

AN EXCERPT FROM:

Into the Heart of México:

Expatriates Find Themselves off the Beaten Path

by

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly everyone has been to Cancun. It can be found as a tiny dot on a few maps going back to the eighteenth century, yet when resort development began in the early 1970s only a handful of people lived there. Effectively, the city as it exists today has no past, so it's not a stretch to think that as enticing as they are in January, Cancun and some of the other recent beach developments don't represent the real México, which is layered with history.

That realization is what drove me to spend some time in México's hinterland after seven or eight delightful beach vacations. I was coming from Minnesota then, where in the winter the word *delightful* describes anything above freezing. What I found in the interior was infinitely more complex than on the beaches. Substantial expatriate communities flourish around Lake Chapala near Guadalajara, San Miguel de Allende, México City, and other towns and cities. I discovered a way of life less hurried, less expensive, and in many ways more colorful and rewarding than the life I was leading in the United States. I encountered values that are different in refreshing ways. It wasn't long before I found myself examining these expat enclaves more closely for the right one to adopt for myself.

For North Americans thinking about moving to another culture, another country, and immersing themselves in a different language, the support of a community of their own people seems vital. Their high school Spanish may serve adequately in a restaurant or on a plane, but what happens when the need arises to communicate with an electrician or a doctor who speaks no English? How well does their Spanish differentiate among plumbing parts or specify urgent auto repairs? Especially in terms of personal relations,

Spanish is a language graced with levels of nuance that the average high school teacher never attempts to explain.

Ultimately I chose San Miguel de Allende as my home in México. It's a historic colonial town on a mountain plateau at 6,400 feet elevation. The broccoli capital of the Americas, it hosts an expat population of about 10,000 among the 75,000 people in the city itself.

Soon, the experiences of my American and Canadian neighbors inspired me to write a book about their lifestyle within this supportive community. I wanted to know what had caused them to leave their homeland and what they'd learned as they settled in. In the conversations that followed, their stories were far more diverse than I had anticipated, and I found no way beyond their simple collective presence in San Miguel to characterize them as a group. They had all come at their new home from different angles, different points on a compass that was not exclusively geographic. The resulting book was titled *San Miguel de Allende: A Place in the Heart*, and while it wasn't the book I set out to write, it was the book that awaited me when I dug more deeply into the project. Sometimes it goes like that when you listen carefully enough to hear the unexpected.

More gradually, as I settled in myself, I became aware of scattered groups of expats who had chosen different towns, places farther off the beaten path, where they were more on their own, or gathered into much smaller enclaves. They lived in cities where they weren't numerous enough to affect real estate prices, as others had in San Miguel, to influence what was available in the markets, or to stimulate the local people to learn some English.

The character of their lifestyle went well beyond doing without peanut butter and chocolate chips. In contrast to my own situation in San Miguel, where if I didn't know where to find kosher dill pickles someone would soon tell me, it led me to dig deeper into ways of living that were less dependent on the support of others from the same culture.

As I crisscrossed the country talking to people, I soon realized that this is a different kind of expat. This book is about their México and their way of life, away from large English-speaking settlements. Some of the people on these pages left the United States leaving little warmth in their wake. Others left with no intention whatever of

becoming an expat. It's not about why or how you came, but about what you do when you arrive.

Like my other book, this volume is personal and anecdotal. Its purpose is to illustrate some examples of this way of life, but not to generalize about it. Whether it's the real México or not is a debate I leave to others, but I know it has its own detailed reality for those who live this lifestyle. And because they are necessarily more connected one on one among the local people, the experience is often accompanied by a more distinctive sense of place, one that they do not dominate through their numbers, and place is one of the principal characters driving this story.

Americans and Canadians do not readily think of themselves as emigrants. After all, we came from the tens of millions of Europeans and Asians and Africans that arrived on our shores as a destination, mostly willing and eager, except those who were marched ashore in chains, so it must be the proper place to be. If that's the case, where else is there to go, and why move on? It almost feels like going against the grain, since it often took a great deal of pain and effort for our forebears to get there. In many cases it put them in debt or servitude for years. This book is the story of some of their descendants who have packed up and headed for new destinations in México. Is it a reaction against their old way of life, or only the next link in a chain of migration that began generations before? In the pages that follow, these characters will speak about this for themselves.

This book is not a sequel to my earlier work on the expat experience in San Miguel. It is more a corollary, an accompanying piece that is meant to stand side-by-side with it and illustrate a range of alternative destinations.

Casting about for a place to begin, I settled on a unique town about an hour from San Miguel. When I was painting, I was always fascinated by the melancholy air of ghost towns. Usually their growth had been fueled by nearby mines, and when the ore ran out the life of the town ebbed away. This was nearly the case with our distant neighbor, a town, once a vibrant city, named Pozos, in the state of Guanajuato. It's an out-of-the-way place cradled in the mountains deep in the heart of México...