

LIVING IN SAN MIGUEL:

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

by

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*An Excerpt:
Chapter 1
Why San Miguel?*

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WHY SAN MIGUEL?

What is all this fuss about? It's true that San Miguel is a historic town and a World Heritage site since 2008. Unlike nearby Guanajuato, the state capital and home to the largest silver mine in the world, the Valenciana, San Miguel has no mines. But it does have fresh springs, and that was its appeal in 1542, when it became a way station for the silver caravans on the way to Veracruz for shipment to Spain. With its other neighbor, Dolores Hidalgo, it played the role of Lexington and Concord for México as the region where the first shots were fired in the War of Independence, 1810-1821. It's the town where the nation of México was declared to be free and separate from Spain by a wealthy local clique who had no authority to do so, but it worked all the same because people were sufficiently ready for a change to be ready to fight for it.

It has architectural controls that make it nearly impossible to remodel any exteriors in the historic center. If you took away the cars, much of it would look like 1750. It has a population of about eight to ten thousand expatriates (out of 75,000), Canadian and American, some of whom wander around wondering whether they're living in the real México or not. So what makes this town a good, even a stellar place to live in as a foreigner, an expat? To make it worthwhile to sell your house in Denver or Dover and wave goodbye to the grown kids (who don't understand what you're doing), and come down here and take a shot at learning Spanish? In short, to risk making a fool of yourself, which is the essence of risk.

There must be *something* about this place, and there is.

Not too long ago the magazine *Condé Nast Traveler* named San Miguel de Allende, México, winner of its annual reader poll to select the world's best city to live in. Here's a reference, you can paste it into your browser, as with all the others that will follow:

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/16/travel/cn-traveler-top-cities/>

In the previous year the winner was Charleston, S. C., and Paris came in at #22. An impressive showing for this middling city in the central highlands of México, and perhaps a bit surprising considering the competition, but it does suggest that many people realize that San Miguel has some superior things to offer. I confess that my first reaction to this announcement was mild skepticism. This town has its warts, and I'm not sentimental about it. I like to enjoy it on its own merits, but I'm always aware of the bad as well as the good. If I had been asked, I would've said this was the best city I knew of that I could afford to live in, which is not so bad, although this is a criterion that Conde Nast's survey does not appear to offer. I suspect their target reader doesn't need to think much about it either.

While the magazine piece doesn't volunteer to share the reasons for its readers' rankings, it's easy to guess what some of them might be: a prodigious historic colonial charm, mostly intact and in some ways suggestive of Europe; a moderate and dependably sunny climate in most months, a low cost of living compared to the U.S. and Canada, the relative absence of heavy traffic, great cultural resources and restaurants, and an overall superior quality of life. Coming from Minnesota, I especially enjoy not having to even think about winter. If there is some aspect of that season I wish to explore, like the delicate crystalline structure of snowflakes, I can always find it on the National Geographic Channel. Somehow, I have never looked.

In short, these are the usual suspects when people start to think about where they might head next after deserting Newark or Detroit. I'm not going to argue with it, since I've lived in San Miguel myself for the better part of the last decade, and while I do occasionally long for Paris or Florence, those yearnings haven't yet prompted me to put my house on the market. San Miguel is a great place to be a writer, indeed, a creative person in any of the arts, and that's my niche. There is more about this, with some examples, in the chapter called CREATIVE LIVES.

One effect the Condé Nast piece did have was to prompt me to think about some reasons for this popularity that I knew were almost certainly not on that undisclosed list. Think of them as the insider's reasons to be here, because they don't all come into focus on your first, or even second, visit.

Number one I would call Cultural Differences. This town does not possess the seamless social fabric of central Iowa, and while it is small enough so that many people here know each other, and even more look familiar, it is still not a melting pot where everyone is merging into a smoothly blended culture. The Mexican community and the expat community both struggle a bit to understand each other's values and way of life. It is difficult to mistake members of one community for those of the other. In short, in passing, we always know which we are and where we belong. Still, it is easy to make erroneous assumptions about people who are different from us, and because it is a dynamic system, we all must work a little, and sometimes more than a little, to understand each other. If this keeps us slightly off balance, I see that as a good thing. It makes for sound muscle tone and mental agility as we get older, things that often tend to diminish in the absence of the challenge of change around us. Which brings us to the second point.

Number two would be Respect for Elders. San Miguel, like the rest of México, is not a place where being cutting edge equates with adopting this morning's newest trend. The calendar operates in fits and starts, and as a result, it is still 1950 in some areas here. We are not rushing to overtake the latest fad, so if you are not extremely young, you still have a chance of being at least somewhat engaged, since the values of those around you are not so fluid as to make yours seem rigidly irrelevant and old fashioned. We are more connected over the generations, and that feels good. Even people of advanced age are not segregated, and most families consist of very young children, parents, grandparents and great grandparents all spending time together to their mutual enrichment. In my childhood, I can remember it being still that way in the U.S., and I was privileged to know several of my relatives who had been born in the 1860s. Imagine growing to adulthood before the automobile was even invented.

