedral: the Parroquia.



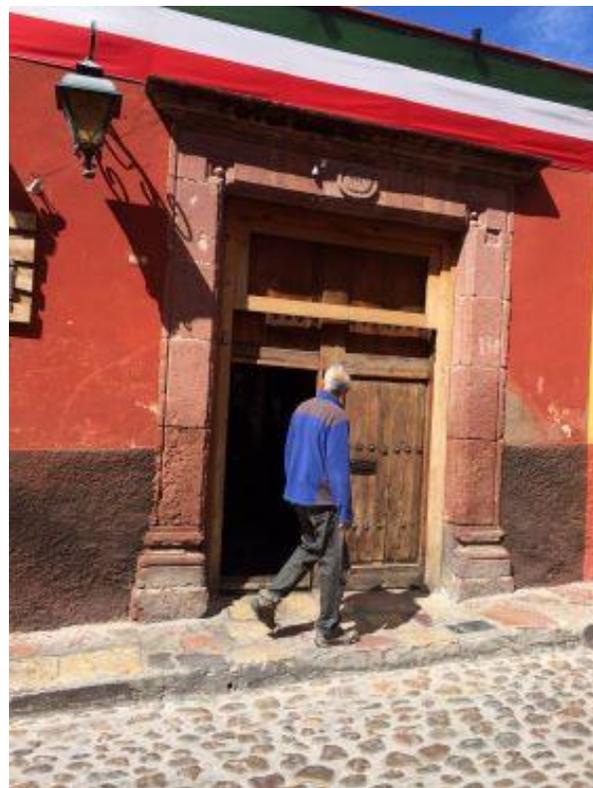
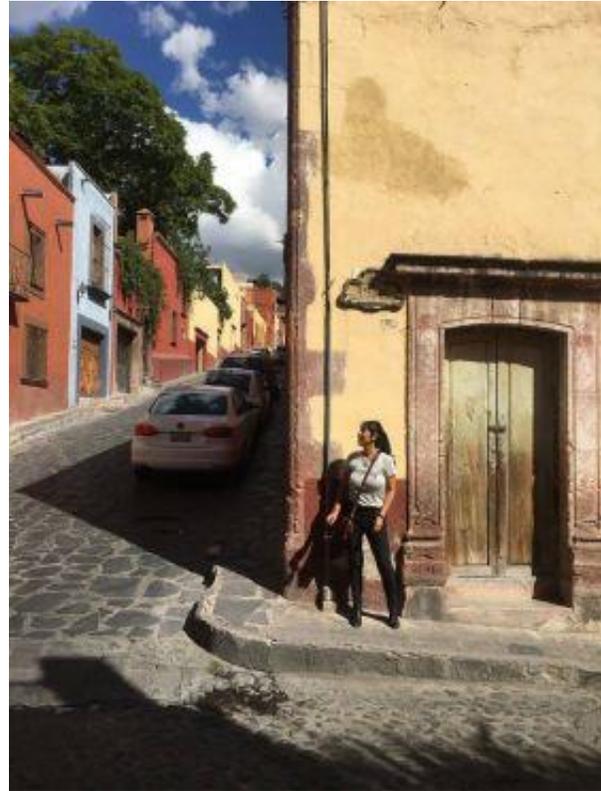
Relatively small and compact, if you live in centro or near the city center of San Miguel de Allende, you really don’t need a car, and you may not want one. If it’s not a holiday (but there are lots of holidays) you can usually find a public parking lot, and the price to park is a reasonable 20 pesos (US \$1) per hour. Other than these few lots, however, there are precious few places to park on the narrow, often one-way cobblestone streets, taxis are everywhere, and for many purposes, it would be more trouble to use a car than just to walk or hail a taxi. There are no traffic signals in San Miguel de Allende. For one reason, traffic moves too slowly to require any.

Visiting San Miguel de Allende is like experiencing a European colonial town without ever leaving the Central Mexican Highlands. As you increasingly move towards the city center, San Miguel de Allende’s street visible neoclassical colonial architecture is increasingly controlled /

protected by the government. There are no buildings tall enough to obscure the Parroquia, and you are not allowed to build or remodel in just any type of architectural style you would like. You see balconies and beautifully hand carved casings for windows and doors, mostly in stone.

The mostly stone construction has a heavy, sturdy, block-like feel, which gives you the impression that it has been there for many generations before us and will continue to be there long after we're all gone. Architectural and artistic details are everywhere, and there are enough trees, vines and flowers visible mostly from inner courtyards to create an overall park-like feel. The color palate rarely deviated from desert / earth tones seen in fall leaves: ochre, adobe, rust, and burnt orange. While we were told that McDonald's was run out of town, San Miguel de Allende does have a Starbucks, right on the corner of the Parroquia and the central Jardin ("garden"; central square), but it blends in beautifully and is tastefully done.

As you walk through the town of San Miguel de Allende, you will see homes that have walls right up against the sidewalk with a single, non-descript door and some with a gate for a vehicle. If you are lucky enough to be walking by as the door or gate is open, you may catch a glimpse of a ruin, you may see an elegant courtyard with perfectly manicured bushes, a koi pond and a home worthy of architectural digest, or you may glimpse a perfectly reconstructed colonial gem. If it's a hotel, you may find yourself admiring a \$40,000 chandelier, flanked by statuary, high-end, indirect lighting and marble. Or, you may not; you may see the home of an average local family. You never know what's behind the doors in San Miguel de Allende. (In this video, Jet Metier takes us on a [tour of a San Miguel de Allende residential street](#).)



You could say that art is in the genes of the expat community of San Miguel de Allende, and that these genes have largely fashioned San Miguel de Allende into what it is today, for Mexicans and foreigners alike. San Miguel de Allende has a modern history rooted in the arts and intertwined with the arrival of larger groups of Americans.

Just prior to World War II, when some prominent Americans established a few art schools in the area, San Miguel de Allende was an obscure, sparsely populated and rarely visited, mostly uncelebrated town. After World War II, the US instituted the GI Bill, which, among other things, would pay for school for qualified servicemen and servicewomen. Somehow, the schools in San Miguel de Allende qualified to accept GI Bill tuition reimbursement. As servicemen and servicewomen moved to San Miguel de Allende to study art, many never left. Thus



was born the larger foundation of the foreigner art community in this Central Mexican Highland town, which led to a wholesale revival of what was just prior, a small, insignificant and somewhat remote outpost. Much more recently, San Miguel de Allende has been re-discovered by wealthy Mexicans as an architectural and cultural gem and to a large extent, as a prized and much coveted location for destination weddings, several of which we caught glimpses of just while walking around.

San Miguel de Allende is a town of processions and celebrations, and if you would like, you can usually join in. We witnessed several at the Jardin in front of the Parroquia, and others either spontaneous or planned. When walking back to our parking spot one day, we happened across Parque Juarez, which is less than a 10-minute walk from centro. Amongst the sounds of kids playing on the playground equipment, we could hear live music. Curious, as we moved towards it, we saw an entire strolling band, complete with at least four guitars, a tambourine, drums, what I assume was an



accordion, singing, masked paraders and dancing women made up as “catrinas” (traditional outfit for Dia de Muertos – Day of the Dead). It was all great fun, made even more so by the fact that we had just run into it. This spontaneity and the wonder of these types of happenstance celebrations occur all the time in San Miguel de Allende. Not only do you never know what’s behind any particular door, but you also don’t know what celebration you’ll see or

even be part of next. (You can see the video of this [Dia de Muertos / Day of the Dead celebration in San Miguel de Allende here.](#))

The Parque Juarez is just a few minutes walk from the Rosewood hotel, which is in one of the higher end sections of San Miguel de Allende. The inside of the hotel is stately and elegant, and maintains the colonial feel of the area. The staff is very attentive, and they have a rooftop restaurant with a great view of the city, especially at sunset, which we experienced firsthand. If you want a drink there to celebrate, it will set you back about US \$10.

As opposed to most other places in Mexico, you can get your organic, vegan, non-GMO, free range, imported food in San Miguel de Allende. When we were there, there was even a decent variety of Jewish High Holiday foods available for purchase. You can get all this stuff; it'll just cost you. As one indication of how pervasive is the American influence in San Miguel de Allende, you can very easily use TripAdvisor to decide which restaurant to visit, complete with the usual quantity of reviews, in English. You can eat Vietnamese food on a rooftop garden, like we did. (TripAdvisor said it was good, and it was.)



By Mexican standards, San Miguel de Allende is an expensive place, and it would be fair to say that living there would be more expensive than many average US cities. However, not all areas of San Miguel are, by Mexican standards, extremely expensive. There are enclaves a 10 – 15 minute walk to centro that are more middle-class neighborhoods, with moderately priced restaurants.

Also, if you look around, not everything is expensive. My wife, Jet ate at an all you can eat buffet (certainly one of her favorite styles) about two blocks from the Parroquia for 75 pesos (about US \$3.50) for lunch, and liked it a lot. Not to be outdone, I found a gorditas restaurant also about two blocks from the Jardin. Utilizing masterful marketing, they had their food facing the street, pretty much butt up against the sidewalk and impossible to miss, so I was intrigued and walked in.

Two gorditas (more than enough), for 20 pesos (\$1) each, and a huge drink for 15 pesos (75 cents). Feeling full and especially satisfied with my \$2.75 lunch experience, I purchased the meal an elderly, poorer Mexican woman with a cane who sat at a table across the way and who

kept smiling at me who had already ordered but not yet paid. Cost to be a hero for an afternoon—30 pesos (\$1.50). You can have this experience or Jet's all you can eat extravaganza, or walk a few blocks and go to the top of the Rosewood Hotel for a solitary cocktail and rooftop view of the town—for \$10. (Guacamole was probably around \$4 or \$5; I don't remember.)

If you really love San Miguel de Allende, you can manage to live there on a modest budget. We met many single women living in San Miguel de Allende, and even with the relatively higher costs, it is quite possible to live inexpensively. For example, you could rent a one bedroom apartment right near centro, not have a car, have very limited utility expenses and very limited healthcare expenses. The rest is left over to enjoy the restaurants, art galleries and general feel of life in a famous colonial city with lots of restaurants and art galleries, alive with colorful Mexican pageantry.

Even though there are LOTS of English-speaking foreigners, San Miguel de Allende is still a Mexican town. In addition to the foreign visitors, there are busloads of Mexican tourists, and you can still hear and see Mexican schoolchildren in their uniforms playing right next to the Parroquia after school lets out.

We were in San Miguel de Allende during Dia de Muertos. Occurring at roughly the same time as Halloween, there are a few similarities. However, in many other ways, Dia de Muertos is completely different. In high-level summary, it is a day to remember those who have passed. In public spaces and in private homes, we saw many altars dedicated to remembrance of loved who were no longer with us. On or around these highly decorated altars were many times a picture of the



deceased, along with some of their favorite items; perhaps even food.

Situated next to what looks like a standard, north of the border park is a series of buildings called the Fabrica Aurora, a factory that was converted into several high-end retail stores. It is so beautifully and tastefully done that I thought it was a museum. Confused and a little bit annoyed at the price tags on all these wonderful pieces of artwork at this great new museum I thought I was attending, I asked what I thought was a docent but who turned out to be a retail clerk why so many items were for sale. Even for someone like me, who hates to shop, the Fabrica Aurora is a great place to visit and even spend an entire day. (Video of Jet Metier describing a [Dia de Muertos / Day of the Dead memorial inside the Fabrica Aurora here.](#))

On this particular day, coming up upon Dia de Muertos, at the entrance to the Fabrica Aurora, they had created a memorial, complete with pictures, favorite drinks, flowers, food, and other items, of artists and patrons who had recently passed. I spoke with several people who had stopped to give proper reverence and to remember, and who knew the people being memorialized. It was a beautiful way to connect the past of this artsy city with its present and future.



In the next story, we compare San Miguel de Allende with Ajijic.

French Fries or Foie Gras? Comparing the Famous Expat Locations Ajijic and San Miguel de Allende

We have been asked several times to compare the lifestyle of the very well known and established expat locations San Miguel de Allende with Ajijic, both in the Mexican Highlands. Let's start with what they have in common:

“Gringolandia,” Yes, But With Plenty of Local Flavor

While no reliable figures are available, a reasonable guess is that Ajijic and San Miguel de Allende may each have somewhere around 10,000 or so expats in the high season. However, just because there are lots of expats doesn't mean you can't find any Mexicans living in the area. Quite the contrary! While there are some higher concentrations of expats, in both areas, expats are very much the minority amongst the locals, and both areas have a good-sized population of wealthier Mexicans who have second homes there.



Surf's Not Up, Dude

Neither San Miguel de Allende nor Ajijic are located near the beach. While this is great news if you're afraid of bad news if you're diver or surfer. By de Allende is eight away from the while Ajijic is a bit Ajijic, you can hang Puerto Vallarta in and within three hours, you could be snorkeling in Manzanillo, where Dudley Moore pursued Bo Derrick in “10.”



vs.



hurricanes, it's an avid scuba car, San Miguel to nine hours nearest beach, closer. From ten in about five hours

It's Really Cool to be in the Mountains

Ajijic is at about 5,000 feet elevation, while San Miguel de Allende is a bit higher, at around 5,700 feet. All other things being equal, the higher the elevation, the lower the temperature. So on a day when you could be sweating in a 90+ degrees Fahrenheit day at the beach, at that same moment, in San Miguel de Allende or Ajijic, you could be walking your dog or playing tennis at an extremely comfortable 75 degrees. This is one of the main selling points of both areas.



The additional advantage of Ajijic is that it is on the shore of the largest lake in Mexico, Lake Chapala, which further moderates the temperatures. While San Miguel de Allende has extremely good weather, one can easily argue that the weather in Ajijic is even better on account of the lake, which will tend to make it less cold in the winters and at night, and less warm in the summers and during the day. Believe me; it's true. After being a while in Ajijic, you'll laugh (or perhaps even titter with unabashed glee) at the consistency of the temperatures, all year round. Ajijic will also tend to be less dry than San Miguel de Allende, without being humid.

A Short Diversion With a Riddle, Sprinkled With Revenge

Before wrapping up what is the same or similar between San Miguel de Allende and Ajijic, here's a riddle:

When does five equal zero?

In both places, five equals zero about 90% of the time when it's the five circles on your smart phone with Moviestar cellular service that tells you that you have the highest level of cell phone connectivity, when you absolutely cannot complete a call. If you want your phone to work in either place, don't use Moviestar.



Now that I've gotten that off my chest, here's where Ajijic and San Miguel de Allende differ.

Did We Just Pass It?

After reading and hearing so much about Ajijic, we were extremely excited about going there. Imagine our disappointment on our first trip when, in total amazement, we realized we had driven right through the Ajijic area on the carretera (main road) without even knowing it and had to turn around and try again. And its not that we weren't looking-- we were!

There is really no landmark or really even a distinctive sign marking Ajijic. The same thing is definitely not true of San Miguel de Allende. Even from several miles away, the iconic and almost fairyland-like Parroquia (in this case, a cathedral) elegantly and gracefully presides over the entire area, visible from miles away, gracing Centro San Miguel de Allende and all the surroundings, it's various shades of pink seemingly ascending to the heavens, with its towers in a shape reminiscent of a sand castle. Does Ajijic have anything like that? Not really. In Ajijic, it's gorgeous Lake Chapala, impressive tropical hills and a magnificent view of what looks to be an extinct volcano on the other side of the lake.



In San Miguel de Allende, the focal point is the Parroquia, with glamor and sophistication increasing in intensity in a roughly concentric pattern as you approach the singularity. In Ajijic, one tends to focus on the lake and very beautiful natural surroundings throughout the many dispersed communities, which, collectively, the locals call "Lakeside."

Circles or Rectangles / Up and Down or Sideways?

While San Miguel de Allende is laid out in a circle with a city center, Ajijic is more of an amorphous and jagged rectangle. On one approach into San Miguel de Allende, just over the bridge, you are greeted with a beautiful, upscale, gated residential development, integrated



into the core of the city. In Ajijic, when you arrive down Colon Street (which is one way and very narrow), you find small shops and nothing obvious to compare to the gated splendor of San Miguel de Allende in the central area.

As mentioned above, there is nothing obvious to even let you know you have arrived in Ajijic, other than a very peaceful plaza two blocks in, and then, three small blocks later, it's over—you've dead-ended into the malecon along the lake. Along the way, you'll find little shops and many very good, very inexpensive restaurants with colorful, mostly humble storefronts. Any gated communities in Ajijic tend to be on the mountain side of the carretera and are generally built horizontally, as opposed to the more urban (and urbane) vertical feel you get while in San Miguel de Allende. Here's a [video of a residential street in San Miguel de Allende](#).



Eva Gabor or Eddie Albert?

For the most part, while Ajijic is definitely moving in the direction of San Miguel de Allende, San Miguel de Allende is higher end and more sophisticated than Ajijic. The restaurants are tonier, and the buildings have more detailed and expensive casings around their doors, windows and columns. While Ajijic is for the most part, “meat and potatoes”, San Miguel de Allende is for the most part “brie and a finely aged merlot.”



Joshua Trees and Cactus or Palm Trees and Waterfalls?

While the weather and foliage in Ajijic has rounded, gentle edges, San Miguel de Allende is starker. Ajijic has the largest lake in Mexico to moderate its temperature, while San Miguel does not, so San Miguel is slightly hotter in the day and slightly colder at night than Ajijic. While the mountains in Ajijic are reminiscent of the tropics, the terrain in San Miguel de Allende is more reminiscent of the pampas in Argentina or the drier areas of Southern California. You can feel the sun and the cold in San Miguel more than in Ajijic because of the drier air. However, this same dry air can make the sunrises and sunsets in San Miguel de Allende pretty spectacular, while, in Ajijic, they are more muted and blend into the lake like an impressionistic painting.

Would You Like a Starbucks With That Extra Zero?

While very few homes in the Ajijic area are priced at over \$1 million, it is not unusual at all to hear people in San Miguel de Allende talk about prices of homes starting with the phrase “one point” or even “two point,” especially towards the center of the city... not too far from the Parroquia... and Starbucks.

To be fair, San Miguel de Allende does have much more affordable housing away from the exact centro but still walking distance to that triple venti, half sweet, non-fat, caramel macchiato, if you’re in pretty good shape. Ajijic doesn’t have a Starbucks, but it does have fresh coffee beans trucked in from Veracruz and sold from the back of that truck right on the carretera.



The Lake Chapala Society Rocks!

While both Ajijic and San Miguel de Allende have well-developed expat organizations, Ajijic’s Lake Chapala Society is in a class of its own. In the dozens of expat locations we cover in five countries, none are the equal of the Lake Chapala Society. In this one place, you can socialize with other expats; get answers to your questions; get your eyes, skin and ears examined; meet the US consulate; go to dances like the [Lake Chapala Society Woodstock Festival \(video\)](#); play cards; hear lectures; etc., etc., etc. It is a great help to anyone moving into the area and a great center of expat life.

Not Quite Bali Hai, But a Reasonable Facsimile

People will tell you that you can go hiking around San Miguel de Allende, but it really doesn’t compare to Ajijic, because the hiking and mountains of Ajijic are both fantastic. While San Miguel de Allende has high desert rolling



hills, Ajijic has towering mountains graced with tropical foliage and waterfalls in the rainy season right off the lake, and volcanoes in the distance. [While in Ajijic, I hiked several times literally minutes from my front door \(video\)](#), immediately encountered a stream, and within 15 minutes, I was enjoying a waterfall. While this is common in Ajijic, there is nothing like this verdant paradise in the San Miguel de Allende area.

Look at This! (Or Not)

An expat who moved from Ajijic to San Miguel de Allende told us that the reason he moved was that, when he had visitors from the States, there was very little to take them to see or do in Ajijic, while in San Miguel de Allende, there was more. I believe this is a fair observation... although not necessarily a damning one for Ajijic. San Miguel de Allende is definitely more impressive and showier. Whether this is good or bad depends on your perspective.

[Here's a video of a procession, complete with music and dancing, we just happened upon while in San Miguel de Allende.](#)



High Roller or Low Baller?

The prices in Ajijic tend to be lower; many times, much lower. While if you search for it, you can find some bargains in San Miguel de Allende and the prices are definitely lower than most (but not all) places in the US, the prices in San Miguel de Allende tend to be higher than in Ajijic. This is especially true with housing, and of course, those tony restaurants. Ajijic is very noticeably less expensive overall, even for the same quality and experience.

[Here's a video of a Sunday brunch for less than \\$7 in Ajijic.](#)



Serenity or Nightlife and Chic Gallery Openings?

Ajijic has the lake and surroundings, which can be extremely beautiful and relaxing, and give off a vibe of peace, while San Miguel de Allende has nothing like it. For Ajijic, think: “tranquilo”... unless you are looking for a restaurant at 8 PM, in which case, you may get a bit agitated, because there are very, very few open. Ajijic has a slower and easier pace of life than San Miguel de Allende. Ajijic is a town, while San Miguel de Allende is a small city, complete with city traffic, more congestion, more activity and more excitement.

[Here's a video of a parody song we made up about Ajijic that was played at a local restaurant-- "Ajijic... and the Livin' is Easy".](#)



Which is best for you? While I’m intentionally overstating the case here and above in order to draw a contrast, it really comes down to this: San Francisco or the suburbs? Imported caviar or a great BLT? Leased BMW 3 Series or paid for 7 year-old Ford F-150 truck? I could go on, but you get the picture.

The Road from San Miguel de Allende to Puebla: Undiminished Anticipation and an Unexpected Oasis

A fine mist began to fall in [San Miguel de Allende](#) on a cool November morning as we maneuvered our fully packed, big white van on a familiar cobblestone road in Los Labradores, up to the smiling guards we had come to know by name. The gate was raised and through it we went, returning our protectors' well wishes and hearty waves in kind. Onto the highway, we turned east, to places we had never been.

We were six months into our [Mexico road trip](#), with our initial experiences and adventures now behind us. As a result of our relative success, our most basic pre-trip fears and anxieties had been greatly diminished:

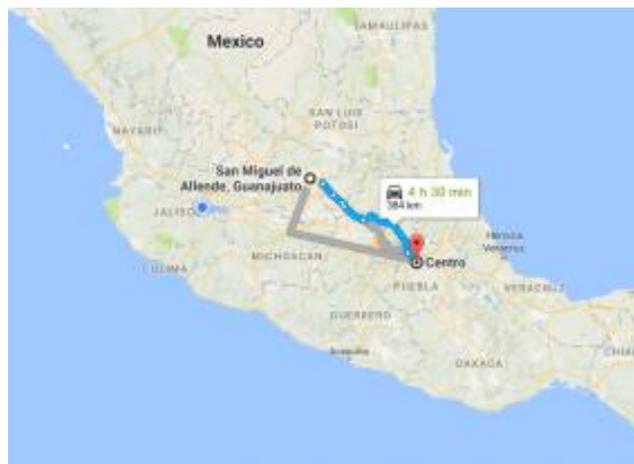
Could we get by in Mexico on the equivalent of one year of high school Spanish?

Was it safe?

Could we find our way around?

Would anyone help us if we needed it?

To the extent necessary, we had mastered the required skills, found that others weren't needed, and had the firsthand experiences to prove that our trepidations about Mexico were largely unfounded and that the people were very friendly and very helpful. Now, as we accelerated to speed on the highway out of San Miguel de Allende en route to fresh adventures in Puebla and beyond, all this was in the past, so could relax and just enjoy ourselves. That's why, with few worries to offset our enthusiasm and attitude, our spirits were high.



Our plan called for us to drive from San Miguel de Allende to Puebla (to get a taste of a larger city lifestyle), on to Orizaba (a small town in the mountains), then to descend from the Mexican Highlands to Villahermosa, and on to one of the beach towns near the historic city of Merida in the Yucatan Peninsula. From there, we would head to the world renowned vacation hotspots in the state of Quintana Roo—Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, etc., right to the border with Belize.



We were told that the places that awaited us would be different in many ways from what we had already experienced. Very soon, we would not have to rely on the second hand accounts of what others had said or written; we would know for ourselves, in the most direct and intimate way. What would we see, hear, smell, touch and taste for the first time? We were about to find out.



The type of terrain we encountered for several hours on the road out of San Miguel de Allende was familiar to us, with the gently rolling hills we were accustomed to seeing in this central part of the Central Mexican Highlands. We could have gone through Mexico City, which we were told many times would be a fantastic thing to do, but for us, Mexico City would have to wait, as we couldn't afford the several days it would take to attempt even a cursory experience of this mega-city with more than twice the quantity of inhabitants of Los Angeles. Instead, a little more than 100 miles from our starting point in San Miguel de Allende, we diverted slightly northward, on the Northern Arc, bulging around and bypassing Mexico City.



San Miguel de Allende is at about 6,200 feet elevation and Puebla is even higher, at almost 7,400 feet, relieving the inhabitants and visitors of the entire area of the heat and humidity they would otherwise endure at the same latitude at sea level. (For comparison, Denver is at about 5,200 feet.) The air was

refreshing to the point of intoxication. Off to the sides of the very well-maintained road with high speed traffic and modern cars we were treated to scenes of a much more seasonally attuned and relaxed time. Men and boys tended their flocks of sheep just like we assumed they have done for hundreds of years on the side of the road while corn was being harvested and set into beautiful cone-shaped sheaves in rows up and down the gently curved hillsides.

After almost five hours of driving, we entered the outskirts of Puebla, and passed by a Volkswagen assembly plant so huge it had an off-ramp named after it. Impossible to miss because of their seeming but not actual incongruity (if you thought about it) were billboards advertising Oktoberfest festivities that had already occurred.

Past the sprawling plant and the outdated German holiday signs we went, on to the general downtown area, which was where our hotel was located, and that reminded Jet of West Los Angeles. Even with the nice, wide roads, Puebla still is a city of over 5 million people with the downtown congestion and everything else that goes with it. This area of Puebla certainly didn't appear to have a lot of poor people in it. Mercedes and especially BMWs were everywhere around us. And, they were clean and new. Also, we must have passed three BMW dealerships.

