

EXPAT LIFE:  
AT HOME IN SAN  
MIGUEL de ALLENDE

by

John Scherber

AN EXCERPT

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#### INTRODUCTION

As American expatriates living full time in México, my wife and I moved to San Miguel de Allende in the summer of 2007, defying both the warnings of the popular media and the conventional U.S. government “wisdom” about living south of this complex and misunderstood line we call the border. From this more southerly side, officially it’s called *la frontera*, but more colloquially, *la línea*, the line.

While many will wish to see it as no more than an irregular track on a map, traveling from the Gulf to the Pacific, the truth is that the border is a line densely burdened not only with the weight of history, as we shall see, but with varying meanings for different people today. For some it is the beginning of a dream, whether they are crossing going north or going south. It can also be a foggy lens through which we view each other with fluctuating degrees of distortion and illusion, and too often with little understanding or sympathy. It is a tangible line on which we can hang our prejudices and

misconceptions as if they were old suits of clothes we can never quite bring ourselves to dispose of. And it can still sometimes be, as it has too often been in the past, a provocative line drawn in the sand. That feature seems to be developing more today as I write this.

A less common way of looking at it is one I want to examine in some detail in this book. It is the idea of México as the home for expatriates, mainly Americans, but to Canadians and others as well, who wish to begin or have already begun a new life away from the country of their birth, and discovered this quite foreign place as their home. How does that work, and why is it the case? Even having gone through it myself, I can see how it still seems like a daunting prospect for some people.

I am a storyteller both by my inclination and my trade, and this is a book that examines some aspects of the expatriate experience I haven't dealt with in my three other books about living in México. It is not intended to be a sequel, but more as a companion piece that can be profitably read even by those who have read the others, since there is little or no overlap, other than in my own attitudes and insights, which continue to evolve year by year, and book by book.

As the author of thirty-three other books, the process of writing is always important to me. I don't start the first paragraph or even the first sentence without knowing who would want to read this. It is written for people who are curious about why a rational person (like me) would leave the country he grew up in, one he inhabited all of his life in order to live in strange settings among people who neither share many of his values, nor understand the focus of his lifestyle, nor his need to explain what goes on to those neighbors from the north who might also wish to visit or live here. To leave a country in which he operated three entrepreneurial businesses, raised a family, wrote several books, and was an active participant in what we then called The American Dream. It is the story of the kind of experiences that await that incautious type of person who settles on this side (my side) of that porous fence we call the border.

It is a book written for anyone considering such a chancy move—but just how risky is it? What kind of person does well as an expatriate and even prospers during that awkward phase of transition, and afterward? How do such people come to earth and get involved? Being an immigrant may be much like going through puberty. You know your voice will change, since Spanish requires a different kind of timbre and inflection, but

what other physical and mental transformations await the unwary expat? Why would any reasonable person consider going through that, especially later in life? And has politics now assumed a higher position among the list of reasons why people decide to leave the United States? It was thinking about that possibility that prompted me to revisit the subject in the light of today, as it occurred to me that “home” as we once thought of it may be less homelike for many than it once was. What if home as we knew it has evolved away from us, even as we still search for what it once meant? This is a question I cannot answer for all of us, but in this volume other expats will speak to that issue.

When my wife and I left Minnesota for San Miguel de Allende in the state of Guanajuato in 2007 it was not for political reasons. We had vacationed in México a dozen times over as many years before we decided to relocate there once the kids were established on their own. We sold our house easily without realizing that the residential real estate market was near the top of its arc in that particular cycle, and we left town with no great sense of stress or transition. We were abundantly ready for a change, but to us that mainly meant we planned to settle into the culture and climate of our southern neighbor with no regrets. We knew it would not be easy, but our history of repeated visits had made us think we could take a shot at it without beginning as complete newbies. I don't recall that we were at all fearful of making the move. Nothing we have learned since has contradicted that, even though being here has often contradicted our expectations.

While neither of us was enthusiastic about the tone of party politics as then practiced in the United States on either side, the George W. Bush presidency had left us confused and disengaged. While I had been, over the course of my life, both a Democrat and a Republican, I could never understand what Bush stood for. I felt early on that the invasion of Iraq was a false flag venture that further destabilized a tensely unbalanced region, and the removal of the iron-fisted dictator Saddam Hussein exposed the population to even greater miseries and uncertainties. We still live with that legacy today and the entire area offers no sign of opting for peace. Nor do the great powers seem inclined to halt their meddling.

Living in México has offered us a means of paying less attention to these problems without actually gaining any further distance from them. We're now only slightly more removed from those intractable conflicts in a world that's growing smaller all the time. It

is quite possible that there is nowhere left to hide, but that may be the subject of a different book, possibly one of my twenty-some mysteries.

In the intervening years in the United States we have seen an explosion of the national debt and an ongoing reduction of the middle class. As an American couple living in voluntary exile in a Mexican town with a substantial expatriate community, it seems that we're observing the gradual decline of a system in the States that is losing its ability to be inclusive, or even to *appear* inclusive, no matter which party is in power. I'm sure there is a message in that, but I leave it to others to spell out what it might be. The certain and continuing deterioration of civility in politics has left me looking for more rewarding subjects to explore. It is in that spirit that I'm happy to return to considering the nuances of expat life in México.

