

November, 2000

Cheryll and I are back from ten days in Mexico City. We set out well aware of the reputation of the city; dangerous and dirty, impoverished, crowded, but with a fascinating history and exceptional museums. It turned out to be partially true, partially exaggerated.

We stayed in the apartment of our friend Carmen Benavides. Carmen is also a GM manager. She's working in the nearby city of Toluca on a two-year international assignment. GM has provided her with a huge, luxury, penthouse apartment in the hills west of the city. She generously gave us the use of her apartment and company car while she was in the US for Thanksgiving. We spent several "Happy Hours" sipping Coronas with a wedge of lime on her terrace while enjoying the view of the mountains.

Driving in Mexico City is ah, er, umm, less than relaxing, yeah, that's the ticket, less than relaxing. The congestion seems perpetual. Traffic lights and lane markers should be considered little more than suggestions. The only way to change lanes is to force your way in. Turn signals are for wussies. Left or right turns can be made from any lane on a six-lane highway. The congestion in the city is so bad during the week that you have to park your car one day each week based on the last digit of your license plate or risk large fines. The air pollution didn't live up to it's reputation. Cars now have to have catalytic converters and the air quality is no worse than LA.

We visited several museums, the ancient ruins of Teotihuacan which pre-date even the Aztecs, well-maintained parks, and huge cathedrals in the city. The area has an incredible history of a huge Aztec city which was conquered by the Spaniards in the 16th century. Many walls have been decorated by Diego Rivera murals depicting the history of the area. Diego Rivera has also painted the murals on the walls of the Detroit Institute of arts depicting the history of the auto industry on a commission from the Ford family. The people were generally happy, industrious and appeared well-fed and clean, if not prosperous. We saw a few, but not many beggars. People without jobs step out at red traffic lights to sell newspapers or gum, wash windshields, juggle, roll around on a towel covered with broken glass or form human pyramids for tips. We were very careful and heard stories of crime, but did not personally witness anything criminal.

One day we drove two and a half hours to Nevado de Toluca. It's a 16,000 foot volcano and we decided to climb part of it in preparation for our climb of Kilimanjaro in January. We made it to 14,300 feet before the loose, unstable rock turned us back. Kilimanjaro has no technical climbing on the route we've chosen. The ten days we spent at 8000 feet may help with acclimatization.

We took a side trip for two nights to the nearby cities of Cuernavaca and Taxco. Cuernavaca is the hometown of my Spanish tutor, Christina. My hours with her were paying off, as English is not widely spoken in central Mexico. Cuernavaca is a nice city in a valley with more cathedrals, museums, a nice garden and a castle. A highlight for Cheryll was getting her first professional shoeshine in the town square. I'm not sure if the 80 cents I paid was a special tourist price or not.

Taxco is a beautiful city in the mountains two hours south of Mexico City. The toll roads (autopistas) were nice, but the tolls were so high that most Mexicans can't afford to drive them. The tolls between Mexico City and Taxco would be considered a very good day's pay for the average Mexican. The Mexicans mostly drive on the crowded, windy, slow back roads while the rich foreigners speed along on the wide-open autopistas. Taxco is famous for its silver mining and silver smithing. We found a room in a hotel with a tremendous view of the city. It was long on charm, but somewhat short on maintenance. We spent the next day hiking the winding streets in the steep hills that are the city and visiting silver jewelry shops. On our way back to Mexico City we stopped in an area called Xochimilco. It's a swampy area similar to the bayou around New Orleans. We chartered a boat, which was powered by a young man with a long pole pushed into the mud. It's the Mexican version of the canals of Venice. There was no serenading, and I'm not sure if that's good thing or not.

One of the highlights of the trip was the people. I should qualify that. One of the highlights of the trip was the people so long as they were not operating motor vehicles. Everyone we met was genuinely interested in both assuring that we were enjoying ourselves, and that we left with a good impression. We ate a local restaurant three times and one of the waitresses spoke English. The evening before we left she gave us her phone number and address and invited us to stay with her on our next trip.

We enjoy a traditional American Thanksgiving, sort of. We watch part of the Lions game on satellite TV. A local restaurant has a turkey dinner special, but it starts with chips and salsa. They must think that turkey is flavorless, because they mix it with bacon and ham. You can guess the rest.

We enjoyed the trip very much. It was good to see what Mexico looks like beyond the border towns and the beach resorts. Just the same, we're putting it on our "Been there, done that" list.

Back to <http://www.odendahls.com/>