Little by little, in moderately heavy traffic, we unevenly approached our destination. We kept a very close watch on Google Maps so we didn't miss our turnoff to get to our hotel. If we did miss it, our penalty would be to have to figure some way to do a U-turn in unfamiliar downtown traffic with three or more lanes in both directions in a van so fully packed that the back windows were blocked.

We passed a huge Wal-Mart, a store that seems to be everywhere in Mexico; even in places like this more posh area of downtown. Then, with very little notice, our turnoff appeared, so we made a quick right.



Within the few seconds it took us to realize our environment had changed, time slowed down and the natural tenseness that you feel when you don't know where you're going in the downtown area of a big city evaporated as if it had never happened. Down the small slope with mature and varied trees draping our way we went, into a virtual oasis right in the middle of the city.



The road was made of gray pavers laid as in a mosaic. Large and beautiful trees arched around us, and interspersed between the buildings were empty, parklike areas adorned with dark green grass. Slowly down this little road we went, looking in all directions, surprised and quite happy with what we saw.

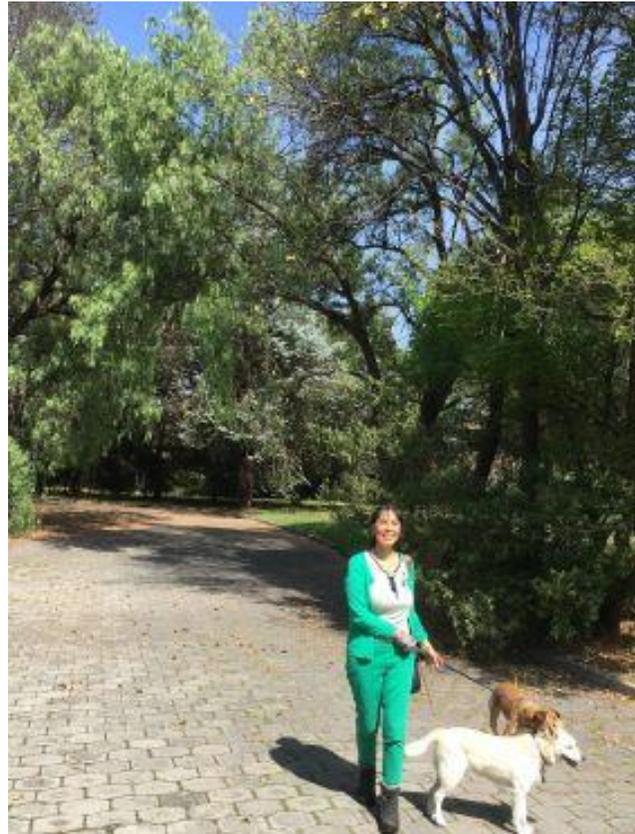
Less than 100 yards ahead on the right was our hotel, with light Barbie-pink walls and white window encasements and columns, in what I would describe as a sleek version of the French neo-classical style. Across from the circular pull-off where we parked our van to check in was a great and, by American standards, very inexpensive, upscale restaurant, as we were to personally verify at dinner that night and breakfast the next morning. The restaurant was also in the same architectural style, with a covered patio open to street, within which we could see some nicely dressed men enjoying what we assumed would be a sophisticated dinner accompanied by an appropriate merlot.



The hotel lobby had marbled floors, and a nice, grassy courtyard immediately behind it, ringed by the rooms. Our room also had marble floors, with Louis XVI furniture and paintings combined with an ultra-modern bathtub and ultra-modern bathroom fixtures. It was all very nice, very relaxing, and again, by American standards, ridiculously inexpensive. If I remember correctly, in-room Jacuzzi included, it was about US \$70 per night total, and they accepted our dogs.



After checking in, we took what would have to be described as a leisurely, early evening stroll, and discovered that we were in a little neighborhood (fraccionamiento), with custom homes, a church with a school, and a pet hotel. Architecturally interesting, Frank Lloyd Wright-type homes appeared amongst the empty, grass covered lots, many graced with huge trees. More than one home was painted periwinkle. The homes were modern, cubic, and with architectural interest; bold, tasteful, and unafraid to be non-conventional. One of the homes we admired most had very modern, straight edges. Another one had several columns of small windows. We saw very intricate, perfectly manicured, well-placed and architecturally aware plantings in front of the houses. Many of the plants weren't curvy or organic, like we saw in the gardens of Ajijic or growing in the jungle in Nayarit. Instead, they were very angular, both in where they were planted, and in their general manicured shape, a perfect, integrated match the homes. The homes made interesting use of several different materials; for example, a walkway made out of both wood and tile.



This was a very pleasant place, which was astounding, given that directly across the street were very tall, very nice, modern buildings, a shopping mall, 6+ lanes of consistently heavy traffic, and the type of high rise apartments you would expect to see in the nicer part of a larger US city. So right in the Mexican city of Puebla was this little hideaway, with its different color scheme, style, and it's mix of patrician and modern feel.

The next morning, I took the dogs for a walk around the fraccionamiento, in this charming bubble of a place that reminded me of Atlanta, Georgia in the fall, with deciduous eucalyptus and pine trees dropping their leaves in the cool, morning air and the slight fragrance of the forest. I felt like staying. It was just wonderful. And, it certainly wasn't the Mexico we had expected to encounter when we crossed the border in 90+ degree heat in Mexicali six months earlier.

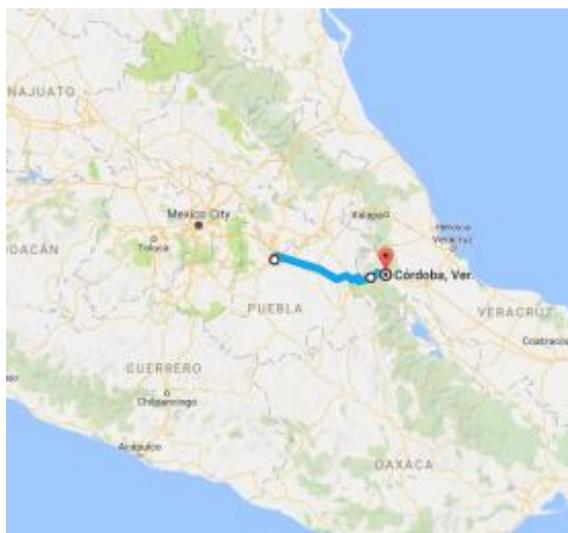
Next: we travel over magnificent mountain terrain to Orizaba, find the hotels there don't meet our needs, and make a bee-line to Cordoba as darkness descends.

The Road from Puebla to Cordoba, Mexico: Otherworldly Canyons, Meeting Celebrities, and the Cordoba Gift Exchange

Given that our planned drive from Puebla to Orizaba was only a little more than three hours, that our combination Puebla hotel / restaurant / fraccionamiento was so pleasant, and that the restaurant had an all you can eat Mexican buffet breakfast, we saw no compelling reason to refuse the beautifully arranged food we found so temptingly arranged before us. Even in this upscale restaurant with impeccable service and sophisticated ambiance, they allowed us to dine “con mascotas” (with our dogs), albeit on the covered patio, which is where we would have wanted to eat in all circumstances. The waitress, Elizabeth, kept bringing us off-menu appetizers the region is known for and my wife Jet was introduced to amaranth (a small grain-like wheat germ, but round, lighter and not as crunchy) that she sprinkled liberally over her fresh papaya and mangoes.



We had been in Mexico for more than five months and had noticed a curious phenomenon regarding the bills we received at restaurants: the amount owed was always either exactly what we expected, or less than the stated price on the menu or elsewhere. In this upscale restaurant in Puebla, it was about 20% less. I have no idea why. In any event, we left an oversized tip, and heavily laden with copious amounts of delicious food, we waddled over to our car. The dogs jumped in, and with more food in our bellies and money in our wallets than we had anticipated, we drove towards the exit, with no plans for lunch.



After leaving the urban areas of Puebla and accelerating to speed, we were once again in the vast countryside of the highlands,

occasionally passing a mid-sized, meandering river. A huge flock with what looked to be thousands of birds seemingly acting as a single, coordinated organism hovered in front of us and then turned mid-flight and flew north, on to their own destination.

Puebla sits at about 7,400 feet, more than 2,000 feet higher than Denver. As we pointed our van close to due east, still higher we went, into the mountains where, even at this tropical latitude, there can be snow amongst the pines. As we started to descend to Orizaba the road became more curvy, sometimes perilously close to the sheer drop-offs that seemed to be several thousand feet and descending into valleys, where occasionally, we would see a village far, far below. It was like being shrunk down and placed in a model of mountains that was not to scale in the reception sales area of a housing development, but these were to scale. What we were seeing was real.

Sure footed and nonchalant horses and goats grazed in narrow areas between the road and the cliff in what we figured was one false step away from their sure demise. At the first turnoff, I had to pull over. Neither Jet nor I had ever seen anything like it. The proportion was amazing. If it weren't for the lush vegetation, it would resemble one of those pictures or drawings you've seen of the moon or other planets, where there is no erosion to soften the edges of mountains or to level their differences.

Even at only 4,000 feet elevation, Orizaba looked like a typical mountain town, Mexican-style, and surprisingly densely populated, given its small population. It was brisk and the air was dry. To the north of Orizaba was Pico de Orizaba, a volcano topping out at more than 18,000 feet, which makes it the highest mountain in Mexico and the third highest in North America.



When searching for and choosing places to stay, in addition to general concerns and needing a place that will accept our dogs, we also need a very secure place for our van, which is more than eight feet tall. Our van is no ordinary van. It is a very sturdy Ford E350 that had been modified before we bought it as transport for people in wheelchairs. After we removed the lift, we customized it further to our exact specifications. Even if we could replace all the “stuff” we carried in our van, it would be close to impossible to replicate the van itself, and certainly, not in Orizaba. If it got stolen, our road trip would be over.



Unfortunately, none of the three hotels we tried that accepted dogs in Orizaba had enough clearance to park our van in a place we considered to be sufficiently secure. Given our late start from Puebla, it was around 2 PM. We tried using our Sprint / Movistar / “supposed to work in Mexico” cell phone to call ahead to see if there was anything suitable in Cordoba. Consistent with our other experiences elsewhere in Mexico, it didn’t work. Driving at night in unfamiliar mountainous areas in Mexico is a very bad idea. Did we dare to drive further on to Cordoba with no reservations? At the time, it seemed the lesser of two evils. Back into the van we went with no time to waste. We would make a run for it.

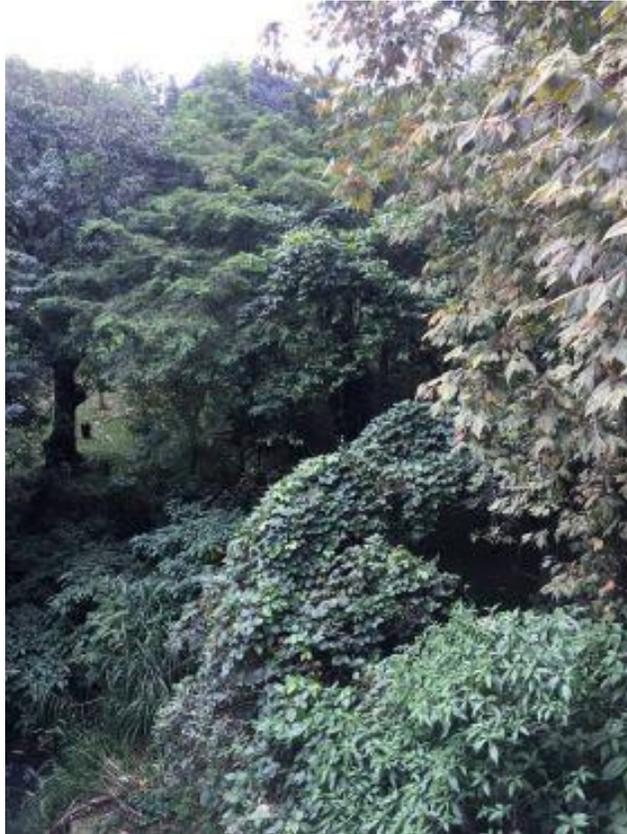
As we descended the mountains further towards the general direction of the flatter planes, feathery pine and eucalyptus gradually transformed to banana trees and coleus, which were very tropical and reminded Jet of Hawaii. As we approached Cordoba, we saw tulip trees and what looked to be acacia. The air became more humid and the smells richer.



The hotel we chose didn’t accept dogs, but they did very generously allow us to park right in front, where the security staff could watch our van all night. Our dogs would have to make do with the middle seat for a bed. On a positive note, the hotel had a stream adjacent, a gorgeous park just next door with magnificent, mature foliage. Not at all unusual in Mexico, our room was very modern and very affordable. It had a cubist, green theme, very sleek and well-designed, and a huge area for the shower. Also very common in Mexico, it had a rain showerhead (the type that sprays water straight

down). Out the window, past the park, we could see an imposing volcano. This would definitely do.

Cordoba seemed to be a very nice city, especially from the vantage point of our newly found, much more than acceptable sanctuary. We were set for the night, so we had time to look around and also to review what we had seen coming into the city. At least from our very quick impressions and compared with some of the places in Mexico we had been, the architecture in Cordoba was not as interesting or notable. We didn't see the arches and bovedas we had enjoyed elsewhere. There was much less of the fine detail work along the doors and windows we saw elsewhere, especially in San Miguel de Allende. The rooflines were pitched and there was very little tile work. The colors were relatively humdrum compared to the rich earth tones of San Miguel de Allende or the wild, inventive colors of Ajijic.



One of the most popular questions on our site, [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), is how are expats treated by Mexicans. The answer for us is that if you are genuinely friendly, as an American, when you travel to places where there are mostly Mexicans, you become a bit of a celebrity.

Within a few miles of the hotel we pulled our van into the parking lot of a popular Cuban-style restaurant on one of the main streets of Cordoba. Sitting at the next table was a family with five adult children, one son-in-law and one grandson. They smiled at us and we smiled back. Jet is especially fearless in these situations, using her very, very, very rudimentary Spanish and randomly applied conjunctions to strike up a conversation. Before too long, they told us they had a ranch nearby where they raised rabbits and lambs, which they illustrated via pictures they showed us on their smartphones.



More than once, they tried to buy us beers. As we all finished our meals, Jet stealthily called over the waiter and let him know that we would buy the family dessert. Not too long thereafter, a tray appeared with 3-inch tall, big square pieces of flan. At first, the family was befuddled. After all, they hadn't ordered dessert. After the waiter explained and pointed to us, confusion was replaced with big smiles as the happy family thanked us repeatedly and only then reached for their forks.



During our long good-bye's, other locals noticed that we were Americans, as a teacher with his wife and young son approached Jet and wanted to talk in English about the wife's experiences in Oklahoma. After our conversation and bidding them well, we took pictures with the first family in front of our van. Directly afterwards, the wife, Jane, gave Jet a pair of long, floral, silver earrings which she had purchased from Palenque, which Jane knew was on our way. It was only later that Jet noticed that Jane was wearing the same earrings in the picture, so she must have removed them from her own ears to make the present to Jet.



Of course, Jet was worried about the dogs all night. When I came to get them in the morning, of course they were sound asleep. The hotel management was very nice and let us take our dogs to where Jet was having breakfast, on a patio area with a pool in front of gorgeous, large trees with big old leaves and arching tops. Change of plans successfully orchestrated, dogs safe and sound (and with us), memories of comradery and kindness from the night before, we ate masa dishes traditional to the area, as we enjoyed the trees in front of the terrace and listened to the stream below.

Our next stop would be out of the mountains and on towards the Gulf of Mexico.

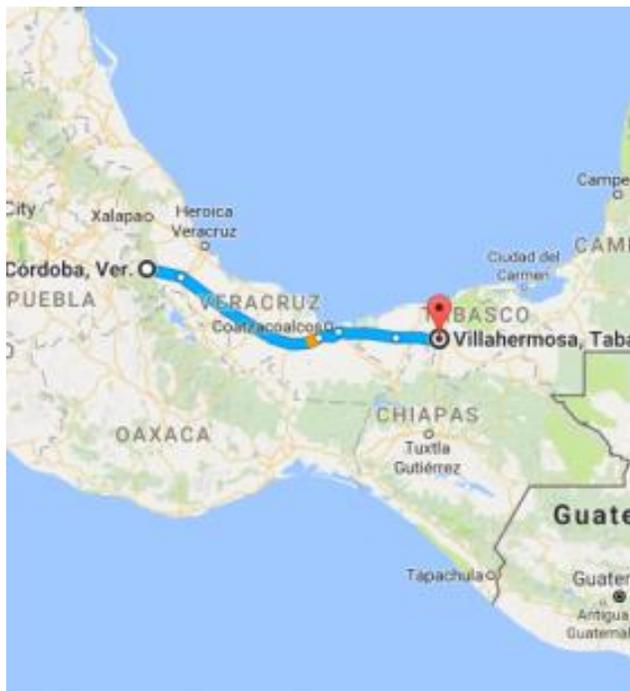
Potholes, Detours and Other Driving Challenges Southeast of Cordoba, Mexico: Just Follow the Pigs, Keep Calm, and Have Faith

It all started so innocently.

It was mid-November, overcast, 72 degrees, with just a hint of rain in the air. On the highway a few hours after leaving Cordoba and headed southeast to our planned destination of Palenque, there were literally no other cars within sight in either direction. The road was high quality and safe. Even the shoulders were full width, as opposed to $\frac{3}{4}$ width shoulders we had seen so many times before, that were used for straddling between lanes to let faster traffic pass. And unlike in Baja and some other areas in Mexico, there weren't even any signs warning of cattle that may wander into our lane. It was an easy place to let your guard down, reduce the act of driving to an autonomic nervous system response, and just enjoy the experience.



It was in this blissful, relaxed state that we turned off to our next highway. Within a few yards, the potholes appeared. Actually, I don't know if the word "pothole" adequately describes the gaping, deep, more than bone-jarring and potentially car-destroying chasms sprinkled randomly about on what used to be the equivalent of an interstate but now that more resembled a mine field, and one presumably to be negotiated at highway speed.



My wife, Jet, would call out the potholes she could see in advance, providing warnings like "Pothole right!", "Pothole straight!", etc., as well as, "Oops, missed that one!" Sometimes the potholes merged to encompass the entire width of the highway, so

we would just have to hold on and hope we would emerge from the other side with car and dental work intact.

On previous roads, we had seen enterprising vendors selling their wares at stalls they had strategically placed on the sides of the road at slowdowns due to traffic construction. At the beginning of this experience, we were surprised we didn't see them with bi-lingual signs reading, "Last chance to save thousands of dollars in chiropractic care—buy our neck braces before it's too late!" Others would perhaps sell kidney belts.

They would have made a fortune.

And earned every peso.

Yet another dimension to our challenges was the light drizzle that had followed a rain hard enough to fill these craters with enough water to make their detection that much more difficult and their depth impossible to determine without smashing into them. As we would hit one, water would splash in all directions and our two dogs experienced the fun of being tossed up several inches, resembling Jacks in the Boxes or a larger version of "whack a mole." I didn't stop to look (too busy paying attention so as not to destroy our van or get into a serious collision), but some of the potholes were so huge and evidently there for so long that I wouldn't be surprised if there were little fish swimming in them.



Dodging these caverns was like driving inside a video game. We couldn't just stay in our lane, zone out and expect everything to work out, because if we did, it wouldn't. I could hit a pothole so huge, our van may do a head plant, or at a minimum, bend something so badly I wouldn't be able to drive it.

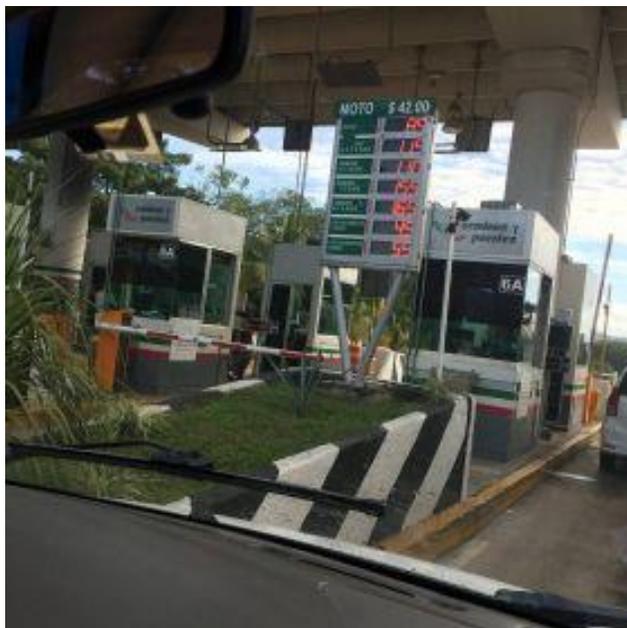
Adding to the fun, our video game became multi-player. While I was concentrating on keeping our van drivable, other drivers on our side of the road who were themselves avoiding their own potholes periodically and unpredictably swerved into our lane, so I had to avoid them as well. If this weren't enough to keep me engaged, drivers from the other direction of traffic were swerving to avoid their own potholes, many times into my lane coming from the other direction.

Adding yet another dimension, this being Mexico, people were of course passing me, and of course, they were passing each other from the other side of the road, which for us would be oncoming traffic, resulting in a vehicular version of the game “chicken,” but with the fun of added road hazards. If one of them coming at us used our lane to pass from their direction, I had to make a split-second decision as to whether the driver on the other side of the road who had driven into my lane would move back in time to avoid hitting us. If I figured he would, I could stay where I was and in so doing, avoid my own pothole, to my right. If not, in order to avoid a head-on collision, I would have to move over and to drop into a pothole of unknown depth and ability to destroy our van.



Some drivers were very concerned about potholes, drove appropriately slowly and moved over to avoid each one, but others didn't seem to mind too much, probably because they were driving someone else's car.

After about an hour of this, we thankfully made it onto another highway, with three lanes in our direction that were nice, modern, and maintained. Then, about an hour or so after our internal organs had stabilized and our dogs went to sleep, I began to notice something a bit odd, and a bit worrisome: for several minutes, we hadn't see a single vehicle coming in the other direction. This was not a good sign.



I can't remember ever being happy about a detour, and this one looked like it may be a bad one. Also, we were in that part of our trip where we really didn't have much of a Plan B. Past the pothole video arcade, more than halfway to our intended destination of Palenque to stay in a rustic hut by a nature

preserve and no place to stay that we knew of prior to Palenque, we were committed to going forward, or it would be a very bad day.

Directly after the toll booth we were diverted from this nice highway with no oncoming traffic onto a road with only one lane in our direction, clogged with all the traffic that had just minutes earlier filled the three lanes from which we were just diverted. You can imagine our speed. And of course, this being an unplanned detour, the detour road was being repaired as well, which added more slowdowns.

Driving immediately in front of us was a truck transporting live pigs, several of which must have found us interesting, because they kept staring at us. It didn't look as if they disapproved of us; they were just staring, somewhat puzzled.



We had absolutely no idea what was going on, how long we would be on the detour, where we were going, specifically where we were, or pretty much anything else. We just followed the perplexed pigs.

Mile after mile we went, from hopeful speedup to demoralizing slow down to detour upon detour, the pigs our constant companion and vista. Minutes turned into more than an hour as the afternoon wore on. We came across a town now swollen with unanticipated traffic. Through it all, we plodded along.

In this town large enough to have cross-streets, several vehicles driven by people who seemed to be "in the know" made abrupt turns onto various side streets. We dared not follow their example, because we had no idea where we were.



Then, we witnessed another bad sign: several of the vehicles turned around completely and went back the way we came. A few moments later, we saw an open-bed truck filled with people coming towards us from the other direction, stopping every few cars to yell something to drivers on our side. Sure enough, he did the same for us, looking at me directly in the face and informing me energetically in a loud voice in Spanish of something I couldn't translate. After he passed, in my left side view mirror, I saw him tell others, some of whom turned around. Then, presumably after enough time to think about it, the driver of the pigs in front of us abruptly turned around, as well-- another bad sign. (We were, however, presented with some better scenery and a bit less porky condescension.)

We couldn't come up with a better plan of action than to just soldier on. In about an hour more, the traffic on our side had come to a complete stop. We saw drivers and passengers get out of their vehicles that were stopped in the middle of the road, joining others who had gotten out earlier and who were milling around. On the other side of the street going in the other direction was not a single vehicle. Our side was a parking lot. Fortunately, there was a gas station near by with a small store. Unfortunately, it began to drizzle again.

I had never been in a similar situation in the US, but I can't imagine that the people being so inconvenienced would handle it so calmly. No one was yelling or stomping about, and there was hardly even a line at the bathroom. The atmosphere was one part festival and three parts resignation. People were wandering about agreeably, talking, or just sitting on a covered bench. Standing by one of the large tour busses were several non-Mexican looking people eating ice cream they had just purchased from the store. It turned out they were Canadians, on their way to Chetumal, on the border with Belize. They told me that there was a demonstration of some sort and that the demonstrators had closed the freeway.



So, the problem was man-made! And could be resolved with a simple police action!! How long could it last?

When I asked this very question to several of the Mexicans around, all of them said that same thing: It will most likely last all day.

What? Demonstrators completely shut down a major thoroughfare and no one does anything about it? And furthermore, everyone takes it with good humor?



The response was simple and the same from everyone I asked: "Si."

After taking a beat to let this sink in, I reviewed our situation:

1. It was about 4 PM.
2. Driving in Mexico at night in unfamiliar areas is a very bad idea.
3. If we went back, it would take us about 6 hours to get to where we started, and at that point, we may or may not have a hotel room.
4. Our Sprint / MovieStar phone didn't work (but it essentially never did).