Older people in México are generally regarded as retaining the wisdom of their accrued experience, and therefore deserving of respect. Solutions are often sought in the proven ways of the past. If they don't always work perfectly today, they may still be close enough, since the future offers even less certainty. In the hierarchical society that structures this country, age is an underpinning of the consistency of values, and a source of continuity both in attitude and in perceptions.

For the third reason, I would suggest what I call The Carnival of Color. While some businesses have branches and satellites, and we have nearby an Office Depot, a Starbucks, and a Costco store in a neighboring town, this is still not in general a country hospitable to franchises or chains, although many Mexicans look on the big box stores as a sign of progress. As a result, you are likely to see behind the counter of your local bakery or dry cleaners the man or woman whose idea it was to start that business, a person who recognizes you and maintains his or her standard of product or service as a matter of pride, since commerce is still mostly seen as *personal*, a transaction that occurs within each other's space. When we buy goat cheese and yogurt at the organic market, we receive it from the hand of the woman who made it. I can think of many restaurants where the owner greets you at the door, and if he passes your table as you're eating, he says with emphasis, *buen provecho!*

While government-planned housing tracts (*infonavits*) exist on the edges of most large towns, and have a distressingly cookie-cutter feel, generally the housing stock is distinctly hand made and individual, using a robust variety of colors and materials. Our streets do not exhibit deadening parades of strip malls and franchise businesses, and the architecture is neither anonymous nor fortress-like in scale. We do not like to be mistaken for each other, and personal hospitality, based on recognition of friends and neighbors, is an established part of public behavior. The need each of us feels for uniqueness needs no justification. Exuberance is valued over reticence in design. It's OK to reproduce the Virgin of Guadalupe on the hood of your 1993 Dodge pickup. Subtle varieties of beige, however, are not easily distinguished this far south of the border, and I suspect are best appreciated against a backdrop of snow.

Number four I will call the Mexican Dynamic. For expats, it is impossible not to compare this country with the one we left, if only to reassure ourselves that we have given up easy access to chocolate chips and kosher dills for sufficient reason.

The country of México, while older than both Canada and the U.S., is still tracing an upward curve in its economic development. The middle class is growing here, if from a smaller base, even as the middle class in the U.S. is shrinking. México is still creating jobs, since it dodged the worst effects of the recent recession in the States. While not a democracy in any true sense, its political life has been dominated by a single party for

most of the last century. While this has fostered corruption and favoritism, more importantly, it has not constantly convulsed the country in political rancor and deadlock. Oddly, things can still be accomplished here at the federal government level.

People in this country do not take politics so seriously. There is a healthy cynicism about what happens in México City that Americans could examine more closely, since Mexicans are not as easily fooled by the nasty rant of self-seeking political parties on either side. This country functions more like Italy, where the government is simply not regarded as a serious player on the field of national life, a life that is more often sustained by the continuity of family and the tradition of the church, so the regime's periodic fall is often appropriately greeted with a yawn. The phrase I often hear in this country is, "Same horse, new rider." This is followed by a shrug.

Last comes number five, and it's my clear favorite. In terms of individual development, it's also the most important. San Miguel, and indeed México as a whole, is a place where expats can come down and reinvent themselves, if that's their goal. Here, if you wish, you can have no history. Even if some expats don't see the process as one of reinvention, that's often what happens. Perhaps it's because we are obviously not part of the mainstream culture, and some (but not all) of those societal rules do not apply. For example, we are granted a pass from the class system here. This is an underlying theme I have written about before and will again. Moving here is a Release into Freedom at any age. It is a place with reduced or even absent expectations of what you might do or how you'll behave. It's as if your overseer has vanished, whether that was a family member, spouse, or a neighbor.

If you were a nun in your working life north of the border, you can be naughty down here without apologizing or blushing. If you were a plumber in Peoria, you can now be a photographer, a painter of portraits, or a poet. You can do nothing at all, or you can do *everything*. You can justify your prior life or simply forget it. The narrow, uneven sidewalk outside your door is labeled, in a script only you can see in a certain morning light, *Step One*. It calls out to you, inviting you to take charge of your life. Above all, you can unleash things from the subterranean layers of your mind, and as they emerge into daylight for the first time, you will need to apologize or explain them to *no one* in the entire world.

That is the charm of San Miguel and, indeed, of all of México.