It is not the point of this book to probe the reasons for the election of Donald Trump, or to analyze the effect of his policies, with a single exception: that since the defeat of the Democrats in both the White House and in Congress, there has developed a noticeably greater interest in moving to México among Americans. Is that only chatter? I'm not going to speculate about that in this introduction. I'm sure that as we proceed people will tell me why they have come here, or wish to come here. This is in spite of the unrelenting attacks on México by the U.S. press and the State Department, and now by the President himself. As we will see in more detail, this antagonism is nothing new, and it should not be a cause for surprise to anyone who knows a little of the history of this hemisphere. (See Chapter Two)

The question that is forming in my mind is whether a different version of the American expat is coming here now, one with different aims and hopes than my wife and I had in 2007. Is there a sea change of some kind underway because of political developments in the United States? Is the real character of that country moving further away from the manner in which we've always thought of it, or wished to think of it? Or is it only the government that is moving away, while the people, the bedrock of American society, watch with a confused and increasingly concerned expression? Is it therefore now easier to think that a country as foreign as México could be home?

Many people both in and out of the media have remarked that democracy is dead in the United States, not just stylishly radical thinkers or people of a pessimistic turn of

mind. Recently I heard former President Carter say this. But México, with its long history of revolution and unstable government, is not a logical choice for those seeking a system of governance unfailingly true to its founding principles. Perhaps no country is. Those of us who have immigrated here love México for other reasons, just as there are still many reasons to love the U.S. beyond its current toxic political climate.

Some of the questions I will try to address in this book are: Who are the new expatriates? Are they merely the current generation of the old ones, using different hairstyles, tattoos, and buzzwords? What changes in their lives do they expect to find here as the result of their move? Will those changes be caused by their position in this culture or their need for flight? To what degree are politics in the U.S. a motive for their presence? What aspects of Mexican culture and society are not likely to be obvious to them, but will ultimately need their serious attention? And ultimately, where and what is home? Is it a place that we can pack up and take with us, as portable as a state of mind perhaps? Or is it something new awaiting us on the ground upon our arrival, lacking only our recognition and embrace to make it real? Isn't this an identity question? Like, who have we been in the past and who are we now? And even more, what will we become as we make this transition?

In an online dictionary I found this definition of home as the second of three, and I liked it best: *the place in which one's domestic affections are centered*. That in itself suggests that home is something to be found rather than something to bring along in a cart or a semi trailer. It's not part of our luggage. I like that idea because it rests on a less inward view, and I would hope that coming to live in México would draw us out of ourselves more than it drives us back within. We want to be open to the experience, cautious perhaps, without being guarded, a task not so easy later in life, but still a useful one at any time.

In the style of my other books about expat life in México, this is not intended to be in any way a scientific sample. I have no background in statistics, and whatever conclusions I come to will be the product of my own experience on the scene here over more than eleven years, my powers of observation as the author of thirty-three other books, and my personal commitment to tell the truth as well as I am able to discern it. I operate with no political party bias. While I am always alert to issues and personalities, I try hard not to label people. I also resent being labeled by them, although many have

tried with little success. Labels are our most common means of dismissal. They are a form of blinders for the labeler, a kind of self-censorship.

As in my fiction, I have little interest in thinking collectively or generalizing. Discovering the truth always works best in the details, with the specific person, the individual. We learn most easily about other people and ourselves from our face-to-face contacts.

For several years I have endeavored to stand outside the circle of American politics because I find it toxic and uncivil on both sides. The two major parties have adopted as their chief objective the thorough division of Americans into irreconcilable camps where sane conversation across the gulf that separates them is no longer possible. I believe this has been done with intent. If we cannot listen to other views, we will not know what is going on, and we will have no other views to compare ours with. That encourages the growth of unchallenged folly.

In contrast, my position is that I am willing to talk civilly with anyone who can be civil to me. The conversational parts of this book that follow are framed in that spirit.

There are approximately one million Americans living legally in México, and many others who are not here legally. For there is not only the much more publicized issue of unofficially admitted Mexicans living under the radar in the U.S., there is also the fact that it is even easier to live illegally here in México, although harder to vote. The bureaucracy is often inefficient and its Achilles heel is that government agencies do not easily share information with each other.

Where I have conversations in this book, they are with people living in the San Miguel area. To some degree they are representative of Americans anywhere in México, but not consistently and never entirely so. It will be easy to find expatriates in many other places who do not think like their peers do here, and this book may speak for them only partially or not at all. An entire subset of expatriates lives in parts of México that offer little or no support from other expats. They usually try hard to leave no footprint on the culture. (See my book, *Into the Heart of México: Expatriates Find Themselves off the Beaten Path*).

Call this excursion then a sampler of the motives, hopes, and experiences of expats living in San Miguel, whether recently arrived or not. It examines the lifestyle of a selected few. My selection process has aimed for diversity and comparison, but it will not

equip the reader to make broad generalizations of what brought and what keeps people here. As a writer primarily of fiction, I'm not fond of broad statements, and for me they carry little weight. As I suggested above, my approach is always that of the novelist, where the truth is revealed more vividly in the detail of the story rather than in the generalizations latent in the stroke of a broader brush.

Before we consider in detail where we are today, let's start with a few thoughts about where we've been.