5. If we didn't get to our next destination, our whole series of reservations at hotels would be messed up.
6. The highway was closed and very unlikely to be opened that day.

What would you do?

As I was reviewing this, Jet had a brilliant idea. I saw her approach one of the many cab drivers just standing around. From a distance, I could see (but not hear) her talking with him. Then she came over to our car. "Let's go," she said. "This local cabby knows the back roads and can get us on the main highway past the demonstration. All we have to do is follow him."



Furthermore, at my suggestion (I can be less than trusting in some circumstances), the cab driver agreed not to take any money until we were safely delivered to a place on the highway that was after the closure.

As the rain intensified, off we went following our escort, leaving behind our new Canadian friends and somewhere more distant, the pigs we had followed for way too long. Us and a few others who evidently knew what they were doing joined the single line that had turned off onto one of the unnamed streets. Rights and lefts we made, onto streets with huge ruts, through residential, rural, and commercial areas. Bemused locals came out to watch the parade.

There were two reasons we enjoyed this second detour: 1) it was quite beautiful to see what we would have missed from the highway-- all the little homes in a pastoral setting with lush vegetation and farm animals, while accompanied by a delightful rain; and, 2) we had hope we would be back on the highway soon. And with this detour came a new, calmer way of looking at things. This out of the way, less than prosperous area was filled with nice people with every day issues much more severe than our current problem. Given the blessing of this perspective, our circumstances didn't seem that dire after all.



After 45 minutes of this pleasant and anticipatory diversion, the ultimate object of our desire appeared in front of us: the highway. The cab driver pulled over, rolled down his window and

stuck out his hand to point to the onramp. I pulled over behind him, got out of our van, ran over in the rain, thanked him, gave him the 100 pesos (about US \$5) we had agreed to, thanked him again, and, as a parting gift, presented him with all we had to signify our vast appreciation and relief-- a single granola bar, which he seemed very happy to have.



We happily rolled onto the onramp and were back on our way. We wouldn't make it to the one of a kind rustic hut in the nature preserve in Palenque that day, but we did make it to the consolation prize about two hours drive before Palenque: the Villahermosa Hampton Inn.

The rest of the day was fairly uneventful.

Merida, Yucatan, from a 400-Year-Old Veranda to a Mystical Cenote

At each of the stops on [our road trip through Mexico](#), there emerged a personal and unique theme for Jet and me. In Baja California Sur, it was the [rugged beauty of the desert juxtaposed against the almost unimaginably blue and clear waters of the Sea of Cortez](#). In the little town of [Lo de Marcos](#) and [Nayarit in general](#), north of Puerto Vallarta, it was the rich, verdant jungle, plunging into the Pacific in little bays bordered by volcanic outcroppings. In [Jocotepec](#), it was our walled garden set amongst a working class Mexican town. [Ajijic](#) had easy, comfortable, moderate, relaxed living and friendly people. In [San Miguel de Allende](#), the theme was splendor and pageantry.



In [Merida, in the state of Yucatan](#), the theme was history, which was more than reinforced from the perspective we enjoyed so often sitting on the elevated veranda of the 400-year-old Hacienda San Pedro Nohpat, overlooking a generous lawn and then the fence separating the hacienda from the little town, in the municipality of Kanasin, about 25 minutes by car from downtown Merida. From this privileged vantage point, we could be observers to the other side of the fence largely unnoticed as the locals went about their day-to-day life, seemingly unaffected by our presence.

We could so easily imagine looking out from that very same veranda 100, 200, 300, or more years earlier and watching the great-great-grandparents of those we saw now, making decisions and experiencing events that would alter the course of those presently living their lives on the other side of that fence. If we imagined very hard, we could even envision the hacienda being built, with close to no other buildings and close to no other people around it. Like all haciendas, this one was built to make things. [Iona Chamberlin](#), the proprietor along with her husband, JR, told me that the root of “hacienda” was “hacer,” which in Spanish means, “to do” or, “to make.” This particular hacienda had its own history of making things, as evidenced by its still standing huge smokestack.



To understand modern Merida, you have to know about cenotes and Mayans. And after that, you have to know about henequen. Let's start with cenotes, because before there were humans in the Yucatan, there were cenotes.

Jet found a highly-rated and more remote cenote called X Batun on TripAdvisor (another juxtaposition the ancient Mayans didn't have), so off we went, through the gates of the hacienda, out to very temporarily merge into the tapestry of village life we would view from above, and out again, up onto a modern highway about one hundred yards away, on our way to the town nearest the cenote, San Antonio de Mulix.

About 45 minutes later, we turned off from the main highway to a country road that had long stretches of nothing, except the thick jungle and flat terrain one sees pretty much throughout the entire Yucatan peninsula. There were no [towering mountains or valleys like we saw on the road from Puebla to Cordoba](#), and not even a hill of any size to punctuate the scenery. Just every once in a while, we would see and then pass a trici-taxi, usually being driven by a man, many times without the benefit of a motor, with more often than not a very nicely dressed woman seated and ensconced properly inside, shaded from the sun by the trici-taxi canopy. Occasionally, a small village would appear, and then it was gone.



As we got closer to our destination, it was becoming increasingly common for us to see handmade signs every so often with the name of a cenote we were not familiar with and an arrow pointing to a dirt road. We didn't know for certain if we were lost or if we should visit one of these other cenotes, but we decided to persevere because we wanted to at least visit the cenote described in TripAdvisor. We came across another small town, but just a bit larger than the others, which turned out to be San Antonio de Mulix. Through the center of town we drove as the only moving vehicle in sight and made a right towards another handmade sign pointing to X Batun. We had found it, whatever "it" was.



Up to a gate we went, where we startled a young man acting as a guard who probably hadn't seen many people that day. He told us we needed a ticket to pass and pointed to an open-air office that we had already unwittingly passed near a small store about 50 yards away. We purchased our tickets

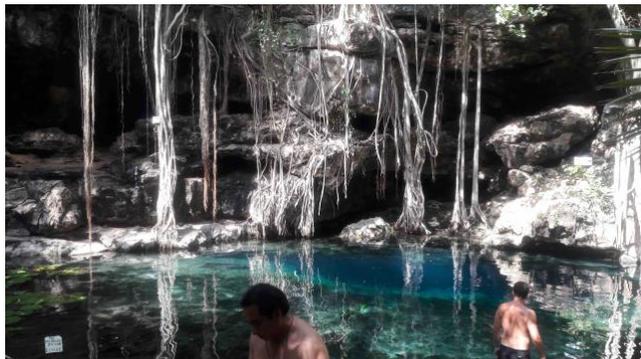
and a life vest for Jet and returned to the now more alert guard, where we dutifully handed over our ticket. Through the gate we went, down a dirt road that ended at a parking lot with no other cars, but had a bored man underneath a palapa doing pretty much nothing but looking at his cell phone. We speculated that his job was to keep order or make certain no one drowned, but we're not sure.

The first time you see a cenote, you can't quite believe your eyes. Literally. I got out of our van first, and went over to a small rise that looked overlooked Cenote X Batun. I had never seen anything like it (and I'm pretty old). Down the stairs and handmade wooden railing the water was luminous. It was like someone had taken a picture, over-saturated the color and then made everything crystal clear with colors so deep you wondered if you had ever seen them before. The waters and surrounding area radiated calm energy.



At the top of the cenote and along the sides, we could see several gorgeous and mature trees, but with their long, gently winding and exposed roots plunging into the cenote water more than 40 feet below, sometimes hugging the dirt along the side, sometimes not. Several of the roots had formed together towards the bottom to create a vine-like grotto and small caves just above the surface of the water. It was a cut-away adorned with plants and outcroppings, all set atop shimmering water that was both clear and colorful at the same time. At the far end of the cenote on a pile of rocks three iguanas watched us, motionless, as if providing silent physical testimony to the timelessness of our location.

Did we dare to go into the water and join this unearthly scene? We did, almost reverentially. We could clearly see and be among fish of different dimensions and colors, some that scattered when we approached and some smaller ones that came by to nibble on us newcomers.



While all the water seemed iridescent, in various places it took on shades of blue and light green, the colors blending into each other, depending on the light from above, the passing of a cloud, or the depth of the water below. It was almost like we were in a place suspended between two physical and even spiritual worlds; one above, and one below. In between these two worlds, in silence other than the chirping of the occasional bird and the rustling of some leaves far above us at the top of the cenote, Jet floated for hours, never leaving nor wanting to leave, taking it all in, experiencing it all and for a short time in the

history of Cenote X Batun, being part of it. There were no other people, and no other sounds. We could just as easily have been there a thousand years earlier.

Next on our road trip story, we'll take you with us to explore more of Merida, meet some present-day Mayans, and learn just how the more modern Merida began.

Editor's note: Thank you to Edin Rudin, for providing pictures of X'Batun cenote. (We had lost ours.)

My New Mayan Friend, and the Evolution of Merida, Mexico

My new Mayan friend had a beautiful smile. Most likely in her 50s, I met her as she and her family were making and selling sandwiches from the very small porch in front of her home with the half wall she used as a built-in shelf. On the street was a solitary plastic table covered by a plastic tablecloth, with two plastic chairs.



The street of my friend's house was perpendicular to the main street bordering the hacienda in which we had rented a place to stay. It was an easy walk for us from the gate of the hacienda; merging into the village life we viewed in front of us from the hacienda's veranda, and turning right to go up her street. In rough terms, you could call this street the main street of Nohpat, a little village about 25 minutes from downtown Merida, because this street had the most retail activity, the bulk of which was from make-shift stores or food stands that appeared or disappeared in front of small homes depending on market demand. In relevant part, the street was probably no more than a 10-minute walk from end to end.

My friend was a woman completely at peace and comfortable in her environment. She was obviously content. Around her was her daughter and several grandchildren. From my viewpoint on the street, I could see the children playing inside what looked to be not much more than a one or two room home, complete with a hammock, standard issue in this part of the world. Every once in a while, her grandchildren would venture out to look at my wife Jet and me, and then resume playing in the safety and comfort of their grandmother's home.



One granddaughter, who was probably around six years old, wanted to show us that she spoke English. From behind her mother's skirt she would pop out and announce in a small but clear voice, "Buenos dias... hello," which of course is only roughly correct. She would

then look to us with expectant eyes to see if she got it right, reward us with a smile, and go back to hiding behind her mother. When we responded, “Muy bien, es correcto,” everyone beamed with pride. In our 16 days in Nohpat, we met several foreigners who stayed at the hacienda, but we met no other foreigners on the street.

My new Mayan friend with the almost perfectly round face and intelligent, kind eyes wanted to communicate with us but spoke no English. Using Spanish instead of Mayan, she was aware enough of our limited understanding and kind enough to speak to us slowly and distinctly, using easy words so we could understand her. She would tell us about her absent sons working elsewhere and her daughters and grandchildren, and sometimes, Jet and she would talk about their shared Catholic faith.

Every time I would take a walk out from the hacienda, I would make sure to stop to visit for some small talk. One day she asked why she hadn't seen me the previous day, so I had to explain that I had a small intestinal problem, for which she offered a remedy. Another day, I found her on her hammock inside her house and after calling from the street, presented her with a gift of some carrot cake we had picked up at a local modern grocery store. More than once, she invited us into her home.



As I would explore the neighborhood on foot, I would sometimes come across my friend's grandchildren, not at my friend's home, but at their own, no more than a five-minute walk from their grandmother. When they would see me from the open doors of their house or the sheets that were hung from their doors or perhaps while playing outside, they would recognize me, usually startled to see someone new, and wave warmly with a big, shy, silent smile.



When we first arrived at the place where they made and sold handmade tamales on the corner in front of the hacienda and diagonal to my friend's house, some teenagers asked me my name and made several attempts to pronounce “Chuck.” Thereafter, every time I walked their micro-neighborhood, I would be regaled with calls of “Chook! Chook!” and “Hi, Chook!” as I walked, the greetings sometimes coming after a slight delay from many directions at once as everyone

who knew the joke joined in, followed more often than not with dispersed and gleeful laughter. In addition to me being a curiosity and my apparently unpronounceable name being good for a hearty laugh, the neighborhood people were very warm and welcoming.

For dinner out, Iona recommended a standard sit down restaurant about two miles away in a village just slightly larger called Kanasin at La Susana Internacional. Jet had wondered was international about it, because it never served anything but Yucatecan food, but never received a satisfactory answer.



Iona told us that if we ordered one tamale for 60 pesos (about US \$3), it would be enough for Jet and me to share for an entire meal, and she also recommended that, instead of driving our huge white van, we take one of the taxis constantly buzzing around in every direction. This taxi wouldn't be an automobile like you might expect, but rather a trici-taxi. As I described in [my earlier article about Merida](#), a trici-taxi is essentially a large tricycle with a place for passengers to sit in front where a car would have a bumper or lots of protection. We further came to understand that at night, some trici-taxis had lights, and some did not.

Once we resolved to ignore the very real possibility of being crushed by a much larger vehicle that may not see us in the dark and pondering why each of the trici-taxi drivers had helmets but we did not, taking the trici-taxi was a fun experience, as we got a very good chance to see the surroundings without the hindrance (or benefit) or a lot of steel between us and objects that may crash into us, and of course, we went slowly. Jet always pointed out the upcoming potholes to help the driver avoid them and would prattle on with the driver asking about their children and whatever aspects of Merida gave them civic pride.



For some reason, each ride we took to the restaurant was via a different route, so we got to see a good amount of Kanasin. However, we were always dropped off at the same place in front of the restaurant, paid our 15 pesos (about US 75 cents), and looked forward to a great meal. We ate there three times, and were never disappointed. Afterwards, we would walk to the local panadería to buy bread and pastries for breakfast the next day and then walk to the

plaza to take the next trici-taxi in line to go back to the hacienda. It was a very good system.

As Mexicans like to tell you and you wouldn't necessarily know if you just ate at Mexican restaurants in the US, the food in Mexico can be significantly different from region to region, and this is certainly true of Yucatecan food. Evidently, La Susana Internacional had a following among some of the more urban residents from Merida who would come there to eat more traditional Yucatecan food. More than once, we would see a nice car pull up that was very likely not owned by a local, and watch as well dressed people got out to enjoy their meals at one of the tables next to us in the spacious dining room.



Jet had been cooking Yucatecan food for years and was interested in experiencing the real Mayan version. Yucatecan food, including the tamales we bought across the street from our hacienda, often includes turkey, so we ordered that. (I had always thought of turkey as being North American, but I was told that turkey was indigenous to the Yucatan.) The soup was rich with pieces of turkey and a broth delicious with unidentifiable (by us) spices. The tamale we ordered was wrapped in a banana leaf and had a very moist filling. There were always a variety of salsas to go with our meals and Jet always laced her food with very hot salsa made with habanero chilies.

Among the most memorable parts of our meals at La Susana Internacional were the drinks. Our favorite was made with a local spinach-like vegetable that was slightly tart. (It tasted much better than it sounds.) The service was excellent and the waiters nattily dressed in traditional clothes. There we sat, eating Yucatecan food and drinking green drinks in an international restaurant, at the



same table every time with the view to the street, enjoying different ambiance and music while we watched Kanasin village life go by, in 75-degree weather at night, in December, with all the windows open.

One afternoon we visited a hacienda down the road from where we were staying called Teya that had buildings from both the Spanish colonial period and the French colonial period. On display in a mini-museum setting were a good amount of the implements that were used to make the area rich; tools that had been used to process henequen. In the present day, no henequen was being processed. Instead, Hacienda Teya had a highly-regarded restaurant and for some reason, a very elegant pool.



Because the pork we ordered was steamed in an underground oven, Jet was reminded of traditional Hawaiian cooking while the music reminded her of “hapa haole” Hawaiian music from the ‘30’s and 40’s. With so many Mayan words that looked Chinese, the grass huts, the foliage and wooden furniture, the eerily similar knickknack souvenirs and the almost exact same latitude, Jet mused that Merida was the Hawaii of Mexico.

To complete our gastronomical tour of Merida, we experienced two very different eating adventures, other than both being “all you can eat.” One was at a downtown Merida hotel with a buffet restaurant where Jet went crazy tasting all the traditional exotic Mayan specialties made from various pig parts and the other was at an ultra-modern parrilla style restaurant called Mr. Pampas that had nothing to do with Mexico other than it looked to be wildly popular among the better-heeled Yucatecans. (“Parrilla” is an Argentinian or Brazilian barbeque where they bring lots of different types of meats on skewers to your table and you just point to what you want and eat way more than you should. The price in Merida was about a third of what it would cost in the US.)



With the exception of Mr. Pampas and other scattered modern parts of Merida, one gets the feeling of this being an old place, as evidenced by the existence of Mayan ruins, cenotes, present-day Mayans, and 400-year-old haciendas. What at one time made the Merida area rich from the 1880s to about 1915, is a fibrous plant you can see growing everywhere-- henequen. Before substitutes were developed, henequen from the Merida area was prized for

many purposes, among them ropes needed for the boats and ships of the time. In this golden era for Merida, the state of Yucatan became the wealthiest in Mexico, with its newly monied families building huge and ornate mansions on Paseo Montejo, what is now the main road in Merida. After several decades, as the need for henequen diminished, so did the wealth of the Merida area, but the grand mansions remained, even though its inhabitants were much less rich than before.

One of the advantages of an area that was once wealthy but that had fallen on an extended period of tough times is that, often, because there is no economic reason to demolish older historic structures to make way for modern and monotonous glass and steel buildings, the architectural and historical heritage remain in place. This is exactly what happened with Merida, as Jet and I could [stroll the wide and tree-lined streets of Paseo Montejo](#) and be among huge, ornate and interesting mansions dating back to the heyday of henequen and Merida, interspersed with new hip nightclubs and trendy restaurants. In areas many times directly abutting the Paseo Montejo there are people buying old, sometimes decrepit homes for relatively low prices and then spending a lot of money remodeling them into a style that could be called “renovation chic” with all the modern conveniences. The result is a downtown of architectural interest, combined with the energy of change, and fun.



Unfortunately, we couldn't stay in the Merida area longer because the host at our Hacienda Nohpat, who had so graciously [given us a place to stay when we showed up unannounced](#), had bookings for our room for the holiday period later in December, so we packed up the van, said our goodbyes, and headed towards the world-famous vacation destination of Quintana Roo.

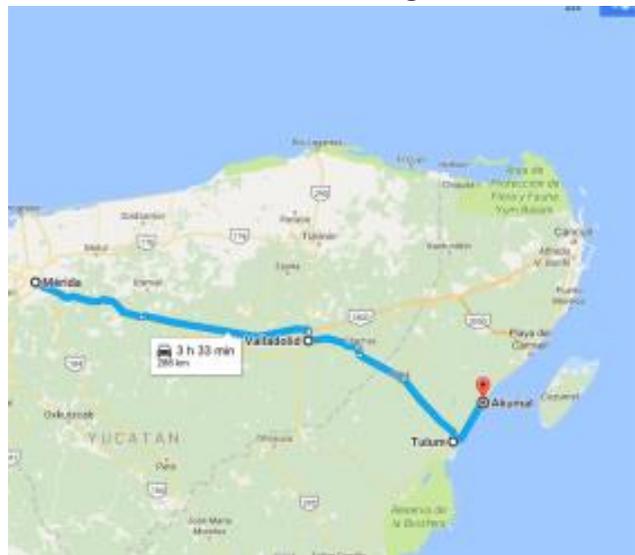
From Merida to Valladolid to Akumal, Mexico: Interesting Friends, How to Pronounce 'G' in Spanish, and Pre-Planned Inspiration

To paraphrase, add to, modernize (and a little bit botch) Robert Burns: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry... so it is great to have the Internet for quick research and decision-making.”

And that we did. Upon leaving Merida, on very short notice, we had to find a place to stay during the first week of December, which is the beginning of one of the most popular tourist times of the year, and in one of the most popular tourist areas in the world-- the famous Mexican resort area known as the Riviera Maya, which includes the coastline areas of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, roughly from Cancun to Tulum. Additional twists to the challenge included we needed a secure place to park our very large and tall van and that accepted our two dogs, not to mention the unhappy but unavoidable facts that neither my wife Jet nor I are heirs to a family fortune, and that we had no connections whatsoever. We were alone, left with nothing but our wits, an Internet connection, a tough set of criteria, and a normal budget. However, we were on our way to a famous resort location. Overall, not too bad a situation, if we could just find a reasonable place to stay.



Through a good amount of research, Jet found a sanely priced alternative called Tao Inspired Living. It was in a mixed master planned development of resort hotels (yes; more than one) and residences called Bahia Principe, in Akumal. Even though we would only be there about a week (we would be forced to find a new place before the prices rose and vacancies evaporated towards Christmas and New Year's), it looked like a good alternative, located as it was just north of Tulum and not too far for day trips to Cancun, Playa del Carmen, and all the other alluring places along the Riviera. We would have to worry later about where we would go after that. We left Merida and headed east.



Close to half way from Merida to either Cancun or Tulum is the town of Valladolid, right about in the middle of the Yucatan Peninsula, about two hours due east from Merida and a good 60

miles from any water element other than a swimming pool or a cenote. Even though we were in Valladolid only a few hours, we did fortunately have the time to meet with John Venator, who did some major renovation on his traditional home, Casa de los Venados, adding very interesting architectural designs and modern touches, turning it into a museum that you can visit, with more than 3,000 pieces of Mexican folk art. We also [met with Denis Larsen, just a short drive from John, in the house he renovated into a bed and breakfast called Casa Hamaca, while Denis and his staff were assembling and giving out “dispensas” to help the local people.](#)



As is so often the case when you travel to places you don't know much about, Valladolid, to the unschooled and ignorant observer (i.e., Jet and me, in the few hours we were there), was a bit of a puzzle. For example, Valladolid seemed to have lots and lots of retail jewelry stores. Why? We don't know. They also had some pretty good Chinese food, in a very nice plaza in the middle of town served to us by what looked to be authentic Chinese people. What were Chinese people doing in the middle of the Yucatan Peninsula? I wish we had the time to find out; it would probably have been a good story.



From Valladolid, you can drive to either Tulum or Cancun, both about 90 minutes away. We chose to go to Tulum because we were running out of time and Tulum is only 20 minutes or so from where we were staying in Akumal. Leaving Valladolid, we passed several small villages, then long stretches of very little other than straight road and flat jungle. When we came across some eco-villages, it was our first indication that we were entering Tulum. Almost immediately thereafter, Tulum appeared at a “t” in the road. To the right was the bulk of Tulum and to the left was the bulk of Riviera Maya, including Akumal.

We had envisioned a dramatic punctuation in this part of our six-month road trip all the way from the US border in Mexicali in the form of a dead end into the Caribbean, where in our imaginations we would conduct some ceremony that would include walking on pure white sand and swimming in crystal clear water, but for the time being we would have to be content with this very standard commercial intersection. Jet and I looked at each other and shrugged. After

the light turned green and the truck in front of us started moving, we just made our left, onto a highway we would become very familiar with as we would travel between Cancun and Tulum.

Almost immediately, we began to see large resorts, men sitting or standing on platforms behind fences for some reason we couldn't figure out approximately 100 meters or so apart, and lots and lots of jungle. What we couldn't see was the Caribbean. That is, unless we were to try to talk our way past the guards at one of the mega-resorts.



After twenty minutes or so, we made the left onto a "retorno" (which I'll describe in the next article), and approached the first of two guard stations we had to negotiate our way past in order to get to what we were told would be our inspirational unit. We knew enough to say we were going to Tao, so the first guard let us through into the larger complex and pointed us to the next guard station, at the entrance to Tao.

Our room was designated "Kin G2", which we pronounced to the guard as "Kin Gee Too," smiled, and prepared to breeze through. Rather than returning our smile and opening the gate, he just looked at us, perplexed, while the gate arm stayed unmoved, in the down position. No dice, so I tried again, displaying my knowledge of Spanish numbers with a self-congratulatory, "Kin Gee Dos." Evidently, that wasn't the problem, because neither the guard nor the gate moved. OK, maybe I should try it louder. "KIN GEE DOS". It was only after several minutes of what seemed like an Abbott and Costello routine that the guard (not us) figured it out. "Kin Hay Dos?" (In Spanish, the letter "G" is pronounced "Hay".) "Si!" Up went the gate, and onward we went.



"Hay Dos" was very nice. Walkie-talkie carrying employees of the management company showed us our room, answered our questions, made us comfortable, and explained to us where to go if there were any problems. It was very much hotel-type service.

If you don't want to read about anyone going to Mexico to live in anything new and pre-planned, you won't like reading about Tao, so you may want to skip to the next story. For the rest of us, [it's pretty nice](#). The geometrical and somewhat boxy modern style of homes so often preferred by Mexicans with the means to buy them were arranged very tastefully and

integrated into a forest / jungle with geometrically placed flowers and plants, all immaculately maintained. [Our bottom level condo with the patio and a small garden had comfortable couches and native art.](#) Looking out the sliding glass door, through some trees, we could just make out the circular drive with a huge fountain, which at night, came complete with a burning torch coming out of the water.

Jet's first impression was that it was a like a college dorm area for really rich kids. You could walk to many areas on wide sidewalks or strategically placed dirt paths without braving the highway. The builders took great pains to integrate their development into the physical environment and the advertised Tulum culture of yoga, exercise, living in concert with nature, etc.

It had a golf course and meeting facilities. Everything worked flawlessly. The water pressure was perfect and the air conditioning was wonderful, not a trivial amenity, in that, even though it was December, without it, we would have been uncomfortable. We had access to the workout facilities, which were in an architecturally imaginative and relaxing pod of buildings flanked by two elevated lap pools. There was an outdoor café set into the wilds of the jungle where we brought our dogs with us to dinner. In the early morning and at night all four of us would all walk the grounds of the resort, peaking into the lovely villas and custom homes while spotting families of coatimundis below the trees.

We could also visit any of the several other pools in the complex, and after we signed up to get our properly colored bracelets (that's right; bracelets), we could [visit two resort hotels](#), which is kind of nice, if you like that kind of thing.

They had an all you can eat lunch buffet for a very reasonable price that we would access via first passing through the two guards on our side of the highway, driving across the highway to the appropriate hotel, displaying our bracelets to their guard, parking the car, and [getting on a tram with 50 or so](#)



[other people who were going to various parts of that sprawling resort](#). It was like being at Disneyland, but with better food, at much lower prices, and on the authentic blue-green waters of the Caribbean, while getting fruity, mildly alcoholic drinks with your meal at no additional charge. The gigantic palapa lobby and the various jungle creatures capering on the lawn fascinated Jet, who had never stayed in an all-inclusive resort, much less one that was carved out of the wild Yucatan peninsula with the stray capybara or two foraging in fastidiously maintained flower beds.

Because it was just so easy, we ate lunch at the same buffet three times. We also [swam at the beach in front of the resort](#) and visited several of the pools, which was a blast for Jet, who swam around and around the island in the center of the biggest pool she had ever been in, all the while listening to the music and watching the dance class being taught poolside to guests visiting from all parts of the world. If you were blindfolded and placed in the pool area and asked what country you were in, your answer would have to be a pure guess. We would clearly have to go outside the resort to experience the more traditional Mexico.



In our next article, I'll describe what I'll call the Riviera Maya Speedway, Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Akumal and Tulum.

Mexico's Riviera Maya, Including Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Akumal and Tulum: From Modern Resort Destinations to Mayan Ruins

If you want to travel by any vehicle in the Riviera Maya (Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Akumal, Tulum and everything in between), you'll have to take the main highway. As in every other place in Mexico we've been, this means driving amongst Mexicans who drive way too fast to be safe, and lots of ill-advised passing. In addition, there are "retornos."



The simplest, most non-threatening definition of a "retorno" is that it is nothing more than a left turn lane for turning around. Upon first thought, a highway with a retorno every couple of miles and no other way to cross the highway or to turn around is a good idea, because this configuration reduces the possibilities of crossing traffic, thereby reducing accidents. Even if you can see where you want to go directly across the highway, you can't just drive across.

Here's how it works in practice. Upon entering the highway from the right, you must wait for a break in the traffic, jam on the accelerator like a teenage boy in a Camaro, burn rubber, and get up to speed before being rear-ended by someone coming up behind you at about 80 miles per hour.



Then, once you've reached the 80-mile per hour speed you must drive if you are not going to become a hazard, you must get to the left lane, and upon entering the additional left lane for the retorno, you must decelerate and come to a complete stop extremely quickly, deploying your parachute, if you had thought in advance to retrofit your vehicle to have the kind of accessories that would make sense for stopping in a Mexican retorno or, alternatively, landing a fighter plane on an aircraft carrier.

Once at a complete stop, you must pick your spot amongst cars, trucks and buses coming at you at the standard 80 miles per hour as they take turns passing each other, sometimes around

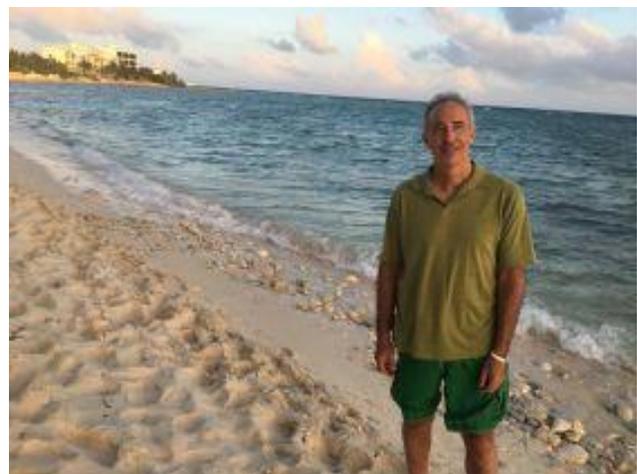
blind curves. Then, you step on the gas again to turn around, keep to the right, and get up to speed as fast as you can, before you're rear-ended by a busload of Australians on holiday.

One of the great benefits of being able to stay in a place for six weeks to two months or longer, as we had planned for everywhere we wanted to go and previously accomplished in [Baja](#), [Ajijic](#) and [San Miguel de Allende](#), is that you avoid the "small sample bias" that comes from a shorter visit. A "small sample bias" is the very natural trait we humans have that causes us to believe that whatever we experience in a short or small sample is how it always is, which many times is not true. This small sample bias can come from a few bad experiences or a few good experiences over a short period of time that are not representative of what you would experience over a longer stretch of time.



For example, [we stayed in a little village southeast of La Paz, in Baja California](#), all the way through July 4th, which, because of the heat that is normally there during that part of the year, is considered to be the low season. However, for us, it wasn't that bad at all, and adding to our fun was the fact that we had all these [wonderful places to visit and experience](#) with close to no other people around. It was great. However, perhaps we were just lucky and got some unseasonably less hot weather.

Perhaps the opposite happened when we were in the Riviera Maya, made worse by the fact that we were only there for eight days. It was unseasonably hot, especially given that it was December, an opinion voiced to us by everyone from the two Mexican women who worked at a hotel in Cancun who we spoke with during a sweaty lunch at an outside restaurant, and everyone else we asked, from a lifeguard to waiters and waitresses. If we had been able to stay longer, we most likely would have been able to experience more average weather, had a much better time, and developed a much more positive view of everything. However, like most tourists as



opposed to residents, we couldn't stay longer, so our experiences were tainted by what we believe to be much more than average heat and humidity, especially for December. That's why, if at all possible, if you are considering moving to a place, stay for as long as you can; that way, you're more likely to see what "normal" is-- the good and the bad.

We didn't get to go to all the areas we heard so much about, including Puerto Morelos and Cozumel, because we only had those 8 days. (This is another reason you really need to stay for longer in any place to appreciate what it's like.) We hope to visit next time and stay much longer. Here's what we did get to visit.



When viewed from the highway, the entire Riviera Maya is jungle, punctuated with grand resorts with magnificent entrances, billboards advertising zip-lining, jeep riding through the jungle, swimming with dolphins, cenotes, caves, etc. And there were LOTS of huge tour buses. From the highway, everything appeared to be big, relatively new, and prosperous. It was quite a contrast to the experience we had just left, [staying in a 400-year-old hacienda amongst a sleepy village populated mainly by descendants of the ancient Mayans](#).

At the northern-most end of what many people consider the Riviera Maya is [Cancun](#), which was created by the Mexican government when virtually nothing was there before. Given this lack of existing villages, old infrastructure, etc., before, the government could build infrastructure scaled to its projected future needs from scratch and carve out large-sized parcels for large-sized resorts, with the result that today, everything looks big and about the same age. Unfortunately, we were only able to spend a few hours in Cancun, which we did touring the hotel zone, [eating in a very out of the way restaurant next to the swamp side of the road](#), and [visiting one public beach](#). From what we saw, it was pretty much what you would expect: big, beautiful resorts with beautiful people doing beautiful things.



A little more than an hour south of Cancun and about midway to Tulum is [Playa del Carmen](#), which has lots of expats, quite a few of whom are not old enough to retire. The focal point of Playa del Carmen is the beach, which is broad, with white sand, flat, and very pretty; and 5th Avenue, a pedestrian shopping / eating / partying area, which runs just parallel to it. To envision 5th Avenue think "Waikiki Beach meets Beverly Hills"; a combination of slightly kitschy souvenir and tee shirt shops, pushed up against Victoria's Secret Oakley, etc., punctuated by lots of good places to eat and party.

A little more than 30 minutes further south (mostly depending on traffic leaving Playa del Carmen) is Akumal, where we stayed in the Tao Inspired Living section of the Gran Bahia Principe, on the non-beach side of the highway, which I described in "[From Merida to Valladolid to Akumal, Mexico: Interesting Friends, How to Pronounce 'G' in Spanish, and Pre-Planned Inspiration.](#)" To the beach side of the highway in Akumal are several larger hotels, but also the town of Akumal itself, which is charming. Very soon upon entering, you find yourself on a single-lane country road (one lane in each direction), going very slowly, which is a very good thing, because sometimes there's not enough room for cars to pass each other from either direction while there were pedestrians walking on the side of the road. And there were a good number of pedestrians walking on the road, which, along with the small lot sizes and unlike Cancun, gave it a nice, less institutional scale.



On the beach side of the street in Akumal were most of the restaurants and small hotels. Sometimes there were residences on the beach side, but more often, the residences were on the non-beach side. Sometimes the houses were grand and impressive, and many times, they were smaller. The jungle was apparent everywhere, providing shade and an exotic, slow-moving feel, as the breeze ruffled the leaves of the palm trees above. Several times, we strolled with our dogs on this street and enjoyed just looking at the houses and the boutique shops and hotels. At one good restaurant, we sat at the bar and looked at the sea while seated on swings, which turned out to be quite comfortable and relaxing.



Before there were Westerners in Tulum, there were the Mayans, who build a city on the cliffs along the shore with the clear, blue-green waters of the Caribbean, and on this ground the ruins exist today. It was these ruins, along with the beach, that attracted the first Western visitors (often, hippies) to the area when there were very few services in Tulum. Today, Tulum is still a bit of a hippie hangout, but one whose values have [merged with modern, upscale Yuppie sensitivities and no shortage of hotels, restaurants](#), and even a nice, large chain supermarket called Chedraui, which for some reason, had the nicest looking produce we had seen in Mexico.

The restaurants, hostels and stores along the highway in Tulum have less style and personality than what you will find [along the beach road](#). They also tend to be less expensive along the highway. Especially on the beach road, you'll see lots of opportunities to do yoga and eat vegan or locally grown food, mixed with hostels, expensive boutiques, expensive and less expensive boutique hotels, and partying, all in a way that is advertised as having a low environmental impact.

Like in Akumal, to gain access to most of the beach areas in Tulum, you would have to stay at one of the hotels or eat at one of the restaurants along the beach road, and the feel one gets while in Tulum on the beach road is similar to what you would feel in Akumal.

What Akumal doesn't have are the [Tulum ruins](#).

Walking on the same roads as the ancient Mayans and seeing and experiencing what is left of their city was a wonderful and contemplative experience, all set, as it was, on cliffs overlooking a gorgeous part of the Caribbean. In the quiet of the ruins, you could almost imagine what it was like 800 years ago, when the Mayans built their city on the cliffs. Gone would be the tour guides and tourists with their cameras and gone would be any of the surrounding areas of Quintana Roo. But the sky would look the same, as would the never-ending and ever present gently rolling waves down below and ahead, the wide sea beckoning with endless possibilities.



Our next destination is Chetumal, which borders Belize. Along the way, we are privileged to experience a dazzling and wonderful little known beach town called Mahahual.

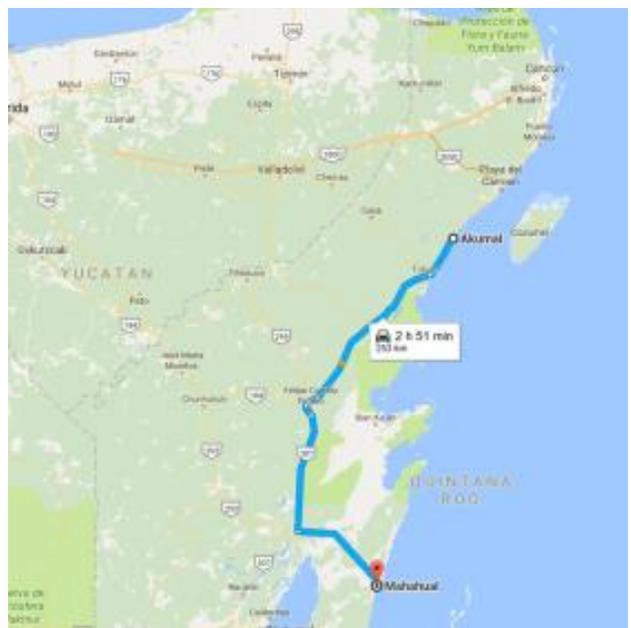
Akumal to Mahahual, Mexico: Way Better Than a Spa Day

When you envision someone in December packing their van in the middle of a driving rain, what pops into your mind? Do you see a person in swimming trunks and sandals? Probably not, unless you had [the same experience as us, as we got ready to leave Akumal](#). I just couldn't think of a smarter way to do it. It was raining hard, it was warm, we needed to get going right away, and I needed something that would dry quickly and that I could easily change out of. Voilà! Form over function: my swimming trunks.

After packing, my wife Jet and I raced the dogs through the downpour so they could jump in, and we were on our way, down the road past the first guard gate and the second, then onto the main highway and to the right, to drive south through the remainder of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo all the way next to the border with [Belize](#).

Our anticipation was especially high as we left Akumal and the Riviera Maya, mainly because we were going to a place off the beaten path. While LOTS of people have been to [Cancun](#) and even [Playa del Carmen](#), [Tulum](#), etc., not as many have been to Chetumal, on the border with Belize, or the places where we intended to visit along the way-- Mahahual and Bacalar.

After leaving Tulum, the yoga- / eco-friendly-based civilization we had become accustomed to almost immediately melted away, to be replaced by the natural jungle and the road upon which we drove, hacked out of the thick vegetation now on all sides. The rain had gradually eased, then



stopped altogether. We had evidently outrun it the bulk of it. With almost no traffic in either direction on the highway, it was us, and our more primeval solitude. It was nice to be on the open road again.

We saw very little civilization for more than two hours and no sea, either, because the road is entirely inland. We could only guess how gorgeous it would be if there could be a turnoff to the left we could take to what we could only imagine would be a magnificent, almost untouched coastline, but there weren't any.



You can drive directly from Riviera Maya to Chetumal and not stop at Mahahual, but we wanted to see Mahahual, mainly because all the pictures we saw of it looked stunningly beautiful. It would be a 40-minute detour from the main road and 40 minutes back. Due to some unusually good planning and execution (not to mention packing in the rain), we had enough time, so we made the left off the main road to head towards the sea, to Mahahual.

There wasn't much of a change right away, just more flat jungle, and now an eastbound road, going straight for miles. In the distance, in an otherwise fairly clear sky, we could see a distinct curtain of rain. As we got closer, we began to drive through bright sunshine punctuated by periodic downpours we could clearly see coming towards us and away, across the highway. It was either pouring rain and the noise that came with it, windshield wipers included, or glistening, silent sunshine. Parts of the road were bone dry, while others were running off sheets of water from the kind of rain that comes heavily and in very large drops. No half measures here. It was quite dramatic and interesting.



Less dramatic and interesting was the road, which, in between two long, straight stretches, had just one turn in it. We had two theories:

1. the farseeing and safety-conscious road planners created this single turn to keep drivers like us alert; and,
2. they had made a mistake and just realized it after 10 or so miles.

We'll probably never know the answer.

There is very little climatic to let you know you've entered Mahahual. However, directly afterwards, the road ends at the sea, which is nothing less than awe inspiring. [What a view it was!](#) We made a right (the only way you can turn) onto a road that was one lane in each direction, and never further than 20 yards or so from exquisitely, clear, flat water, which changed into various brilliantly shaded, dazzling colors stretching into the distance, where the clouds appeared, perfectly placed on the horizon as if in the imagination of a skilled painter. Time slowed way down, as we drove at between 5 – 10 miles per hour, consistent with the other sparse traffic, taking it all in.



To the left was the striking water; to the right, an assortment of small restaurants and some hotels. There were a few larger than boutique hotels, but not many, and nothing like the scale and grandeur of Cancun. Rather, the grandeur of Mahahual was to the left, in the sublime and glorious sea and the view.

After 10 minutes or so of experiencing the wonder of it all, we stopped at an Italian restaurant on the right side of the road. To the left, on the sand, was a place advertising outside massages. I don't remember the price, except that it was very reasonable, especially given the ambiance. No need for the standard Stateside contrived spa experience with Zen-like music and incents; the gently lapping water and gracefully swaying palm trees provided the sound, while the aroma was a faint scent of the sea. All anyone needed was supplied by nature and the masseuse standing at the ready; no waiting.

While Jet had declined getting a massage at the beach in other places in Mexico, partially because it was just too darned hot, she had no problem agreeing to receive [what I'll call the "Mahahual treatment"](#), plopping quickly and joyfully onto the massage table on the sand, while I took the dogs for a mellow, life-affirming walk along the shore. One gets the feeling in Mahahual that you don't really have to leave to go somewhere else. Why would you? Jet was getting a massage while the dogs and I walked



along the shore and then to the end of a narrow pier, where [I lazily watched a group of kayakers paddle out to the near horizon, suspended as they were on the clear and multi-colored sea, while the dogs marveled at how they could see fish in the 3 feet of water they were above.](#) It was relaxing and beautiful.

I meandered back to the massage table and took a seat on one of the many lounge chairs nearby, with the dogs at my sides, becoming one with the vista, nothing to sully the experience except for the occasionally passing overweight European vacationer in what I can assume is their customary much too tight and much too small bathing suits for their middle-aged and not too fit anatomy. Otherwise, it was close to perfect.



Come with us as we visit the surprising town of Chetumal next, on the border with Belize, and do some unanticipated shopping.

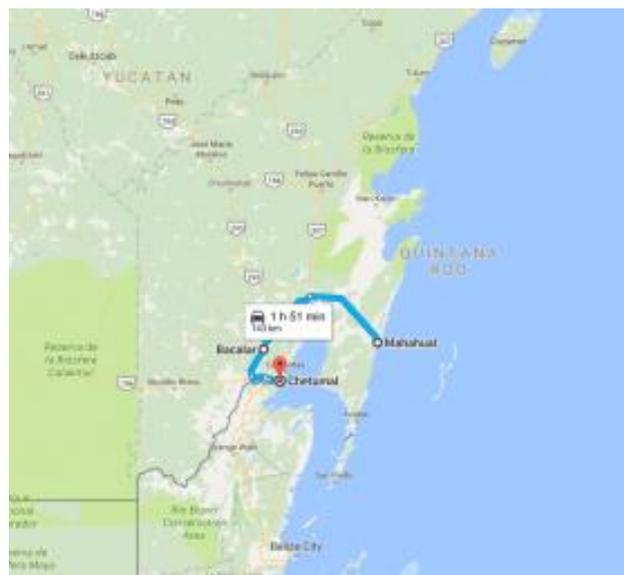
Mahahual to Chetumal, Mexico: An Otherworldly Lake, a Time Machine, and Great Presents for Everyone

Almost on cue, just minutes after my wife Jet was [finished with her massage on the beach in Mahahual](#), the wind picked up, and we and everyone else could notice that the squalls that earlier were further out and more separated were now consolidating and moving closer. Evidently not strangers to what would happen next, everyone but us folded up and headed for nearby shelter. Having a full itinerary, we got in our van, retraced the road back to the main highway, and made a left to head south, on our way to Bacalar before reaching our final intended destination for the day in Chetumal.



Bacalar is not that well known, perhaps because there is no obvious turnoff. After cruising by several times where we thought it should be and where we were told it would be and confounding the local school children standing on a corner who saw us pass back and forth several times, by luck we blundered through a residential area and onto the right spot, in front of the lake.

We were glad we found it. The water in the lake at Bacalar is so iridescent and filled with energy that it could be confused with a giant [cenote](#), but with a shoreline that looks like Tahiti. In the foreground, lily pads bobbed in the water to create a fairy tale ambiance, while in the near distance, multiple piers were staggered so as to be more picturesque against the Caribbean-like water. If you didn't know any better, you would think we were dreaming that you were at some surreal seaside with water that is almost unnaturally saturated with color and clarity, all at the same time. Neither Jet nor I had ever seen this exact set of picturesque components arranged in quite the same way. It was enchanting.



I walked out on a pier with the dogs to experience more. Looking back, I saw some hippies parked on the shore, complete with the perennially favored, standard issue VW camping van.

There was an early twentyish guy with dreadlocks and his blonde girlfriend, suitably bedecked with peace signs on her clothing. To the other side was a Mexican woman waiting for her husband and son, who were snorkeling in the clear water. There was no one else around.



Turning back to the lake I instinctively experienced a moment of reverence for my surroundings. Unable to stay longer, we took a good number of pictures, got back in the van, turned around, waved at the school children one last time, and headed for the highway.

About ten minutes later is when it happened.

“Mennonites!” shouted Jet.

And Mennonites they were, in their overalls, long sleeved shirts and a cart. Some had blonde hair. They looked as if they were sucked up in a time machine from a worm hole somewhere in Europe 200 years ago before there was any automation and plopped right in the middle of a typical Mexican village, but where the Mexicans were so used to them they didn’t give it a second thought, unlike me, who had never seen a Mennonite before.



Jet was especially excited because she had admired Mennonite culture and their fine furniture-making. Years earlier, she had purchased a beautiful display case made by Mennonites from where we were now in Mexico for our home just outside of Tucson, Arizona that was one of her favorite pieces of furniture. Were any of the people we were witnessing crossing the road now one of the very artisans who had a hand in making this prized piece displayed several thousand miles north? We'll never know.



As we started to enter Chetumal, we crossed the airport and signs for the border with Belize, which is just a few miles away. If we had made a right onto one of the roads to the border, we would have driven the entire length of Mexico, [from the northern-most part of Mexico near Mexicali](#) to the southern-most, where we

were now. If we had driven directly, it would have been about 2,500 miles, but instead, we [drove through Baja](#), and visited several expat locations not directly on the path, including [Ajijic](#), [San Miguel de Allende](#), [Merida](#), and most recently, [Cancun to Tulum](#), which added another 500 – 1,000 miles or so to our trip. Instead of going to the border, we headed past the significantly less momentous Sam’s Club, to our hotel.



Even though I like to pay as little for things as possible, it is my belief that there are a few things you should be careful about paying too little for, for example, someone to do an operation on you and uncooked meat. While not as critical as selecting a surgeon or butcher based on the cheapest price, I believe it would also be possible to pay too little for a hotel, and Jet had found one in Chetumal for \$26. I was a bit worried.

I needn’t have been. [The hotel was actually very nice and clean, with working Internet, very good plumbing for showers and toilets, a television and even a workout area by their indoor pool](#). It was also located right near downtown and the bay. We enjoyed it thoroughly, as I re-calibrated my “worry meter” about cheap hotels, at least while in Mexico.



[Chetumal itself was also surprisingly nice](#). Sharing the Bay of Chetumal with Belize (which Belizeans call Corozal Bay), [Chetumal had a very pleasant malecon and nice amenities](#). We were there right in the height of the Christmas present buying season and on a Saturday, so the streets were packed (but not too crowded) with shoppers and restaurants open late. For some reason, they also had several Boba stores, which we very much enjoyed, along with the free concert downtown, just walking distance from our hotel.

But the best shopping experience had to be along the malecon and provided by young men from Chiapas, which is located a good 300 – 400 miles away. Evidently working as a team with a master ringleader carefully hidden and speaking the indigenous language of Chiapas instead

of Spanish, they had a huge variety of beautiful, hand-embroidered blouses, which they told me were 100 pesos each (at that time, about \$5). It was very difficult to judge the age of the young men, as they were very short for fully grown men and just didn't look that old (very little or no facial hair, etc.), while yet having a maturity about them that would make you think they were in their mid-twenties.



After watching and listening these young men trying to sell to the local Mexicans and hearing the same price (so I knew I wasn't being quoted the Gringo Price), I went to find Jet to tell her about my find, mindful of a piece of advice I had learned years earlier: never get between Jet Metier and a good purchase.

After telling her of my discovery, I prudently stepped aside before becoming invisible or just seen as an obstacle that had to be cleared, thereby safely presenting a clear path for Jet to the goods and the promised shopping paradise. She told me she appreciated that I encouraged her to buy to her heart's content (it's easy to be a hero at these prices), and set to work.



As if guided by a shopping laser beam and pulled by an irresistible gravitational field, feet barely touching the ground, Jet was drawn over. She looked at the merchandise, somewhat shocked. Every blouse was beautiful and every one was different! Almost too good to be true and jammed by too much stimuli, for several minutes, she couldn't even process the "price / quality / how many should I buy" equation; words and higher level thought simply eluded her. After taking a moment or so to regain her composure, she told me that blouses of this quality would cost at least six times as much in Forever 21 and more in other places, if you could find them at all.

Since many Mexican handicraft markets have no changing stalls, and certainly these young-looking hawkers from Chiapas on the street did not cart around screens, Jet has had to try on

shirts over hers right on the Chetumal malecon. Because there was no mirror for Jet to see how each blouse fit, I took pictures on my cell phone of her for her to see how each one looked and based on how each one fit, who to give it to (or to keep it herself). Intermittently during this joyous spectacle, a passerby or two would nod their approval of a particular choice. Shopping knows no language.

Over the next 30 minutes, we had purchased distinct, memorable, quality, and beautiful Christmas presents for every female on our list, and five or so additional for Jet.

Carrying our bags as we walked further on the malecon to enjoy the sights and reflect from our starting point that morning in Akumal (story [here](#)), we both agreed: it had been a great day.

Next, we'll turn north, back through the Mexican Highlands to see what's changed...

Chetumal to Cordoba, Mexico: More Ease and a New Cooking Style, But Watch Out for the Kids!

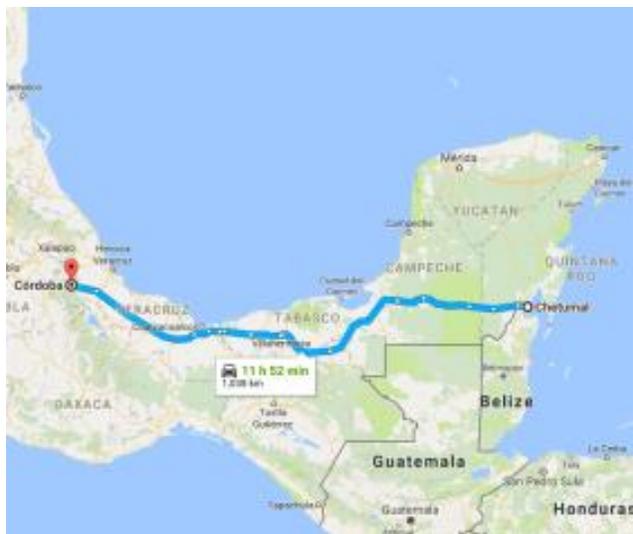
Here was our situation:

- It was the middle of the Christmas High Season, when house rental prices are the highest and house rental vacancies are the lowest. (The euphemistic term for this is “Landlord’s Market.”)
- My wife, Jet, our two dogs and I were in [Chetumal](#), about as far south as you can go and still be in Mexico.
- Due to a bad experience with a house rental (see: [Two House Rentals Gone Wrong, and a Guardian Angel](#)) and as a result, no reservations anywhere, we needed a place to stay for several months in exchange rental payments which wouldn’t result in bankruptcy (see: “Landlord’s Market”, above).



What would you do?

From this less than powerful bargaining position and after lots of research and contacting pretty much everyone we had met on [our Mexico road trip](#), Jet found us a place that seemed OK (all we had were pictures) through a rental agent we trusted at a price that didn’t feel like extortion after a natural disaster. It was in the [Ajijic / Lake Chapala area](#), 1,182 miles from our present hotel room in Chetumal. Given the reality of our less than enviable situation, that was good enough for us. After seven months since [crossing the border in Mexicali](#), 14 Mexican states and more than 4,000 miles on our road trip, The Fates had decided it was time for us to return to a place about halfway through our adventure we had stayed before and very much enjoyed.



We would have liked to have driven to the Lake Chapala area via a route that would be different than just re-tracing the one we took down to the Yucatan Peninsula by means of

offsetting our return route to the west, so we could experience Chiapas and Oaxaca and Jet could buy the items originating from this area "factory direct" as opposed to from vendors pretty much throughout Mexico and [most recently in Chetumal](#). However, given the combination "season / rental vacancy rate / rental pricing" dynamic and the fact that we had at best only an implicit hold on the rental, until we physically unpacked at Lake Chapala, if we took this diversion, our trip back would have been followed by this nagging black cloud with the words "What if it doesn't work out and we have nowhere to stay?" written on it, so Jet put her grieving aside, and we reluctantly decided to take the most direct route.



On the good side, there is a very noticeable and cheery combination of comfort and relaxation that comes with visiting places you have been to before. You can loosen up and take in more, without being dogged by concerns such as "Are we lost?", "Will we like it?", "Where can we eat?", etc. For most of the places we were going, we knew the answers to each of these questions from our experience gained earlier, when we first visited, and which would allow us to expand our experiences from the comfort of "the known." Happily and with surprising joy, we booked the same three hotels we had stayed in on our trip down, thereby planning to balance the thrill of experiencing the absolutely unknown with the contentment and confidence of being in the tested and more familiar but not yet so familiar as to be boring. After being on the road in an unending parade of new places since May, it was an easy trade-off.

We left our [great \\$26 hotel room in Chetumal](#) to drive close to due west, from the state of Quintana Roo to the state of Campeche, across the girdle of the Yucatan Peninsula where Mexico is squeezed by the Gulf of Mexico on one side and Guatemala on the other.



Not unusual for this part of the world, the air was thick and musky, it was a bit humid and overcast, the jungle was omnipresent and the terrain was flat. Gradually, the scenery changed to rolling, pastoral hills, cleared for cattle and horses, but very few humans. It was relaxing and very green, with ponds, wooden fences with barbed wire. There was lots of room and plenty of signs advertising various, more remote Mayan ruins.

As is the case with many things that eventually become commonplace, we remembered the first instance; in this case, something that confused us. Traveling at about 60 miles per hour, we passed some kids running along the road, followed by an open truck with more kids in the back and Catholic religious symbols on top. Fascinating. What was that all about?

In this very rural area, about 20 minutes later, we saw another instance of essentially the same thing but with a different truck and different kids, then 10 minutes after that, another, and so on. It was now raining intermittently, and still we saw more kids running along the side of the road. Each group had some sort of unifying dress—tee shirts or neckerchiefs, etc. In places along the side of the road, kids and young adults waited in groups, too often sitting with their backs toward the traffic and way too close to the road for my comfort.



(Jet and I have often remarked how trusting pedestrians are in Mexico; sitting, standing, or walking right next to the road, many times apparently not paying any attention whatsoever to the possibility that with a slight turn to the right of a distracted motorist, their lives would be changed forever, or worse. And it's not like there are never any safe places to sit; most of the time, there are. They just seem to prefer the unsafe ones.)

Being curious types, we stopped at a gas station that looked to double that day as a staging area for whatever was going on, and asked what was happening. Clearly, this was our first year in Mexico, because what we were witnessing was the annual celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which commemorates the Catholic belief that Juan Diego, an early convert to Catholicism in Mexico, was visited by the Virgin Mary. Not only in the state of Campeche were they running, but they were also running simultaneously in the entire 31 states and one Federal District in the country. [You can see our interview of some participants here.](#)



We arrived at the Villahermosa Hampton Inn as night fell, pulling in against the sounds of persistent and random firecrackers exploding in the distance in every direction, celebrating Juan Diego's vision and the Virgin. The front desk manager remembered us, and in a magnanimous gesture to commemorate our first stay, charged us for only one of our two dogs. As we got to the room, one of our dogs noticed the same type of dog bed provided by

the hotel that she had slept in during our first Villahermosa Hampton Inn experience, and immediately took up residence, tail wagging in approval. Even our dogs were more comfortable the second time around!

Leaving the next day, the road from Villahermosa to Cordoba slowly gained elevation, as we left the flatlands and saw the view this time from the east side of the road. It was still humid, with sugar cane, ponds and lakes, and lots of pastoral land. Given that we were on the other side of the highway, we were easily able to pull off at an intriguing-looking restaurant that had what looked to be a small amusement park next door with tanks of some sort. Getting out of the van and looking closer, we saw that the tanks were used for aquaculture and the restaurant was serving some of the contents of the tanks for lunch.

We had tilapia cooked “en papillote”, which Jet told me meant cooked “in paper” in French, but in this case, our meal in Mexico was cooked in foil. We ate delicious, fresh fish, cooked in a style I had never even heard of before, right off the main road to Cordoba, with a bus stop in front. They served us spicy and rich salsas made of chili seeds cooked in oil (see picture nearby). It reminded Jet of Chinese chili oil. Even though this unexpected treat was not for sale, Jet asked for a bottle to buy. The somewhat perplexed but accommodating waiter found a bottle, poured some in, and we had our souvenir. To the side of us, they had set up chairs for a religious gathering, as little boys dressed up as St. Juan and little girls dressed up as the Virgin Mary skipped and ran past us in full costume, parents in tow.



Arriving in Cordoba, the HB Hotel hadn't changed a bit in the roughly one month since we had last stayed. Just like the last time, we enjoyed a big, very modern and comfortable, extremely well-designed room with a marble shower. Because we knew what we were doing, we made sure to get a window overlooking the park, [which we described in an earlier post](#). What I didn't describe before was the policy of using the in-room hotel refrigerator. Unlike in the US, where removing the Coke in the fridge would result at checkout in a trip to the ATM or the need for a credit increase on your card, in this well-stocked hotel refrigerator, everything was included for free! Astonished and not quite believing what I was being told because it was so opposite my experience in the US, I asked three times in my broken Spanish, using different word combinations. The result: Yes, it was “gratis.” Unwrap the candy!

Our dogs couldn't be in the room with us, but we were not as concerned as last time we were there, because this time, we and our dogs knew the drill. We put our dogs in the van and parked it so that the end of the van could be seen from the front desk. Then, I had a quick conversation with the night guard (who remembered us from last time and was very friendly), and just like last time, I tipped him, in Mexico, always a much appreciated and very easy to afford gesture.



The next morning, I awoke the sleeping dogs and we more completely explored the beautiful adjacent park and surrounding neighborhoods. In addition to seeing more of the neighborhood, what had changed is that we had arrived on a weekend, so we could sample the brunch we had lusted after but not been able to experience the last time we were there. In stark contrast to the people at our most recent lower elevation experiences, the women customers at the brunch wore clothing designed for cooler climates. As we enjoyed the patio and [ate the local specialties of different corn masa dishes](#), a Christmas party was in progress. We could bring our dogs to the pool area, just like before, where they, us, and the people at the party [enjoyed the outdoors, the gorgeous, huge trees from the park close by, and the sound of the creek below](#).

Even though everyone was friendly the first time we visited, they just seemed even more friendly this time. There were smiles, recognition and greetings, along with our struggling but somewhat improved Spanish. We felt like we were being treated as recently returned friends, fresh with adventures and stories to tell.



True, our adventures in the last several months had become integrated into Jet and me and changed us, as what was strange just months before now provided a familiar and safe place to which we could return.

Next, we depart Cordoba for Puebla and experience soaring mountains, lots of good things to eat, and a dancing klezmer band.

Cordoba to Puebla, Mexico: Soaring Mountains and Lots of Gastronomy

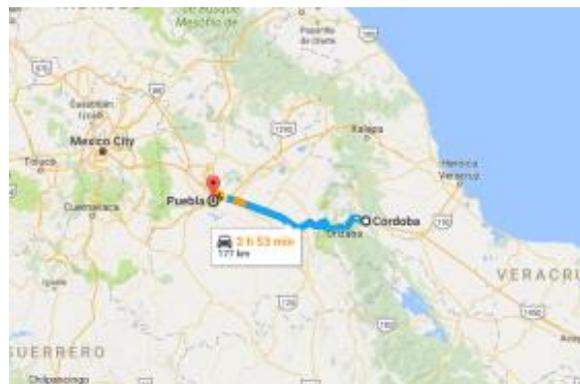
We were looking forward to visiting Puebla again, so as one of our few extravagances while returning to Lake Chapala as quickly as possible, we booked two nights [at the hotel in Puebla we had enjoyed so much](#). Staying there an extra night would also make it possible for us to see a bit of the city.

Starting in Cordoba, Puebla is less than three hours by car, but what a breathtakingly scenic three hours it is! Even before leaving Cordoba, we could see towering snowcapped volcanoes, previewing what our trip would be like the next several hours.

Pointing the van northwest, the environs of Cordoba passed behind us, our van gaining elevation as we went, the flatlands of the Gulf of Mexico on our drive prior to Cordoba the previous day becoming more and more a distant memory. Within an hour, we were driving mountain passes, on a typical mountain road. The air became a little drier and steadily cooler, as the surroundings changed from typical urban inhabitants doing typical urban things in Cordoba to shepherds with their herds of sheep on the side of the road, amongst mountainsides graced with lush foliage and stately pines.

We were traveling amongst huge trucks with drivers that evidently had been on this road before and who were late, because they were traveling fast on narrow, winding roads. We, however, had plenty of time, as we enjoyed the drama and the splendor of our surroundings. To the right, the road hugged the mountain, while to the left we saw drop-offs on an almost lunar scale. Below, there were little valleys with towns nestled within.

Up we continued to climb, ensconced in the grandeur of these magnificent mountains. Then, at about 8,400 feet elevation, the road leveled out to reveal an enormous, slightly tilted but flat plane, as the air became less humid still. Within just a few moments, we were in an area of brown hills and plants more suited to a drier climate and swaths of agricultural plots.

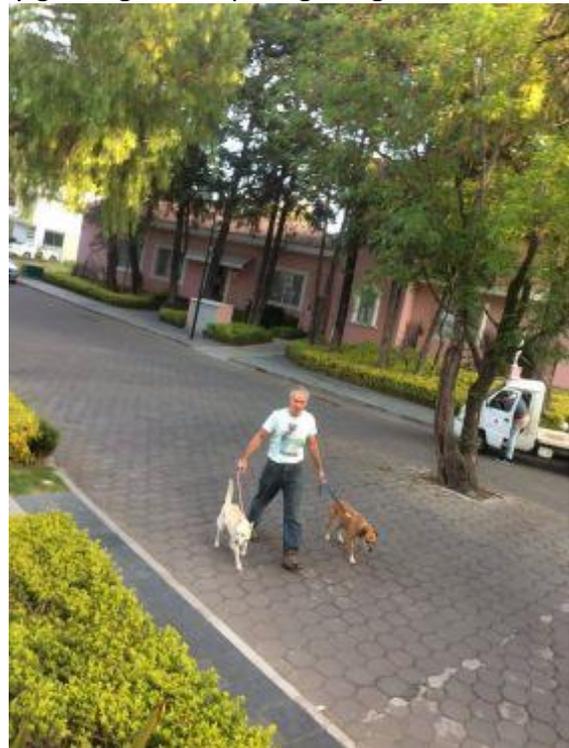


Coming into Puebla, we took a different route than the last time, but not on purpose. Missing our turnoff, we wound up on what seemed like several miles of elevated highway with a great view of the city but with nary a single off-ramp. Eventually, we were deposited next to a huge Volkswagen factory large enough to be a small city of its own.



After our unplanned tour of the industrial side of Puebla, we made the same right into the little oasis that contained our hotel and the surrounding neighborhood. Like returning to the accepting home of a kindly relative, everything was pleasant and familiar. The air was fresh and cool, with the slight scent of pines, and it was quiet. The old VW camping van that was parked nearby with the leaves on it was still there, as was the pretty and stylish fraccionamiento (housing development), just as we remembered them. This time, we had to try a few different rooms at the hotel before we found the one we liked best. Being that we knew better, we avoided the mistake we made last time, and got a room overlooking the courtyard as opposed to the parking lot.

There were the familiar pine and oak trees, with richly green grass carpeting the ground. As before, we enjoyed our morning walks, but with the added comfort of knowing the neighborhood. We tried to see if there were homes to rent, but couldn't find any short term.



We were very happy to have booked Puebla for two days instead of one, because it gave us the added time to do many of the things we weren't able to on our first visit but would be able to on this one. This time, however, we would benefit from the greater knowledge and confidence that comes from visiting a second time, repeating what was good while seeking out new adventures.

Looking to replicate the breakfast buffet experience we had on our first visit, we ate again at the restaurant across from the hotel, on the same terrace with our two dogs, with the same waitress, Elizabeth, who remembered us and brought us delectable masa dishes that were the pride of the region but not on the buffet, prepared just then, just for us. In addition, my wife Jet discovered a tasty grain-like wheat germ called amaranth that we were told is a common breakfast food in Puebla with marvelous digestive properties. (Several months later, while

visiting California, Jet shared her discovery with her parents, who, after a suitable trial, agreed.)

Our hotel was in the more modern part of town, so we had to drive a bit to do our [self-guided tour of centro Puebla](#), which had very nice shopping and beautiful architecture. For the hours we were there, we saw not a single expat, although there were a sprinkling of stores from our American past, including Woolworths, evidently unaware of its fate in the US and still thriving in Puebla, Mexico. There was a street band playing what resembled klezmer music, so after our car tour, we spent some time walking near the plaza, where, [never passing up a chance to dance to klezmer music, Jet gave it a try.](#)



But back to the shopping. Jet found some miniatures of Mexican leather purses that she had to have and did, along with native blouses that she wanted but couldn't have, because they did not have sizes large enough for her. We visited a store where Jet purchased an exuberantly embroidered floral native dress that was perfect for her mother to wear at her vacation beach home in the Philippines. In a testament to how all of humanity is intertwined in one way or another, the legend goes that, centuries earlier, a Spaniard bought a Filipino girl to Mexico, whose native Filipino dress and embroideries were so admired by the native Mexican women that they adopted the style and technique for their own clothing. Fast forward to the present, now each Mexican village has its own signature designs in this style for which they can be identified. Completing the circle, Jet purchased the dress for her mom, both of which will be traveling westward in a few months.



Jet also bought herself a native dress with fringe at the hem, a design rarely found in the crafts markets. While there, [the owners of the store outfitted Jet in a beautiful embroidered native skirt that had only one seam and needed careful wrapping and a cloth belt to keep it up.](#)

One of our dinners was at the restaurant just up the street from the hotel less than a 10-minute

walk away. We knew that our dogs were safe (and probably asleep) in the hotel room, so we could enjoy ourselves worry-free. To get to the entrance, we had to walk over a gully that had a Plexiglas bridge. Other than two well-dressed Mexican men a few tables over, we were the only customers in this beautiful, chic restaurant with the murals of bulls on interior walls that were adorned for Christmas. In stark contrast to the temperatures we were in just a few days earlier in the Yucatan Peninsula, Jet was now dressed in full on winter gear with a below the knee coat, and still asked to be near the heater.



As we waited for our authentic Puebla food, we saw that the waiter and his assistant were engaged in a rather elaborate ceremony to the side of the table of the two other patrons. There was a push cart, lots of different types of alcohol, and what looked like jars of spices and other items we couldn't identify. The evidently discerning and worldly men watched approvingly, but not too much so.

Interrupting the show two tables over was the arrival of our food. It was sophisticated and different than we had experienced just a few days before and certainly nothing like you would expect in a typical Mexican restaurant in the US. We had guisados, which we learned is delicious, subtle, savory and stew-like, with black beans on the side.

Unable to shake the vision of the alcohol-centered ritual we had witnessed before dinner and feeling good about pretty much everything, I decided to try it. Out came the cart with the mezcal and spices, and the show began. With the confidence and professionalism evidently gained from training and practice, after several minutes of pouring, mixing, rubbing, adding and stirring (I don't remember any shaking), the waiter passed me the finished product... which, honestly, I didn't like at all. But hey, you never know until you try. Perhaps it's an "acquired taste."



Our third culinary triumph was dinner the next night at a Korean restaurant within a half hour walk from the hotel. It was our first Korean food in more than eight months and Jet's first conversation with a real-life Korean in Mexico about the Korean dramas she has been steaming from the Internet all during our road trip. (There's no place like home.)

Flush from our Korean food experience of bulgogi, kimchi, seasoned soybean sprouts, seasoned spinach, spicy cucumber salad and lots of other side dishes, and after having a sufficient quantity of amaranth the next morning, we bid goodbye to our sanctuary in the little offset of modern Puebla and embarked for the final leg of our journey, to Lake Chapala, about 420 miles west-northwest. We had a long way to go and not much time to get there.

Next, we sprint the last leg of our journey, from Puebla to the Lake Chapala area while constructing mind experiments and visiting a very unexpected rest stop.

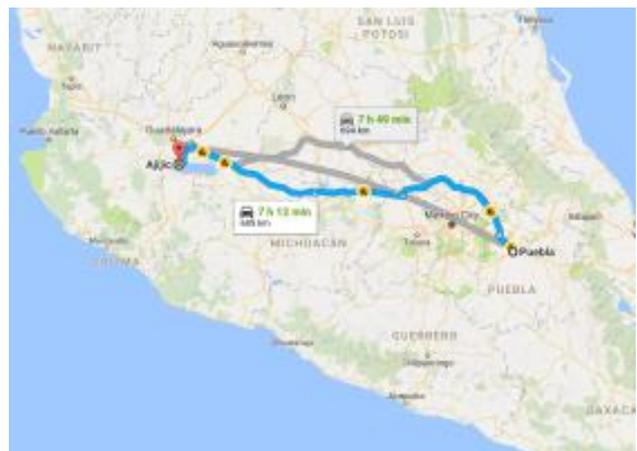
Puebla to Lake Chapala, Mexico: A Place Worthy of Return

From Puebla, it's only about 80 miles to Mexico City, and there were plenty of signs encouraging us to visit. However, with over 21 million people in the metro area and us being on a tight schedule on our way to Lake Chapala more than 420 miles away, we decided it would be better to see Mexico City some other time, and instead pointed our van to the Northern Arc, which, true to its name, curves around the fourth most populous city in the world.

The scenery to each side of the Northern Arc is filled with huge corporate farms and massive granaries. In front, behind, and to the sides of us on the highway were what seemed like a never-ending parade trucks fully-laden with Volkswagen Transits manufactured in Puebla and on their way to their respective showrooms or perhaps to a loading dock for transport elsewhere.

To the sides of the road were vast expanses with very little in them; basically flat areas with medium-sized volcanic-looking mountains defining the horizon, and in the near view, high desert and hardly any trees. The few trees that grew naturally looked to be Joshua trees and others that resembled California Pepper and Spruce. We also saw paddle cactus farms with the cactus packed so closely together we figured that, to harvest them, you would have to start at the edge and move inward. We were traveling through a huge valley ringed by medium-sized peaks poking up from our already high, plane-like elevation.

For us, the atmosphere and general feeling of the area was relaxing and mellow, with not much change in the scenery to look at for quite a while. If you've ever driven through the San Joaquin Valley in California, it was a bit like that, but with higher mountains. The modern highway was very good, so I could drive smoothly at 80 miles per hour, and of course, this being Mexico, I was being passed by motorists going 100 miles per hour.



Given that the driving was so non-demanding, my mind had time to wander, as I thought back to a few days earlier, when, on a two-lane highway (one lane in each direction, each with its own shoulder), for the first time ever, I experienced being passed by two cars at the same time; one using the shoulder to the right of me and one passing on the left using the opposing lane of traffic. In my more than 40 years of driving, I'm quite certain this has never happened to me before, because I would have remembered it.



“Passing cars irrespective of their speed seems to be an imperative for Mexicans,” I thought.

And then I came up with an experiment: what would happen if, instead of going 80 miles per hour, I were going 110 miles per hour? Would they still pass me?

Fortunately, my wife Jet's rather impassioned opposition and the fact that our fully packed van couldn't safely go 110 miles per hour stopped me from performing my ill-advised experiment... but I still do wonder...

High up in the mountains in Temascalcingo, about 75 miles northwest of Mexico City and 3 ½ hours from Puebla (in other words, pretty much in the middle of nowhere), [we visited a remarkable rest stop called Café km 118](#). We knew immediately we were not at just some ordinary rest stop, because the outside was spotless and modern, with a flower wall. Inside, there were good-looking, fashionably-dressed, tall Mexican customers (especially tall when compared with the Mayans in Yucatan), quite a few of whom seemed to be wearing ski-wear.



Everything was state-of-the-art, the bathrooms were very clean, and everything was orderly. The servers wore plastic guards around their faces I assume so that they didn't breathe on the food, which was varied, bountiful, beautifully displayed, very inexpensive (by American standards, not Mexican), and delicious. In every way, it was a tasteful melding of corporate efficiencies with style, so it wasn't sterile. It was as though we been transported via a time machine to visit a standard Mexico rest stop in the year 2040. Even the cakes on display were intricate and world-class. We had never seen a rest stop like this in the US, let alone in Mexico. We wondered if

people visited this place not as a rest stop, but as a destination.

Several hours later, before reaching Guadalajara and as a bypass to this huge city, we made a left onto the cuota (toll road) that headed straight towards Lake Chapala. When we were last there, it was the summer rainy season, so then everything was incredibly lush, dripping, plump and green, with clinging vines to soften the graceful landscape and a musky / “it just rained” smell in the air. Now, as we approached, because it was mid-December, everything was dry, including the air.



As the road crested, we saw the lake down below and in front of us, the landmark to our ultimate objective the last four days and more than 1,100 miles of driving from [Chetumal, on the border with Belize](#). Down we drove to the “T” near the lake’s edge, where we stopped at the light, a perfect place and time to trade our road trip mentality for a “we’ll be staying here for a while” mentality.

As the light turned green, we made our turn onto the main road in town, now past the place where we had shopped for produce, past the man we knew selling coffee from his truck on the side of the road (we both waved in happy recognition), now past the place we had eaten when we first came to town, when we were completely ignorant of the area we would be staying. We slowed down even further as familiar faces and familiar places with happy memories filled us with comfort. Yes, the hills that used to be green were brown this time of the year, but the trees overhanging the road were just as pretty and the people and places we knew and enjoyed were all still there.



[Seven months earlier, starting as naive beginners without any guide or experience](#), without having completed our temporary residence papers, without knowing much Spanish, without much of an idea of what we would experience or even if we would soon or eventually turn tail and run back to the US in failure, Jet, me, and our two dogs [crossed the border at Mexicali](#) in a fully packed, big, white van, and [pointed it south, to Baja California](#).

During that time on the road, we had overcome obstacles, celebrated new competencies, small and large victories, saw, lived in, and fully experienced beautiful and completely unexpected places from [Baja](#), through [the area around Puerto Vallarta where the jungle drips into the sea](#), to the Mexican Highlands with [comfortable Ajijic](#) and [sophisticated San Miguel de Allende](#), down to the [Yucatan with its mystical cenotes](#) and Quintana Roo with its flashy resorts in [Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Akumal and Tulum](#), and all the way to [the border with Belize](#).



In those seven months, Jet and I had adventures together to last a lifetime, made new friends of all different walks of life and backgrounds and expanded our horizons and understandings, all of which had changed and deepened us and had become a very welcomed part of us both. Now, driving down the road with Lake Chapala to our left and the mountains to our right, we had arrived at a place we would stay for a while.

Now That Our Road Trip is Over, I Can Tell You What It Was Really Like to Live in Mexico for a Year

Maybe my wife and I lead lives a lot like yours.

Or at least we did, until about a year ago. That's when we sold our comfortable home in Arizona, sold, gave away or put into storage about 90% of our "stuff," packed the rest into a big white van, and along with our two dogs, spent a year traveling around Mexico.

Why did we do it? For [an adventure before we were too old](#) to do it and to see if we liked anywhere along the way as a place to live.



A lot has happened to my wife and me in that year and it certainly seems like more than a year since [we crossed the border in Mexicali](#).

Maybe you would like to hear about it, in case you're considering having your own adventure abroad.

Before I share our observations, here's a little about my wife, Jet Metier, and me. We were born in the middle of the Baby Boom, 1957. We don't have children at home any longer, but we do have the two dogs I mentioned earlier. We had done a moderate amount of international traveling but never as adults had we lived in a foreign country. Our Spanish was about on level with a B-student high schooler half way through first year Introduction to Spanish.

With that, here's the highlights of what we've learned:



- The foundation of your success or failure will be your attitude, especially at the very important beginning stages, when everything is most new, and there are the greatest challenges / opportunities. “There is no growth without pain;” in this case, the “pain” of having to do some things differently. How will you respond? Will this “pain” cause you to become irritated as you become more inward focused, or will it open for you new perspectives and growth? Do you define “different” as “less than”, or do you approach differences with curiosity and seek to understand and gain from them?



If you're open to it, being placed into unfamiliar circumstances and seeing things you're not used to will make you more understanding of other people, challenge your pre-conceived ideas, broaden and deepen you as a person, and provide you with a hyper-charged opportunity for growth.

See: [Exposed: 'Move and Live Abroad' Industry Is a Sham, a Scam, and a Fraud](#) and [Want to Be Happy Living Abroad? You'll Need This](#)

- The reality of Mexico was very different than what we thought it would be. Up until we crossed the border, the totality of our Mexican experiences were a few soirees across the border near San Diego to Tijuana / Ensenada, a vacation to Cabo San Lucas, a few Club Med experiences, and a two-hour cruise stop. Here are just a few of the things that ran counter to what we thought we would find:



- Most of Mexico is in the Highlands, where it's not hot and where there is no ocean. Where there is ocean in Mexico (or more properly named in this example, the Sea of Cortez on the east coast of Baja California) [can be magnificent](#), rivaling in beauty beaches almost anywhere in the world, but you come across them by surprise, and there are close to no people there. At the other geographic extreme, we [traveled through mountain passes and snow-capped volcanoes](#) and [miles of rolling, agricultural land](#) with very pleasant, cool, temperatures. A very large portion of Mexico is in the Highlands with enough elevation to make the temperature moderate all year round and there's a big lake called Chapala that [moderates the already nice weather around it even more](#). In the Yucatan, [they have cenotes](#), a visit to which is worthy of everyone's bucket list.



See Best Places YouTubes on [the beaches we enjoyed](#) and [Our First Few Days in Ajijic: "Not Too Much"](#)

- In general, the Mexicans you meet in Mexico after you leave the border areas are quite a bit different than the Mexicans you meet in LA, Tucson, etc. The Mexicans in Mexico tend to be more traditional, non-confrontational and even a bit passive, and they don't really celebrate Cinco de Mayo! As a group, Mexicans in Mexico are not at all scary, open, friendly people who like and admire Americans and Canadians.

See: [Observations About Baja Mexicans and Baja Mexican Food](#)



- Not even the food in Mexico was what I expected. When you think of Mexican food, what comes to mind? If you're like me, you envision hard shell tacos like you find at Taco Bell, burritos, maybe some enchiladas, and lots of chips. The reality is that Mexico is a big country, with lots of regional food differences. What surprised me most is how many

dishes they make into something I would call “stew.” I’m still waiting for my first enchilada and we’ve had perhaps four burritos in over a year, but it’s not for lack of trying.

See: [Food of Mexico](#)

- Your housekeepers and to a lesser extent, your gardeners, are your guides. (Almost all our house rentals included housekeepers and gardeners in the rental price, which is nice to the point of being luxurious.) Alternatively benevolent mother, human Angie’s List, personal assistant and trusted guide, your housekeeper is not only intimately aware of how everything in the house works, but they are a great resource for answers on everyday living, such as “Where can I get the tear in these pants sewn?”, “How do we get more water for our outside container?”, “When do they have celebrations and shoot off the firecrackers?”, etc.
- It is very difficult to pick good vacation / short term rentals without seeing them first and knowing the neighborhood. Jet did many, many hours of research, a great job and several awesome houses in awesome locations, but even so, we still wound up with two bad choices that required evacuation, some fast thinking and quick execution of “Plan B.”



See [Two House Rentals Gone Wrong, and a Guardian Angel.](#)

- You really can be happy without that new, leased BMW. I know this because in Mexico we saw happy people all the time, some of whom, by North of the Border standards, were materially quite poor. How could this be? What could be more important to happiness than material success? It turns out that the answer to this question is very important, which is brought into focus easier when living amongst people who don’t

have as much as you do and yet are happy. In our North of the Border rush for “stuff,” many of us could benefit from more of this perspective.

See: [How Traveling and Living Abroad Gave Me a Better Perspective on Time and Happiness](#)



- Compared with Mexico, the healthcare system in the US is absurdly expensive and the doctors don't spend enough time with you. While Americans used to justifiably cite healthcare as a reason not to live in Mexico, now healthcare is a prime reason to live in Mexico.

See: [My Personal Experience Comparing Healthcare in the US vs. Mexico](#)

- After living in Mexico for a year, I am even more grateful to have been born an American. The reasons for this are too numerous to list here. However, just from a financial standpoint, an American with an income in the middle of other Americans can come to Mexico and live like a king, while a Mexican with an income in the middle of other Mexicans obviously can't come to the US and live well. Being born north of the Rio Grande is an unearned, very lucky gift. Again, thank you, USA.

See: [4 Advantages for Americans Living Abroad](#)

- And thinking of that gift, you can be very proud of how, as a group Americans and Canadians behave in Mexico. The Ugly American is by and large a myth, as difficult to locate as Big Foot. Any fair reading of American and Canadian expats (a reading which would of course exclude Americans who just hate the US and anything American) would recognize and appreciate American and Canadian expats in Mexico starting charities, treating others with respect, displaying kindness, etc.



See: [What Expats Are Really Like](#)

- While it is easy to get by in the expat areas of Mexico without knowing much Spanish or close to no Spanish at all, the more you know or can learn, the richer will be your experience and the lower will be your level of frustration. Mexicans are extremely understanding of your poor Spanish and are flattered that you are trying, no matter how badly you botch the language. (I speak from repeated personal experience.)

As an example, when you say to a Mexican that you are sorry you can't speak Spanish well and that you're trying to learn, most Mexicans will reply with a big smile, tell you that it's great you're learning, and they are trying to learn to speak English, too. This equivalence is very nice on a human level, but remember, you're in Mexico. It really should be more incumbent for you to learn the language of Mexico than for Mexicans to learn English. You can do it and you don't have to be perfect. Knowing just a few words is much better than complete ignorance and you will get large grins and lots of appreciation in exchange.

- In most places, you must be a good driver. As examples, many of the areas where it would be prudent to have a shoulder to the side of un-railed 100 foot drop offs into the sea in Baja have none; the colonial or just older towns (and there are lots of them, including Ajijic and [San Miguel de Allende](#)) have very narrow streets in most places; the traffic patterns are, by our standards, chaotic; maintenance and signage is not great (they have very little money to fix it—[property taxes can be about \\$150 per year for a 3,000 square foot home](#)); some places have [potholes large enough to have fish in them in the rainy season](#); and the calm, easy going Mexicans you meet elsewhere become maniacs when behind the wheel.



- Do it before you're too old. Not only because of the hand-eye coordination and cool nerves required for driving in many places (see above), but also because walking in Mexico can be more physically demanding. The streets can be cobblestone and not

maintained well, the sidewalks can be uneven, and if you're tall, there are lots of opportunities to bump your head.

- After settling in, your stress level goes way down. Many of the reasons center around how much less expensive it is to live in Mexico. (See [How Living Abroad Can Reduce Your Stress](#).) Here are just some of the North of the Border stressors that are reduced (many drastically) in Mexico:
- Quality healthcare costs about 75% less, so you are less worried about going to the doctor or being wiped out financially by an illness. I save about \$1,000 per month (yes, you read that right) on health insurance, while doctor visits are around \$30 each or less, out of pocket, without insurance. Even going to the vet is much less expensive. One of our dogs needed surgery to repair a ligament in her knee. The cost here in Mexico was around \$300, compared to around \$2,000 in the US. Think how much that would reduce your stress. (See: [My Personal Experience Comparing Healthcare in the US vs. Mexico](#).)
- Repairs to your car cost about a third and body work is probably about one tenth the cost as in the US, so rather cursing, gritting my teeth and girding for a huge expense if I need a new timing belt or a repair to a dent the van, I just happily take in in, and later, it is delivered back to me, with perfectly done work and, when compared with the US, a very, very small bill.
- Domestic services such as housekeeping, gardening and even painting (each about \$2.50 to \$3.00 an hour) and repairs (the same per hour or slightly more) are so inexpensive that you don't have to do them yourself. This not only leaves much more money in your



pocket, but it also gifts you with something even more important-- time to do other things you enjoy. This can be a much bigger deal than you would think it to be, after you've lived it for a while. It's really quite nice.

See: [How Not Doing Chores Living Abroad Added 36 Additional Years of Free Time to Our Lives](#)

- Apples to apples, housing is about half or less the cost as in the US. This reduces a lot of stress and increases your enjoyment in that better / bigger house in a better location with better weather, view, etc., you're living in, while at the same time putting the extra money you saved into the bank, so you can look forward to looking at your bank balance with joy, rather than trepidation.
- And while you're enjoying yourself as a result of the items in the bullets above, if you're into these types of things, you can easily afford some pampering to celebrate. My wife Jet gets facials and pedicures for about a 75% discount or more compared to what they would cost in the US, while I get my haircuts for anywhere from \$2.76 to about \$6.

See: [Getting a Haircut in Lo de Marcos, Nayarit, Mexico, for 50 Pesos \(US 2.75\)](#), [Medical in Mexico YouTubes](#), [How Living in Mexico Can Give You a Lifestyle Upgrade](#)

- If you have a good relationship with your spouse or significant other, it will be much better and deeper, because you will have worked together and shared big, new experiences as a couple. However, if your relationship isn't so great, you may want to consider not going (or at least not going together).



- If you don't get involved with drugs or smuggling, you are much safer from violence than common (and flat out wrong) knowledge. We were never once afraid in any way for our safety, and evidently, the hundreds of single expat women in their 70s we met (none of whom were especially threatening looking themselves) weren't afraid for their safety, either.



See: [Safety in Mexico](#).

- As a group, the Mexican people are hardworking, warm, helpful, non-resentful people. When you interact with them, witness their lives and how they interact with each other, how family helps out, and how they deal with what we would consider to be hardship, even though they may be different than you, you will come to admire them, and want the best for them. Also, the country seems to be doing fairly well economically. Housekeepers have cell phones, people look very well fed, there seem to be a good amount of middle class Mexicans and there are plenty of upper middle class and wealthy Mexicans.

To balance things out, here are some of the bad things I haven't already mentioned:

- Depending on where you are, [the electricity can go out more \(and with it, the Internet\)](#).
- Depending on where you are, the Internet may not be as good as you're used to in the US. (However, in some areas, it's actually better.)
- You will tend to see more stray dogs.
- When you go off the beaten path in expat areas, not everyone speaks English, so that could frustrate you.



- In many places, [you shouldn't drink the water](#) out of the tap and the plumbing is not as good as North of the Border.

If you do something along the lines of what we did, you'll most likely be a better person than if you just stay home, for lots of reasons. When you figure out you can be successful, you will feel very good about yourself. You can test yourself in somewhat challenging but certainly not life threatening or extreme situations to "see what you're made of" against a backup plan that, if it doesn't work out, you can always go back.



Almost certainly, you'll succeed in one way or another in everything, which will give you a big confidence boost that will carry over into other aspects of your life. When you make it through, you'll have great stories to tell and great memories to look back on. You may not be "The Most Interesting Man / Woman in the World", but you'll be a lot more interesting and well-rounded than if you had stayed home and watched TV.

With the caveats above, doing what we did is probably a lot easier to do than you think. After all, all those 70+ year old Americans and Canadians did it (many of whom know little or no Spanish), so how hard could it be?

The "Club"

This brings me to the concept of "The Club", the intangible existence of which dawned on me when we were staying in [La Ventana](#), at an out of the way fishing village about 45 minutes from La Paz, in Baja California Sur, only about a month into our trip. We were talking with a big group of Americans who vacationed in Baja all the time and were clearly having a great time; fishing, boating, snorkeling in crystal clear waters, eating at fun restaurants, enjoying the weather and the beaches, etc., and they were doing it in safe surroundings at a small fraction of what it would cost in the US.



How were they able to do this?

Because they knew something others did not: that done right, Mexico is fun, safe, accessible, etc., and very inexpensive. If others knew about it, it would be crowded and expensive, but it was not, simply because others did not know about it. As people who did know this, they benefitted; they were members of The Club. After considering their experiences and perspective and comparing it with our own new experiences after crossing the border, it dawned on me that we had joined The Club, too.

So, there you have it. Our adventure and year-plus abroad may or may not be for you, but at least now you know more about what to expect if you do embark on your own adventure. As for us, given that the alternative was staying where we were, spending another year doing pretty much the same thing in pretty much the same place, the choice was obvious, and the results were great.





The Woman at the Pemex

Written by Jet Metier

My husband pulled our high-top white van with the dogs in the backseat into the Pemex, the ubiquitous gas stations of Baja California, Mexico. We were returning to the outskirts of La Paz, a busy little town that fronts a bay and is held in by the mountains. He spoke in Spanglish to the attendant about the price of gas as the van was serviced. I sat inside, drowsy from a day of walking along soft surf. From my side of the van, I watched a woman approach the car to the right of me. She moved towards it slowly, choosing it from all the other cars in line at the busy bays. The car was not a new model, the paint discolored from too much intense sun. When the older male passenger in the back seat got out to get something from the bright and modern looking convenience store, I could see that the upholstery had gone shabby. But the woman who approached the car seemed not to notice or make judgements on whether or not they were the sort of family that would want their car pampered. She was carrying a large yellow wash cloth made of microfiber and began to rub down the exterior of the vehicle with somber care.



This woman, unlike the Pemex attendant who was filled our tank, was not wearing a uniform, but she was dressed neatly, as if she were appearing for work. Her buttoned up blouse was white and had yellow flowers. I noted that she looked very fresh in her knock-off designer jeans and thick rubber athletic shoes; unlike me. I wore rumpled clothes and my hair was salt-sprayed by the beach. My complexion was damp with sweat, eyes smudged black by eye liner pencil applied and melted hours ago, a sloven, a mess. But there was no denying who was poor and who was simply poorly dressed. Her clothes were well washed, but not current. And her face, though clean, was not the kind that was used to being indulged with gentle cleansers or restful and carefree days playing at the shore.

She moved with minimal exertions, as if any energy she expended was subtracted from a finite source. She moved trancelike; not being aware of what she was doing, yet performing systematically. No one inside the car made eye contact with her. They all seemed to understand that to notice her would embarrass her or them. She was made invisible by her poverty, part of the environment like the trash that stuck to the wild bougainvillea thorns that surrounded the unkempt lots in the barrios. She was past being ashamed of her condition, an indigent in public where everyone at the station could see her vague labor.

Meanwhile, I kept cover in the car, knowing I was not presentable; pointing out the spots the attendant had left on the windshield for my husband to clean again. She and I were the same; women of middle age, but while I looked like a woman whose husband often grabbed and massaged her instep, she looked as if her feet always hurt and there was no one to rub the pain away.

She took the seemingly new yellow micro fiber rag and rubbed the other car along the driver side of the front window, making circles that the passengers turned their heads not to see. When the passengers did not object, she continued on the other side, rubbing it without liquid solution or even much arm strength. I saw her rub the rear-view mirrors, buffing them gently, not



checking her reflection to see if they were clean or to look at herself. She moved on to the side panels and stroked lightly where the trim moldings were and in the open spaces where they had come off. She did this with the dignity of a professional, but in a daze, sleepwalking through her work. Unlike the people in the car, I was immensely interested in what she was doing, as fascinated as I would be watching a hummingbird take sips of nectar from blossom to blossom. The last I saw of her at that car, she was using her yellow cloth on the hubcaps, treating them gently like they only needed the lightest of dusting. I do not know if they paid her or even gave her thanks.

My husband got back in the car and we consulted our map. We looked up. The woman was now standing by my husband's side of the car. We could not see her face; only the top of her head. I saw her thin wrist come up to the high windows of our tall van. The yellow towel barely reached the corner of the front window. She did not look at us or her task at hand. I saw the underside of the cloth through the window moving in mystic circles; it was still clean, and where she had lightly buffed, made no difference in the clarity of the glass that she had attended. She did this wordlessly. Her glance never lifted to where we sat high in our car in quiet shock. We let her apply to her task only for a moment.

In alarm, I told my husband, "She does not have to do that."

My husband took some money from his coin cache and gave it to her. I don't recall if he said a word to her. I do know no word came from her. She did not look up to us to acknowledge us or give us thanks. But suddenly, as she was passing by my husband's door to leave, we saw her hand come up. Her wrist was bent and her palm was up, and in her hand, floating along my husband's open window, was a solitary cookie. It was dreamily presented, a gift that was unexpected. I can't even say that she was attached to that hand. All we saw was the cookie

nestled in her bare palm. My husband did not hesitate and took the cookie, which he showed to me. When we looked back, the woman was gone.

My husband immediately took a bite of the cookie. It had a square base and on top were four sections of what looked like pink tinged marshmallow in the shape of an abstract blossom.

“It’s good. Here, take some.”

I was curious but could not take a bite; even after my husband said several times that it was surprisingly good. Probably, the germ-wary in me did not want to take a bite of something given by hand from a stranger, especially one who was amateurishly washing cars. Also, it was such a surreal occurrence; I needed time to process it. One does not bite into a miraculous vision.



We did not speak of her during the long drive through the dark mountains. But we did the next day and recalled the incident the way people speak of falling stars that move unexpectedly slowly through the sky. We even discussed where she kept that cookie; her pants were not baggy and she carried no bag. The cookie was uncrushed; it carried no lint nor was there a sign of packaging from where it had been kept pristine.

I can still see that cookie being proffered so elegantly; her hand a beautiful platter conveying her own sweetness. Unlike the young kids at the entrance of Soriana Supermarket later that evening who were trying to talk my husband into giving them money for nothing, this woman wanted to work for her money. And, as if to ensure her pride, she would do the work first without an agreement of payment. We did not want her work, but because of the job she soundlessly offered and that she gave first, we wanted to help her. She could easily have pocketed her pesos, and then gone on to another car to clean. But she disappeared mysteriously, leaving that cookie and a memory that could not be smudged away. It could be said that it was a trade; that she was repaying us for a pittance. But to us it was beyond the realm of commerce. Instead, she was the gentle giver and we were the startled receivers. She had produced a pretty present, solely out of the goodness of her heart, a cookie to mark that moment of sharing.



Jet Metier / BestPlacesInTheWorldTo Retire.com

She was so extraordinary, this woman at the Pemex station, doing us a good turn and making us glad that we had encountered her generosity. My husband and I were struck by her act of grace and that is how we both described her act: in spiritual terms. We bless her and wish her well,

this woman tending to cars and lovingly dispensing good food shaped like a flower, a cookie presented as solemnly as a sanctified wafer at mass.

You can access [Jet Metier's Facebook page here](#).

How Living Abroad Can Reduce Your Stress

Would you like to reduce your stress?

Based on the hundreds of expats we've interviewed and the more than one thousand who participated in our studies, if you are like them, there is more than an 80% chance you could reduce your stress by moving abroad. As proof, first we'll provide the results from a [survey we conducted about living in Panama, Belize and Nicaragua](#), in which we asked expats "What is your level of stress in your home abroad?":



A lot less: 60.5%
A little less: 22.9%
About the same: 11.5%
A little more: 2.5%
A lot more: 2.5%

In a soon to be published study, we asked expats living in Mexico the same question, with remarkably similar results:

A lot less: 60.7%
A little less: 22.2%
About the same: 12.5%
A little more: 3.1%
A lot more: 1.6%



Given that lowering stress levels can be so important to one's overall health and happiness, let's consider why the majority of our respondents said it was so much less stressful to live abroad.

We can break stress into three components:

Genetic—or just how we were born.

Environmental— what, objectively is happening around us. As an example, if we are being chased by a lion, that an objectively stressful situation.

Attitude -- how much we allow the previous two components to affect us.

We will leave the genetic component to others more qualified to discuss it, with the stipulation that we probably can't do much about it. We can, however, change a portion of the environmental component through where we choose to live, and we can change the attitude component, which, on net, is easier abroad, for reasons I'll describe below.

Regarding environmental stressors, there's no doubt that, for most people, change is stressful, and there can be a good amount of stress in moving to a new country. Many expats tell us, however, through the studies and interviews we conducted, that after they got over the initial issues of the differences in living abroad and the stress that doing so creates, their stress tended to decrease compared with their home country. Here are some of the reasons they gave us.

Lower Cost of Living

All other things being equal, the less it costs to maintain or even elevate your lifestyle, the less stress you will have. Money issues are stressful.

Here's how the contributors to our site compared [the cost of living abroad](#). In general, the differences can be substantial. [In my own experiment, I reported that my family spent 62% less](#). I can also personally report that each percentage point (each and every 62 of them) reduced my stress.

[Jewel Hoff](#), formerly from Las Vegas and now living in Matagalpa, in the highlands of [Nicaragua](#) put it simply. "When I fill up the trunk of my car with fruits and vegetables for \$18, I'm not stressed. When you pay your rent for a 3-bedroom, 2-bath, brand new home with hot water for \$200 a month, you're not stressed."



You May Not Have to Work

For many people, work can be stressful. Given the potential for a lower cost of living abroad (see section just above), many expats could quit work or, in a move that reduced stress even more, many unemployed expats stopped looking for work and retired.

Useful links: [Best Places in the World to Retire - Mexico Q & A](#) – [Expat Stories](#) – [Best Places YouTubes](#) – [Best Places Facebook](#) – [Download this book for free](#) – [Best Mexico Movers](#) 270420-a **208**

Even expats who still worked after moving abroad reported less stress. [Bob Hamilton](#) traded life in Canada for one on the island of [Ambergris Caye](#), in [Belize](#). Hamilton told us, “I have friends back home in Nova Scotia in 'suit and tie jobs' who complain about stress. I tell them, ‘I have stress, too, but if I want to get rid of my stress, I go to my office, get a rum and coke, walk 50 feet, and sit under a coconut tree on the beach.’”

Fewer Chores to Do

One of the most stress-reducing bargains available abroad is the cost of household help, with housekeepers and gardeners / handymen generally charging around \$3 per hour. (Here’s our article on [how much more time expats add to their lives by not doing chores.](#))



While very few people would consider having to do chores to be as stressful as having to go to work, not having to do chores did reduce our contributors’ stress, primarily because they had more time to do what they wanted and there were fewer domestic conflicts and resentments about whose turn it was, for example, to mop the floor.

The Culture of a Lower Stress Response and General Acceptance

Each of the countries we cover is known to have a bit of a “manana” attitude, even Belize (where the official language is English). This is one of the few areas where living abroad can be more stressful rather than less, for example, when the repairman didn’t show up on time... or at all.

Some of those with the attitude to just accept the manana culture were able to turn this stress into a benefit. [David Berger](#), from Chicago, now lives in Belize. “If you are worried about having high speed internet 24 hours a day, you might go crazy here because there are times that we don’t have it, but we just do not worry about it. When the Internet is down, we just go swimming in the beautiful sea!”

Most North Americans find it difficult to do this right away, but many do ease into it. This not only reduces their stress if they are the ones who happen to be late (in which case, others don’t seem to mind as much), but they also report that it helped them to prioritize their values and

put more focus on items that became more important to them than the repairman or Internet, such as investing more time into their friendships and family relationships.

Expats with the flexibility to adapt their attitude toward stress were by far the most successful. [Ryan Wrobel](#), formerly of New York and now practicing law in Belize, told us, “Things move slower, but that can actually be a positive thing. There’s not that frantic rush, high-paced lifestyle that might exist in some of the bigger cities in the US, and that’s a good thing. It’s good for your body. It’s good for your mind.”

In addition, we have repeatedly heard about how the culture abroad can be less judgmental and more accepting of a diversity of actions and results, which reduces the stress of feeling the need to conform. [Alfonso Galindo](#), who used to live in California and now makes his home in [Mexico](#), told us, “We have more of a ‘live and let live’ culture here in Mexico. What you want to do and how you want to do it, other than harming others, is your business. This takes off a lot of pressure to be like everyone else and the constant striving for more and more material success that one feels in the US.”



Less Materialism and How Less Can Be More

While some expats are stressed out by not having enough choices of things to buy in certain areas (some areas more than others), other expats have reported that they are happy with fewer options, which they saw as a benefit. There were fewer things to buy, so why stress about going to get them? Alternative enjoyments such as the sea is there for everyone, and it’s free.

Quite a few expats told us that because of observing and interacting with locals who had much less materially than they did and yet they seemed to be just as happy, they concluded that more material goods did not necessarily increase one's happiness. As a result, they became less materialistic themselves, which made them even less stressed... and happier.

[Mark Leonard](#), who used to live in New Jersey and California and now lives in Corozal, Belize said, "For Belizeans, it's not like, 'I need to have this, I need to have that.' In a wedding here, you could wear shorts and sandals. There are zero demands put on you by the culture here in Belize, compared to the demands put on you by the culture in the US."



Healthcare is Available and Inexpensive

How many people in the US are stressed and worried about having to pay for a large healthcare expense or live in fear of getting sick, because their deductible is so huge? I reported personally on [my own healthcare experiences here in Mexico](#), which I found to be extremely stress reducing for me. With the same or better quality, I went from health insurance costing more than \$1,000 per month with a \$10,000 deductible in the US to \$250 per month with a \$3,000 deductible in Mexico; I went from doctor visits for \$100+ in the US to \$20 in Mexico; and dental visits were reduced from \$130 to \$30. Besides putting more than \$700 in my pocket each month in lower insurance premiums (very stress reducing), I know that if I have a serious medical issue, it will not bankrupt me. Compared to the alternative, I find that thought relaxing.

I have spoken to several Canadians who were so stressed about not being able to get a test or surgery done soon enough in Canada on their "free" healthcare plan that they traveled to Mexico or Panama to have it done right away and paid out of pocket. Want that diagnoses or surgery right away, instead of waiting months or even years? Most likely, that ability and control over important issues in your life would reduce your stress.

Better Weather

Not all places abroad have better weather than all places in the US or Canada. However, many do, which is one of the reasons people from the areas with worse weather move abroad. For those who find better weather abroad, the removal of stress relating to shoveling snow or having to stay inside during the hot / muggy / or insect season is a nice, relaxing break.

More Healthy Habits

Perhaps because they're less stressed in other areas and to a certain extent because they tend to walk more, lots of expats have reported to us that after moving abroad, they ate better and many lost significant weight.

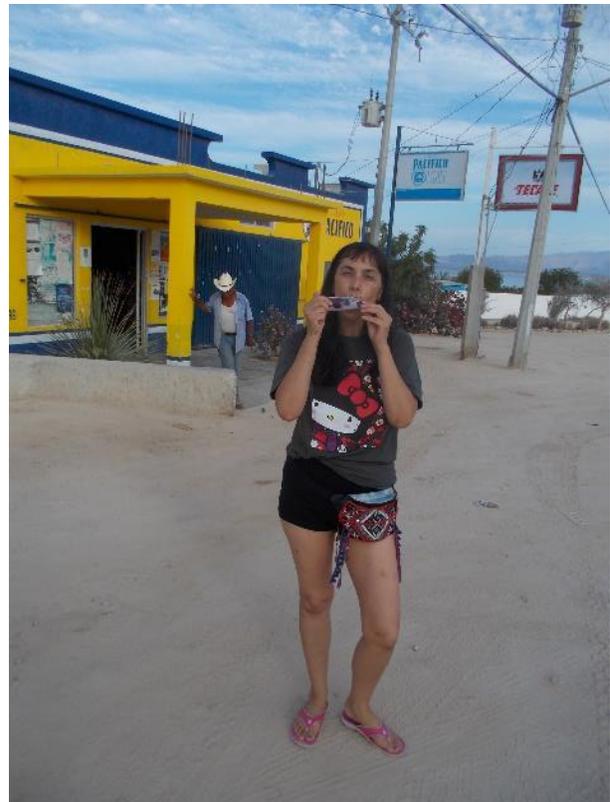
Texan [Linda Jensen](#), now living in [Boquete, Panama](#), said, "My husband Arne and I didn't get enough exercise in Texas. Now, we walk everywhere in Boquete, because it's so convenient and because the weather's so nice. There's so much fresh fruit and vegetables available that taste so good and are so inexpensive, that we're eating better, too. Our health is much better and our stress is much less here."



Conclusion

Would moving abroad reduce your stress? No one can say for sure what would happen for any individual person, and there are certainly are people who have experienced the opposite reaction, and had their stress levels increase. But what we can say is that, with the right attitude, moving abroad could help reduce your stress... and it certainly worked for the vast majority of respondents to our survey.

Former Californian [Irma Quiroz-Yuque](#) summed it up nicely when describing her life in Belize. "I enjoy my time swaying on the hammock on the front porch looking at the view of the water, listening to the birds and animals. It's been more of a stress-free, relaxing type of lifestyle here in Belize compared to the States. We don't have the noise, the congestion of the freeways, or of the roads close by. It's not as big as population so you don't have as many cars on the roads. It's so carefree. We've made many friends, including the local people. It's just a different type of lifestyle but a very nice and natural lifestyle. It's healthier. We're happy."



Two House Rentals Gone Wrong, and a Guardian Angel

Now that it's over, I can tell you about it.

So far, on our [road trip through Mexico](#), we have rented six vacation houses that did work out (pictured here) and two that haven't (not pictured here). From those experiences, there are lessons to be learned.

The first rental gone bad was in San Miguel de Allende. Here are the facts, with parenthetical commentary.

- We found the rental on the very popular site VRBO. (This means nothing. VRBO is just a place for owners to place listings. We received zero support from VRBO in resolving our dispute. On a related subject, Craigslist is a very popular place for out and out scams. Be very, very careful using Craigslist.)
- The pictures of the house looked nice. (All this means is that the person taking the pictures knows how to present a property. Very few people—other than Mexican nationals, which, from an American viewpoint, is hilarious—will take pictures of dishes in the sink, dirty toilets, laundry being assembled for folding, etc.)
- The owner was an American. (All this means is that the owner understands your culture; it doesn't mean that he or she will be honest, etc. Some of the outright scammers take advantage of Americans or Canadians who put trust in the scammer because the scammer is also American or Canadian.)
- The owner was extremely responsive in answering our emails and did so very specifically. (Better than the opposite,

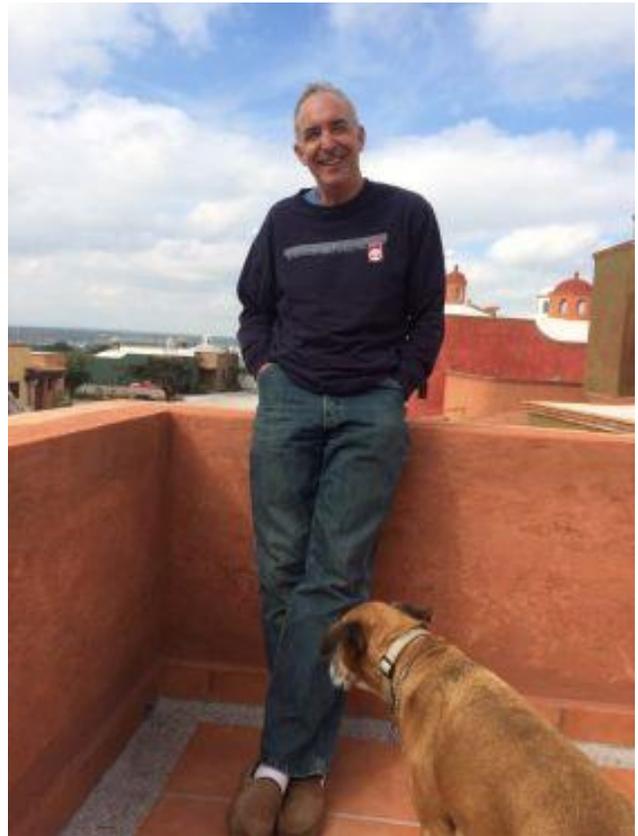


but not, by itself, enough to guarantee she was telling the truth.)

- It was the first time the owner had rented through VRBO, so there were no reviews. (In and of itself, this is not determinative, but it's also not a good sign.)

Given the first four bullets above and ignoring the last one (as well as my good sense), I transferred \$1,130 through PayPal (also zero help in a dispute, irrespective of what they would lead you to believe) to the owner for upgraded Internet and a little more than five weeks of rent. Luckily, instead of using cash, I used a credit card. Perhaps I had a premonition...

The owner wouldn't be at the home on the day we arrived and the rental was hard to find, so we were told to meet the housekeeper and her husband at the train station. A woman who was standing by a truck with about 10 feet of furniture stacked in the bed seemed to be looking for someone, so we introduced ourselves. Sure enough, it was the housekeeper, Maria, who instructed us to follow her and her husband to our rental. Down several streets we rambled, trailing behind the sideways credenza and roped down chairs and tables.



As we progressed, it was a bit like "Heart of Darkness," as relatively nice areas gave way to successively less and less nice ones. As we neared the home, accompanying our descent was the distinct smell of some sort of animal manure. We couldn't tell exactly what animal it was from, but it was probably pretty big... and there were probably lots of them.

In our emails to the owner, we told her we needed the house to have clearance for our van, which is over 8 feet tall. Just to give us some room for error (and in case the owner didn't know how to use a tape measure), we asked her if the rental had 10 feet of clearance.



She wrote that it did.

It did not.

When we arrived, I didn't even have to measure. If I stand and put my hand straight up, it will go to about 8 feet, and the crossbar to the gate was several inches below my fingertips.

It was starting to get dark, and we had no defined Plan B, so we unloaded from the sidewalk, helped by Maria, her husband, kids, and a few other relatives. They were great. Next, we had to find a place to park the van, especially given the several suspicious-looking youths eyeing us and our stuff from the sidewalk, so I asked Maria if she knew any place nearby that was secure. Of course, she did.



Mexicans are generally very happy to help, very resourceful, and always seem to "know a guy"; usually a cousin. In this case, the person Maria knew wasn't related, but who turned out to be a very nice man with a repair shop that we were to drive to around the corner and up the street. Against the slight breeze and wafting odors, we navigated to the front of his shop and then through the two huge, black, extremely well locked gates where our van barely fit inside.

What the shop area lacked in terms of any more than a few inches more than was absolutely required for our van to fit, it made up for with two snarling German Shepherds straining against two thick chains and those 12-foot metal gates with the barbed wire on top. Because of the tight fit, I couldn't completely open my door to get out, so I slithered out of the area created by the partially opened door held back by a wall, stepped in some dog poop, shut and locked the door, and went on my way to walk back to the house in the dark, accompanied by Maria and her kids, who for some unsettling reasons, felt the need to escort me.



Back at the house, I took off my shoes, went upstairs to where the office was located, plugged in my PC and found that the Internet didn't work. When I texted the owner on my cell phone to ask about this (remember; the Internet didn't work), she texted back that maybe the Internet would work better downstairs

and if that didn't work, she gave me the phone number of another Internet provider to call and the prices they would likely charge me. (She had written previously that the Internet worked great throughout the house, and in addition, I had paid her for an upgrade she never did.)

Because of her sensitivity to noise, my wife Jet had specifically written to the owner to ask if it was quiet. The response was, "The only noise you'll hear is of the birds singing."

In a fairly stark contrast to crooning robins, that entire night, over the sounds of the disco music playing next door which was only drowned out by what I would suspect to be a 240-ton locomotive coming by about every two hours with horns blaring, just as I was about to fall asleep between the train arrivals and departures, I would be awoken by the buzz in my ears from flying insects.

I could go on, but you get the picture.

The next morning, fresh from about 45 minutes of uninterrupted sleep, Jet and I scurried for alternatives. Luckily, we found that Los Labradores (a self-contained, pre-planned community [described in a previous article](#) where everything worked) had a vacancy. After our experience the previous night, in theory, something like Los Labradores sounded, looked, and smelled really good. (It was really good.) All we had to do was to get our items out of the house and leave. Unfortunately, one of the doors wouldn't open with the key that I had used the night before. The housekeeper Maria tried her key, which also didn't work.

About half our items were locked behind a door no one could open, we were sleep deprived and we wanted / needed to get out immediately.

What would you do?

Predictably, Maria "knew a guy" who knew how to deal with such issues. Within five minutes he arrived and applied a solution I probably never would have thought of. After being told the issue, he simply cut away the silicon around one of the windows with a razor, removed the



window, stepped into the room, and let us in. We carried our items to the van, paid him for his work and a new tube of silicon, I checked again for my wallet, and we left.

I wrote to the owner to tell her of our experience and very politely directed her where to send our refund. She refused. I reminded her of how she had written to us about several items that were demonstrably false, which didn't seem to make much of an impact on her, because she still refused. I even offered to pay her for several days that we weren't even there. No deal; she would keep it all. Her exact words in an email to me were: "All I can say is that you are in Mexico and things are very different here. Unfortunately, I can not [sic] return the money to you. We had a deal and you broke it, not me. Good luck!"



After failing to get my money back through VRBO and PayPal, and after several months and lots of time managing the case through a mechanism called a "chargeback," VISA returned every cent of my money. There are two lessons here. The one for people like you and me is to get and keep everything in writing and pay with a credit card, which I did. The lesson for the owner / serial liar of the home in San Miguel de Allende is that she should have accepted my offer to pay for a few days. Instead, she got nothing.

Our second house rental gone bad experience was more than a month later at the beaches around Merida in the Yucatan in a home that was owned by a Mexican national with whom we had some differences of opinion that others have told us were cultural, but I'm not completely convinced. For example, they didn't see any reason to include bed sheets or pillows, while we did. They had no problem with the cockroach that jumped up on the pizza to sample the pepperoni after we had opened the box for literally less than 30 seconds while, again, we did. (I could just imagine the cockroach watching us from the time we entered, his excitement at realizing we had brought a pizza, but his lack of impulse control to wait until we had left to eat



some. In insect years, he was probably a teenager.) There also seemed to be some confusion about who would be responsible in the event the house needed repairs.

As to non-cultural issues, there was the issue of the prevailing winds, 5-foot-high mounds of decaying seaweed, stickers everywhere on the sand, and the less than clear ocean water.

In fairness, I was told later that the seaweed comes and goes and the ocean water does get more clear. I have been told that we had hit a bad day combined with our unrealistic expectations, which to a certain extent, I can accept as valid.

That evening, Jet prophetically refused to unpack. I gave her the least stained bed to sleep on, sans sheets, while I took the couch. The next morning, I took the dogs for a walk. Well, you couldn't really call it a walk, because I had to stop regularly to remove stickers from my dogs' paws. Upon my return, as I arrived close enough to the house to hear it, I was treated to a blood-curdling scream. Jet (who has no problems killing spiders, scorpions, etc.) had opened one of the cabinets and found it infested with cockroaches. As if we needed it, this was the final straw.



We just didn't belong there.

Unlike the rental gone bad in San Miguel de Allende, this one resolved quickly and fairly, because the owner had some integrity. Also, after hearing our complaints, she probably figured we were more trouble than we were worth. We paid for the one day we were there (I had not paid any deposit) and for the upgrade of the Internet, and left on good terms. The only problem was that we were in a completely new place in Mexico with no place to stay.

So there we were, in a small beach town near Merida; two adults, two dogs, a huge white van filled to bursting with our stuff, and it was mid-morning. We began our search.

We had several criteria, including a place that would accept dogs, was big enough



for our van, had good Internet, and a vacancy that night. As I drove towards Merida where I hoped we could find something, Jet researched using the Internet via our iPhone. Our strategy was to first establish a fallback position where, if everything else failed, we could stay a few nights. Given the traveling I had done for work in the past, I had special status at Hilton brand hotels, so the Hampton Inn in Merida that accepted pets looked very appealing, although expensive, so it couldn't be a long-term solution.

Jet had always wanted to stay at a real hacienda and found one on the Internet that had several good reviews. (See, we do learn.) It was in Kanasin, a town about 25 minutes from downtown Merida. So, to Hacienda San Pedro Nohpat we drove, with very little idea what we would find or if we would like it, and not much time to waste.

Merida has very, very nice and uncrowded highways. Down the off-ramp we went toward what would hopefully be our place to stay for a while, on a road soon accompanied on all sides by several versions of what you would call a "tuk tuk" if you were in Thailand—essentially adult-sized tricycles with a place for passengers, some powered by a motor, some powered by the human peddling it, all customized differently by their owners.

At first glance, the hacienda was impressive, with a lawn that must have measured half an acre by itself, bisected by a wide, straight walkway with lamps on each side leading to the steps of a very generous veranda. Tilting against the veranda was a ladder being used by a man who was painting. (Later, I would learn that this man's name was JR.) It looked like they might have been closed for restoration. Simultaneously searching for my Hilton Honors club card, I asked JR if they were open. He said they were, and called for his wife, Iona without leaving the ladder.

Then appeared our guardian angel, with a look in stark contrast to her husband. JR was dressed pretty much like me: dirty shorts and a tee shirt. Iona looked like she stepped out of a fashion magazine, tall, slender and composed, in a sun dress. Jet and I must have looked a bit frazzled, because Iona asked us if we would please join her on one of the back patios for a refreshment.



"But we have dogs."

"Great. I love dogs. They're welcome, too. I'll get them some water."

"We're afraid they may run away. Is the area enclosed?"

"Yes, and it's really large, too."

Our blood pressure dropped to close to normal.

Over the next twenty minutes (Iona was in no hurry), we sat with Iona and told her our tale of woe and need, surrounded by a lush tropical garden with overhanging vines that delighted our eyes and shielded us from the sun, in comfortable chairs, only muffled sounds from the street, well refreshed, with our similarly well refreshed dogs happily investigating the enclosed grounds of a 400-year-old hacienda.



Within the last day, our dreams of being on the beach for three months with the dogs and us frolicking on the sand and in clear water had been dashed. Seated in front of us now, our guardian angel Iona offered a consolation prize but one it turned out was much more realistic and ultimately a lot of fun—the two-bedroom suite just behind her (no cockroaches or stickers, but sheets included) and even a pool for us and the dogs to use. It wasn't the beach, but it was a wonderful solution in a very stylish and interesting place. All we had to do was unpack.

Note: all pictures in this article are of the places we stayed that we liked. (We didn't show you any of the duds.)

How Traveling and Living Abroad Gave Me a Better Perspective on Time and Happiness

One of the great advantages of traveling, or better yet, living in a different country, is to see how others live their lives. If we are open to it, we can gain perspective and insight, not only into the human condition in general, but more pointedly, into our own condition.

I'll give you an example.

While on a [road trip](#) for [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), we have traveled by car thousands of miles through Mexico, from the California border in Mexicali, to the southern tip of Mexico in the Yucatan, where you can cross into Belize.

Along the way, I've noticed repeatedly that, especially in the poorer villages, virtually all the Mexicans I saw in interactions with each other appeared to be happy. This was true whether I came across them unexpectedly while hiking, or in their little stores, or walking their kids to school. Not the fake "how are you / I really don't care" happy, but genuinely happy, joking with each other, greeting each other warmly as if the other person mattered, etc. This even happened to me when, as a gringo walking alone and on a trail in tribal lands, [I very unexpectedly came across a local](#).



I have heard the same observations from expats on our site about the locals in [Panama](#), [Belize](#), and [Nicaragua](#), where almost all the locals are materially much less wealthy than those in the US and Canada. In many cases, this phenomenon and way of life is one of the reasons many people from the US and Canada move abroad in the first place.

How could this be? Weren't the people living in these countries materially poor, and wouldn't it naturally follow that their poverty would make them miserable?

I compared what I saw in these areas in Mexico with what I saw when I was in much wealthier, larger First World cities, such as New York City, Chicago, or even Tokyo. In those places, I would generally see people with more strained looks on their faces, most likely over-scheduled and

late, hurrying from one place to another, seemingly not very happy and certainly not very relaxed.

Comparing the two reminded me of the word that inhabitants south of the US border will use for "to worry about", which is "preocuparse," or to be "preoccupied". In our Developed World quest for material goods, most pronounced in larger cities, have we made ourselves pre-occupied and unhappy? And what is the point of working for all these material goods, anyway? Isn't the point to be happy?

An economist may argue that the people in the little, poorer villages are "freeloading" off of the advancements made by those preoccupied people with their more hurried, self-important lives, which is true. People who are not working and just enjoying each others' company are not developing cures for diseases, or even figuring out how to have clean water and enough food to eat, etc., without which no one would be very happy.



It is also true that many people love their work, so they are not unhappy at all working lots of hours. What I'm referring to is the larger group of people who would definitely be happier with more time off. Perhaps I'm referring to you.

So is that the unspoken trade-off: more happiness vs. more material success? Of course, it is a continuum, and one we don't think about much, unless you see people at a place on that continuum different than you and your peer group. This is one of the advantages of traveling. As you observe these people who are behaving differently than you and your friends, you may ask yourself, "Where is the best place on this continuum for me?"

This all reminds me of the story I was told years ago, before I did much long term traveling. It's about the investment banker who, while taking a walk down the beach from his \$500 per night hotel room, came across a poor Mexican fishing village where he saw a particular fisherman who had come in hours before the others but had three times as many fish, and was leaving his boat to go



home. Being naturally inquisitive, the investment banker stopped the fisherman and asked him how he did it.

"I have a secret technique, señor, that I use to catch lots of fish easily."

The investment banker was perplexed. "OK. So if you catch so many fish so easily, why don't you go back out for a second or third run? Then, you could catch even more."

"I would rather come home early."

Even more confused the investment banker asked, "Well, what in the world do you do when you come home early?"

"I can be with my kids," the fisherman replied. "Then later, after we all have a big lunch together, I take a nap, and have enough time later to stroll along the beach with my wife. If I made several trips back out to fish, I wouldn't be able to do that."



The investment banker was incredulous that the fisherman was leaving so much profit on the table.

"Listen. Here's what we'll do," the investment banker said. "You tell me the technique. We can hire a bunch of high-end IP lawyers to get a patent and the exclusive rights. If anyone infringes on us, we'll sue the pants off them! Then, I'll go to New York to get some investment capital, we'll buy a fleet of ships, train the crews, set up distribution worldwide, go public, and cash out for a fortune! After just three years of 12 hour days work, you'll be rich!"

"And what would I do then, señor?"

"Well, with all that money, you come home early and be with your kids. Later, after you have a big lunch together, you can take a nap and have enough time to stroll along the beach with your wife."



Now that I've seen this in person, the story means a lot more to me.

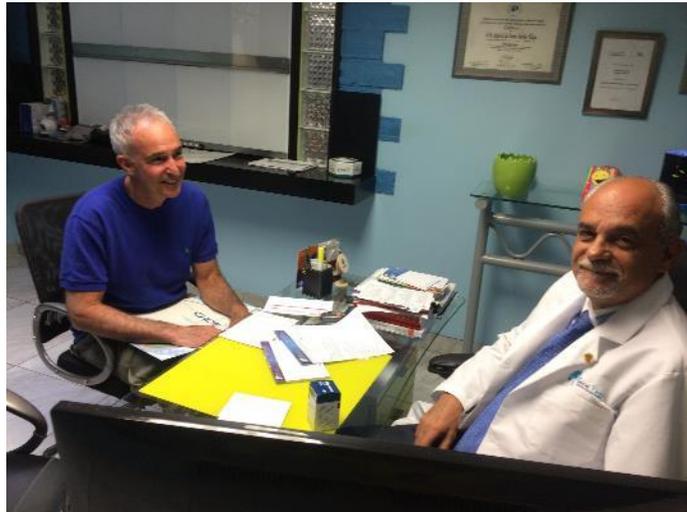
Pictures, from top to bottom:

- Jet Metier at a fishing village in Baja California Sur
- Jet Metier and Chuck Bolotin with new friends Johnny and Gaby Meza in San Juan Cosala, near Ajijic, Mexico
- Jet Metier and Chuck Bolotin with new friends in Cordoba, Mexico
- Mexican fisherman and his wife in La Ventana Bay, Baja California Sur
- Chuck Bolotin with Pancho and his son as invited guests at Chuck and Jet's home in Ajijic, Mexico
- Jet Metier and Chuck Bolotin on the road to Cordoba posting with kids celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe



My Personal Experience Comparing Healthcare in the US vs. Mexico

One of the most important and personal items people consider when thinking about moving abroad is “How is the healthcare?” While the [Best Places in the World to Retire website](#) has a huge quantity of answers provided by hundreds of expats to the question “[how is the healthcare](#)” for more than a dozen [locations on our site](#), there is nothing like experiencing it yourself, which I had never done personally.



Until recently.

Let me tell you about it

First, for comparison, here’s my US healthcare experience. In Arizona about a year ago, I injured myself playing basketball, and had a pretty significant pain towards the middle of my right calf. I limped home and put ice on it. Over the next few days, it didn’t get any better, and it had also swollen quite noticeably. I didn’t want to go to the doctor because I didn’t want to use one of the two visits per year my health insurance covers with me paying a \$45 co-pay, because for later visits, I would have to pay for everything myself, and doctor visits were well over a hundred dollars each.

A few days later, my dentist saw my puffy, inflamed, bloated leg (I was wearing shorts) and delivered an alarmed and rather shrill admonition to go see the doctor immediately because I could have a blood clot from which I could get a stroke or even die, all without any warning whatsoever. “Say no more, doc!” My dentist had my attention, so I made an appointment with an MD.

My general practitioner had me go through a series of procedures that cost more than \$1,000, and then, after seeing two MRIs (the first one he ordered turned out to be for the wrong area) corrected his earlier misdiagnosis of a strain to a complete tear of my Achilles tendon. It was too late after the original tear to do much in the area of surgery, even if I wanted it, so he told me I could do physical therapy at the cost of several thousands of dollars, or just try to deal with it myself. Not having an unlimited amount of money and figuring the physical therapy would cost more than it would be worth, I chose to just deal with it myself.

So, to sum it up, even after paying for health insurance (which I understand that now would cost me well over \$1,000 per month for myself and my wife Jet) the healthcare I received in the US was expensive enough that even after paying huge insurance premiums, I didn't go to the doctor until I figured that what I had might be a life threatening emergency, and when I did, I got misdiagnosed, then re-diagnosed and told that I could do treatment for several thousands of dollars more, or basically just live with what I had. And without any physical therapy, in exchange for the care I just described, I paid over a thousand dollars out of my own pocket, because I hadn't even come close to my \$10,000 deductible.



Fast forward to our [road trip through Mexico](#) and finally winding up here in the Ajijic area, on Lake Chapala. About two weeks ago, I noticed that a pain I would get from time to time in the back of my left shoulder had gotten bad enough that it was impacting my day to day life. A friend recommended a physical therapy clinic right in downtown Ajijic. I walked in without an appointment, and was told to come back in an hour, at which time I could be seen immediately.



My therapist, Jonathan Tamayo Cosio, spent almost an hour and a half with me exploring the problem. What he came up with was interesting. Testing his theory, he asked me to turn over on my back, placed his hand on my diaphragm and asked if it hurt behind my shoulder when he pressed down. It did. Jonathan said that this led him to believe that my problem had nothing to do with my shoulder and everything to do with the ribs on my right side not opening sufficiently to let in enough air, so that the left side was overworked and produced the pain.

This was interesting to me because, during the 30+ years I had had this pain on and off and had it looked at by various doctors and chiropractors, no one had noticed this. Jonathan may have diagnosed the problem all these other US healthcare ace professionals had missed and caused

me on and off problems and sub-optimal performance for most of my life. I paid him the 500 pesos (less than \$25 for the session), and scheduled another. At \$25 per session, why not come in more often?

After a week or so, the pain was only marginally better, so Jonathan suggested that I see a doctor, which I did. Jonathan wrote a note with his findings for me to give to whatever doctor I saw. Less than a hundred yards down the street from the physical therapy office, is the office of Dr. Leon, who is famous amongst expats. I walked in without an appointment, so Dr. Leon could not see me right away, but his colleague, Dr. Jessica Quintanilla (proper title in Mexico, because she is a female: Dra.), could see me later that day.



From our 4:30 appointment until we left at 5:50, here's what happened.

Dr. Quintanilla asked me a bunch of questions about my general health and health history and documented it on her computer; she called and spoke with Jonathan; listened completely, fully and attentively to me and my wife; talked with us; examined me; and we jointly decided on a plan. She told me that I wasn't getting enough air in my right lung.

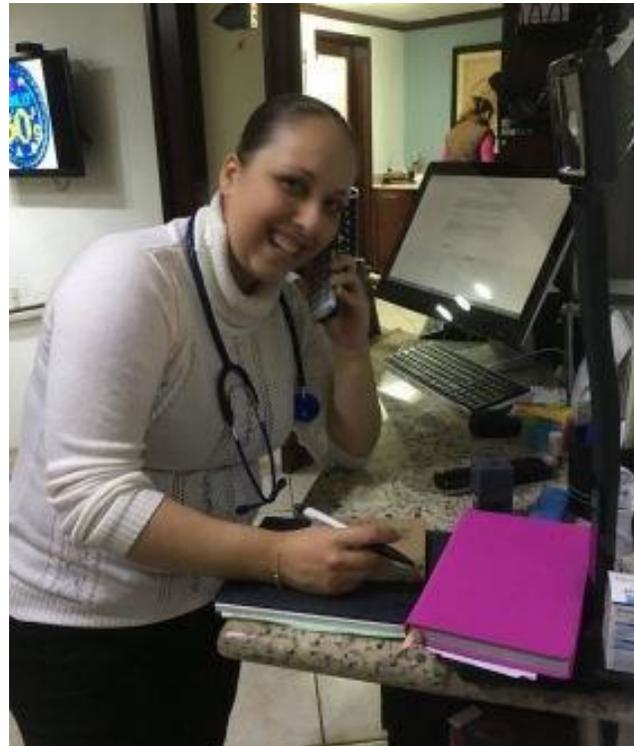
Being a very thorough doctor, she wanted to eliminate all potential issues, so she asked to do an MRI of the entire area. The MRI would have to be done in Guadalajara, about an hour away by car. I could either drive there myself, or she would have a driver take us there and back for 600 pesos (about US \$30). \$30 to have someone take me an hour away, wait, and then take us home? \$30 would hardly cover gas for the car and parking in an LA medical facility! After a good discussion, we decided that a more immediate and less costly solution would be to have some x-rays at a facility about a 10-minute drive down the road.



For immediate relief, Dr. Quintanilla gave me samples of a medicine to reduce pain in nerves and an injection that reduced inflammation, etc. For good measure, she prescribed some medication for me to take for the post nasal drip she discovered I had but didn't know I had and hadn't complained about. This post nasal drip would also cause other symptoms including coughing and reduced hearing I had been plagued with for several years but hadn't thought to or been told to connect the two. Now, I did.

We thanked Dr. Quintanilla and told her we would pay. She said we could pay later. The cost for the hour and 20-minute examination would be 300 pesos (about US \$15), and \$100 pesos (about \$5) for each injection. Dr. Quintanilla told us that if we felt the injections were too expensive when given at her office, she would sell us the medicine and we could have someone else less expensive do it. For \$5 each, I figured I would have a doctor do it.

As we left Dr. Quintanilla's office, I couldn't tell if my suddenly improved mood and less pain was the result of a better physical condition from the injection, the expectation of a better physical condition, or the realization that I just had a complete and competent doctor examination with medications, three injections and the reading of the upcoming x-ray for less than \$30.



To celebrate, and so my fretful wife Jet would not have to cook, we walked a block down the street, crossed the road and purchased the special complete roasted chicken (they gave us only the dark meat Jet prefers) with about 10 roasted and perfectly seasoned new potatoes, salsa, chilies, and tortillas to go for 92 pesos (about \$4.50), and while we were waiting for it, two doors down, we purchased huge plate of steamed vegetables for 25 pesos (about \$1.25).

At our home that evening, we had an awesome chicken dinner (we ate less than half of what we ordered) complete with the steamed vegetables and a very good helping of good feelings. I had come to the realization that, whereas in the US, I denied or delayed myself healthcare

because of the cost, here in Mexico, I could visit a doctor for things I really should, and it would cost about as much as a good deli sandwich in the US. My health life in Mexico would be changed and much improved, not only in cost, but also in worry and in catching issues earlier and treating them competently.

I also thought about the visit to the podiatrist I never had in the US because of the expense, while in Ajijic, I had several extremely successful [one hour each podiatry treatments for \\$12.50 each \(video here\)](#), which completely eliminated my problem. Lastly, I reminisced about our [recent dental cleanings in the Ajijic area \(video here\)](#), which cost us less than \$25 each in a sparkling, very new facility and how we scheduled our cleanings more often than in the US because... well, it only cost \$25!

That night was the first one in quite a while in which I didn't wake up in significant pain, and the next morning, more than 60% of the pain was gone. The air had just a touch of coolness to it but not too much (after all, we are in [Ajijic where the weather is close to perfect](#)), and the sun was shining. I had found some great allies in keeping me happy and healthy. In my healthcare life, I was no longer alone. It felt good.



How Not Doing Chores Living Abroad Added 36 Additional Years of Free Time to Our Lives

Writer's forward: Why people in places such as Mexico, Panama, Belize and Nicaragua are willing to work for expats for less than if they were located in the US or Canada is the subject of another article. Suffice it to say that those of us fortunate enough to be from Western industrialized nations have hit the "Where You're From Jackpot" through no particular virtue of our own. We were just lucky to be born in the US, Canada, etc., and to be able to use US or Canadian dollars to pay housekeepers and gardeners abroad less than we would have to pay them if we were all located in Chicago or Toronto. My only comment on this phenomenon for this article is that, for reasons that include because we have been so fortunate, we have a moral obligation to treat those working for us with respect, dignity, and generosity.



Earlier today, at the exact same moment that my wife and I were enjoying the scenery during our relaxing, unhurried walk with our dogs, the hard water stains in our bathrooms were being removed, our laundry was being done, our floors were being mopped, and the weeds in our yard were being pulled.

Had Jet and I somehow mastered "simultaneity" or found a quirk in the space-time continuum in order to be in two places at once?

Hardly. What we did didn't require any scientific breakthroughs, but for us, it was almost as impactful. So impactful that, by my calculations, it has added more than 36 very happy years of free time to the combination of my wife and my lives.

Here's how it works.

When we moved abroad, we rented a house. Included with the rental (which was extremely well priced), and at no additional charge, we received the services of a housekeeper for four hours a week and a gardener for about nine hours a week. When you rent in [Mexico](#) (in this case, in the well-known expat destination of [Ajijic](#)), this type of arrangement is not unusual, and has been the case in all the homes we've rented in this area.

It's quite reasonable (but not mandatory) to hire the housekeeper for an additional four hours per week for 200 pesos, which is about US \$10. Even though I'm not one to spend money easily (just ask my wife), this seemed to be a very good value, so I coughed up the additional \$10.

If you add it up, you'll see that my wife and I are receiving 17 hours of services per week. That's 17 hours per week of someone else doing the stuff my wife and I would otherwise have to do. That's why we were on our walk this morning, enjoying that scenery, instead of scraping hard water spots with razor blades, dumping Clorox into a bucket, etc.

If you live in the US or Canada and unless you are fairly wealthy, you can't afford to pay for the 17 hours per week of household and gardening services we receive for an additional \$10, so I'll explain to you how it is.

It's really nice.

More specifically, it's like re-living your childhood but with some crucial differences. Having the housekeeper is like having the mother always wanted to take care of you, but with her doing the chores with a smile and not making you feel about anything, all while your dad is telling you to go have a good time while he pulls the weeds. How's that alternate reality?

Our housekeeper is named Yolanda. Just yesterday, Yolanda re-arranged the shirts in my closet because, in her estimation, they were beginning to be a bit messy, and she's constantly putting what she considers to be my randomly things back where they belong. She even sewed a tear on my wife's blouse and on two pillow cases. Yolanda takes personal responsibility for how the house looks and functions, and has justifiable pride in the result.

Our gardener Pablo also takes personal responsibility, and not only acts as a gardener, but also as a general repairman. All we have to do is mention that something needs to be done or ask Pablo's opinion on something, and before you can say "gracias," he's out fixing it. After sourcing and buying all the materials, he's installed new parts into a sink and put up a fence for us.

Having Yolanda and Pablo do these kinds of things was a bit unnatural for us, because for 30+ years of home ownership, it has always been me who has been the one responsible for any repairs and maintenance, while my wife Jet was always responsible for cleaning and general garden care. Some people may find it to be a difficult transition to have others do this for them, but we suppose we'll have to get used to it. At least we're trying.



In defense of our old, chores-laden lifestyle, I should add that we were never really that upset about having to do chores in the past for two reasons: 1) we generally act as adults; and, 2) we couldn't conceive of any alternative.

We do here, and we do now.

The first person to open my eyes to the wonder of not having to do chores was [Mike Cobb](#), who is an expert in living abroad. When I spoke with Mike about the advantages of living in [Nicaragua](#), I expected to hear about the low cost of living, great weather, etc., but he surprised me by continuously bringing up how he and his wife, Carol, didn't have to do chores, and telling me how much free time this opened for the things they valued most, like spending more time together as a couple and with their young girls.

On an intellectual level, I knew that what Mike was telling me was similar in other countries, because on our site, [Best Places in the World to Retire](#), we have hundreds of answers by dozens of expats on the question of the cost of housekeepers in [Mexico](#), [Panama](#), [Belize](#) and [Nicaragua](#), as well as more answers for each area within each country. It's just that, until you experience not having to do chores for yourself, you don't really appreciate how great it is.



Here's how I concluded that not having to do chores would add more than 36 years of free time to Jet and my lives. Here is our daily average breakdown of things we do, adding up to 24 hours:

Work and work related activities: 8.0

Sleep: 7.5

Eating: 1.5

Shopping, driving, doing errands, etc.: 1.0

Personal activities like showering; exercising; talking to each other, family and friends; taking care of the dogs, etc.: 2.5

Reading a book, magazine, or newspaper or watching TV: 1.5

Unallocated time that would have included doing chores: 2.0

If we multiply our daily unallocated time that would have included doing chores of 2 hours by the 7 days of a week by the 2 of us, we end up with a total unallocated weekly time of about 28 hours. Our housekeeper and gardener spend an average 17 hours per week helping us, which is over 60% of our previous total unallocated time. If we each live another 30 years (60 years total), this means that my wife and I would have the equivalent of about 36 happy, unallocated years added to our lives; years we can use to take that walk or do pretty much anything we like, like enjoying the garden in the home pictured to the right we had earlier in our trip, and which was maintained by a husband and wife team that came by three times per week.

Our only regret is that we didn't do this when we were younger.



Writer's addenda:

- For most couples, the woman would do the bulk of the chores discussed above, so one could argue that it would be the woman who would gain the most from having household help. For example, using my numbers, my wife Jet did about 70% of the chores above, which would mean that she would receive the majority of the gain, so in this case, she would benefit from 25 years of happiness devoid of chores, while I, on the other hand, would receive a relatively meager 11 years of additional non-chore happiness. To men who would see this as a problem, I would ask, "How happy are you when your wife is cleaning toilets?" and furthermore, "What's it worth to your happiness to have your wife not cleaning toilets, and as a result, have her happy?" I suspect that the answer would be compelling.
- I know that we will not be working until we're 90 years old (or at least I hope not), so the math I did was to illustrate the point. You may want to do your own calculations to see where you come out.

How Living in Mexico Can Give You a Lifestyle Upgrade

Picture this: you've gone to meet your wife after her facial and pedicure at a local boutique hotel. Leaving the bright sunshine outside, you open the thick, wooden doors and are welcomed into the cloistered anteroom. Around you is subdued lighting, ornate furniture, and a smiling, perfectly groomed young female receptionist with Old World mannerisms and a sophisticated hairdo.

Passing into the dining area, your feet and joints appreciate the thick carpeting, while your eyes feast on the rich colors and sumptuous furniture. Above, there are chandeliers. Two elegantly dressed and made up women wearing scarves and speaking in civilized tones are quietly conversing over wine in crystal glasses and what remains of their equally elegant meals on fine dishware. Nearby, a formally-dressed waiter politely delivers their check and leaves the area. You become aware of the gently playing classical music.



Where are you? Have you landed in a tony upper-end US or Canadian city or suburb? Gathering your wits to focus on the practical, are you suddenly nervous and a bit indignant about how much you're going to have to shell out for all this extravagance, thereby ruining the entire experience?

Not at all. Relax. In this case, you're in the little village of [Ajijic](#), in the Mexican Highlands, on Lake Chapala, where the two women you saw are now paying the waiter the equivalent of about \$6 for each of their meals and \$2 for each glass of wine. Smiling and after leaving an appropriate tip, they return to their conversation, in no particular hurry to leave their comfortable surroundings.



To the side of the women, your wife appears, very happy and relaxed. She's just had that facial and pedicure for the equivalent of about \$23 total. Remembering where you are, relief at the price rockets through your body. Your breathing slows and your blood pressure drops. Now you're happy again, too. "Care for lunch, sweetheart?"

You and the expats around you are leading a life that would cost much more in the States or Canada for a very manageable amount down here.

You see it everywhere; going to the movies (about \$3 for first-run American movies in English), out dancing, or to a play. If you choose to, you can go to Roberto's, where you can get what would be a \$25 dinner in the US for about \$8, while enjoying it all listening to live music in a garden setting, in near perfect weather all year round. If you go Friday night, you'll get two for the price of one,

In many of the areas I've gone here, the expats look like they could easily be in West LA or Manhattan, leading enviable upper-middle class lives. The difference is, many of them do not have typical upper middle-class bank accounts. To put it simply, they've figured it out, as have others in other parts of Mexico. In [Baja](#), it may be the home on the bay with the view of islands, while in [Puerto Vallarta](#), it could be the benefits of larger city amenities while living on the Pacific. In [San Miguel de Allende](#), perhaps it's becoming a patron of the arts and local charities, and in [Merida](#) the style of living in a colonial city, while in [Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Tulum or Akumal](#), it could be living in or near a world class tourist destination with famous beaches. There are other equally great and diverse places in [Mexico](#) as well, and from what I've heard from interviewing hundreds of expats in other countries, the same can be true with local color and variation in [Panama](#), [Portugal](#), [Belize](#) and [Nicaragua](#).



But it's not only that things cost less, although that's a huge part of it and much of your lifestyle upgrade would be based on this. Here are some examples from what I've personally seen or experienced during our [one year road trip in Mexico](#):

There are radically fewer chores to do. You can easily afford [housekeepers \(about \\$2.50 an hour\)](#) and gardeners (about \$3 per hour). At that price, you can leave the chores to others while you enjoy your clean house, freshly laundered clothes, well-manicured garden and doing what you would rather be doing. (We did the math and determined that not having to do chores was [the equivalent of adding 36 years to our lives.](#))

Healthcare is more accessible, more humane, and won't wipe you out financially. When you go to see a doctor, you aren't shuffled from room to room and then, after a sudden knock at the door followed by the doctor looking down at a chart as he or she talks at you, compelled to hurry it up for a six-minute appointment, and afterwards, paying a small fortune for the visit or your health insurance. Here in Mexico, [a typical doctor's visit may cost around \\$30 or less out of pocket](#), and he or she may spend up to an hour with you. If your health insurance is like mine, [you'll pay about 75% less for better coverage](#). Sort of makes you feel better... all by itself.

Stress can be much lower. Scratch the car? No problem. Just pay \$25 to have it repaired while you're getting your brakes done and your car delivered back to you. Have to pay to get Internet set up? Relax; it's \$5.50 for installation and \$14.50 per month for cable. Perhaps a good game of tennis, a hike in the mountains or an exercise class would be nice. Here in Ajijic, all are free or close to it. And don't forget how much less stressful it is not to have to do the dishes the day (or days) the housekeeper comes (see "chores", above).



Those who have figured it out are leading upper middle-class class lives on lower-middle class incomes. I know people who live pretty much on Social Security who can afford to occasionally eat out and go to plays; things they never could do in the US. For them especially, their lives are substantially different.

Are there some lifestyle downers to living in Mexico? Sure there are. In most places, the [power and the Internet goes out more often](#) and the plumbing is nowhere near as good. In most places, there is much [less shopping variety](#) and not knowing Spanish can be frustrating in some circumstances. Sometimes, people are late or don't show up at all and certainly not all places look like the hotel I described or dinner at Roberto's. Could I have written an article about those things? You bet. It's just that, personally, I don't enjoy writing or thinking about that and I would rather focus on other things. What would you focus on? Of course, I don't know, and your reality will be different than mine.

From my perspective, though, if you've got the right attitude, balancing out the positives with the negatives compared with living north of the border, you can live here as if you've got much more money and many fewer cares.

Just like those two women at the hotel.



Two Fender Benders Compared: One in the US and One in Mexico

On [our road trip through Mexico](#) and on the [Best Places in the World to Retire](#) site, we and other contributors to our site are often asked to do a comparison between life in the US and life abroad. In order to be accurate, these comparisons are almost always filled with lots of caveats because it is not often easy to do a fair one-to-one, “apples-to-apples” parallel. However, sometimes, you can, which is exactly what happened to me a few days ago.



First, here’s my US experience. Several years ago, I was driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic near Tucson, Arizona. Being a Type A multi-tasker who tries to use all available time, I figured that given that the traffic was “stop and go,” I would be able to sneak in a text. So, down went my eyes to my phone.

Of course, you know what happened next.

When I looked up, I saw that the van in front of me had stopped short and I had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting it. Too late. I hit it at perhaps 1 – 2 miles per hour.



However, I did hit it, so I put the car in park, got out, and took a look. There was no damage to either bumper, which the other driver acknowledged. However, he was a professional driver transporting passengers, so he had to call his company to report the accident. Off to the nearby parking lot we both went to deal with all the attendant issues.

We were told to wait for the police, which took more than an hour, and exchange all sorts of information, which we did. Unfortunately, of course, we would have to report the accident to our insurance companies.

Later, after lots of correspondences with my insurance company, they informed me that that

two people in the van claimed whiplash, and there was several thousand dollars worth of repair work that needed to be done. The whiplash claim was of course preposterous and unprovable (perfect for those claiming it to get a cool few thousand dollars of, in my opinion, ill-gotten gains). The cost for the repair work was possible, given that we were in the US and even the most minor scratch costs hundreds of dollars to repair. (I recently had a larger body repair done on my van here in Mexico for the whopping total of US \$27.50, but I digress.) Of course, I assumed my rates would go up as well.

Fast-forward several years to the present, with me driving on the carretera (main road) in the town of Jocotepec, around Lake Chapala, a famous expat location. I'm stopped at a red light. Looking to the left, I see that a yellow taxi has stopped to let a second passenger into the car. Behind the cab was another car traveling too fast that hit the taxi at about the same speed I had hit the van several years earlier. I heard the crash sound and saw the heads of the people in the taxi jerk forward.

What happened next was a 180-degree departure from my experience in the US. The taxi driver got out of his car, looked at his bumper, looked at the other driver, and said "OK". The elderly driver who hit him never even got out of her car, said "OK" from the driver's seat, and they both drove off. The whole thing, from impact to driving away, took perhaps 30 seconds.



I've been told that before the US was such a lawsuit happy country, what I saw in Mexico is what would have happened in the US. Even though I'm 59 years old, I don't know if this is true or not because perhaps I've never experienced it. But if it is true, it must have been a very long time ago... a time, in my opinion, when it was better in the US than it is now.

Important note: This story is in no way intended to depict all accidents in Mexico or to give you advice to you on what to do if you are in an accident. It is only intended to accurately describe what I saw with my own two eyes. If you are involved in an serious accident in Mexico (especially one with injuries), you are not allowed to leave the scene until police arrive, so please don't.

(Pictures, from top: Jet Metier in the parking lot at the malecon in Jocotepec, Jet Metier on a typical street in Jocotepec, and the writer with his two dogs facing Lake Chapala in Jocotepec.)

Lessons Learned From 5 Months as a Nomad-- His takeaways after selling everything at 58 and hitting the road

(We thank the wonderful people and our good friends at Nextavenue.org, where [this article was originally published](#) December 6, 2016)

As boomers, quite a few of us had the fantasy when we were in high school or college of getting in a VW van with our friends and hitting the road for parts unknown or taking a year off to travel. What adventures we would have!



Some of us even did it, and have stories to tell. Most of us, however, didn't. We settled into more traditional lives. Our adventures and our stories would have to wait. But now, as we get older and the passage of time seems to accelerate, we become more acutely aware that we don't have unlimited time or unlimited good health, causing many of us to wonder if our adventures will ever happen.

My adventures are going on right now. So I wanted to share the lessons I've learned in the past five months living the nomadic life in case you're considering doing the same.

As [I wrote on Next Avenue in July](#), the thought of having regrets too late for a "do over" was too much to bear. So my wife and I — co-founders of the website [Best Places in the World to Retire](#) — sold our Tucson house and gave away or sold most of what we owned, packed the remainder into a big, white van, and with our two dogs, [we hit the road](#).



Our plans were to first to drive through [Mexico](#), and then to [Belize](#). Most likely, we would also visit [Panama](#) and [Nicaragua](#). [Portugal](#) is a long shot, but we're aiming for it. We're doing a grand tour to sample places and lifestyles; generally staying for six weeks to two months in great vacation rentals in great vacation and expat locations. We're also trying to broaden our experiences and learn more about the world and about ourselves.

The nature of my work makes this easy for me. I can handle Best Places in the World to Retire

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tasks anywhere with a good Internet connection. And I can join the 500+ contributors on our site who write about their experiences and observations firsthand on our web page, our Facebook page and YouTube.

Five months in, we've [traveled the entire length of Baja California](#) and [stayed in a small village just south of La Paz](#). From there, we [took the ferry to Mazatlan](#) and [spent more than a week just north of Puerto Vallarta](#). Then, we drove to the Mexican Highlands and stayed for more than two months in the [famous expat haven of Ajijic, on Lake Chapala](#), where the weather was voted the second best in the world. We're now in [San Miguel de Allende](#), a picturesque colonial city also in the Mexican Highlands.

Here's some of what we've learned so far:

1. Not only is staying in great vacation locations for weeks to months at a time more interesting, fun and exciting than staying at home, it's also much less expensive. By my rough calculations, our cost of living has dropped by more than half.

Dinners at very good restaurants are about \$4 to \$6 each and we've paid our housekeepers the going rate of about \$2.70 an hour. I had my teeth cleaned by a dentist for \$27 and a visit to the podiatrist set me back only \$12.50. My wife had facials for \$15 each, and, after steeling myself for the outcome, I got my hair cut for \$2.76. (You can judge the results of [my haircut on this video](#).)

All these items and services were equal to or better than in the U.S.

2. You don't have to worry about your safety or be overly concerned about having anything stolen. We have never once felt physically threatened or been robbed. Quite the contrary, we've found the Mexican people to be very friendly, happy, warm, welcoming and honest.



Four separate times, I was told that I'd left too much money for a tip or that I paid too much for something.

3. Mexico probably isn't like you expect. It's better. If, like me, your only previous experience with Mexico was at a border town like Tijuana or on vacation in places like Cabo San Lucas, you have very little idea what Mexico is really like.

We've been at 5,000 to 6,000 feet elevation for about half our time, where the weather is around 75 degrees daily. A good portion of Mexico is actually in the highlands, where we can go out any time of day without worrying about the sun or heat.

4. You'll be in for pleasant surprises. We have, precisely because we've taken the time to drive through an area or because we were in a place for longer than the standard vacation, offering us the gift of time to just wander around.

For example, we visited [a series of magnificent beaches in remote areas of Baja California](#) with calm, clear, warm water, and almost no one was there to share it except our dogs (who are also having a spectacular time).

From locals, we've learned of otherwise unknown hiking trails and what could only be described as [a full day at an all-inclusive resort for the price of the included lunch](#).

5. If you're paying attention and have an open mind, being in a foreign country provides you the opportunity to put to rest stereotypes. ([I provide some specifics here.](#))

As you gain a greater understanding of a place or group of people there, you come to the



inescapable conclusion that some ideas you had may not be true. In short, being abroad can help you become a deeper, more understanding person.

6. Most things we fear are worse in anticipation than in reality. We were concerned about lots of things, including: crossing the border with pets, driving in Mexico and communicating in our extremely rudimentary Spanish where there were few English speakers. This is precisely the anxiety and stress that causes many people never to have their adventures in the first place.

As it turned out, however, nothing was as difficult or fearsome as we'd dreaded. What's more, as we mastered each anxiety and our fear left us, our trepidation was replaced with a sense of confidence. And with that confidence, we received a sense of mastery and well-being that we never would have achieved had we just stayed at home.

As we've grown progressively better at conquering our fears, our minds have cleared, we've relaxed and we're enjoying ourselves more. Now, we experience fun and wonder on a whole class of undertakings; [even just going to the grocery store](#).

All in all, our first five months have gone much better than we'd hoped. They've certainly been much better than sitting at home, or worse, realizing one day that it's too late to do any of this at all.



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