

The True Vibe of San Miguel de Allende

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San Miguel de Allende, a town of about 175,000 people 270 km (168 miles) northwest of Mexico City, may represent Mexico at its best, having a year-round dry and cool climate thanks to its elevation of 1,900 meters (6,200 feet), and representing every cultural aspect of the Mexican people, having been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. Those guidebook aspects of the city are easily found online, in as great a detail as the searcher can want. My concern in this brief account here is to in some way get at the soul of the place.

Mexico remains a Third World country – not just in its infrastructure, but in its social institutions – and San Miguel is a paradigm of that status. Internet service is unpredictable; power outages are not uncommon, affecting *colonias* (neighborhoods) randomly; tap water is undrinkable, with the town's two natural springs having run dry in the 1970s,¹ and with its three main bottled water suppliers rationing service in late May, 2024; the threat of catastrophic water shortage, like that in Mexico City,² constantly looms. Despite not being an urbanized nation, Mexico's pollution, especially air quality, is worse than the United States,³ mostly because its internal combustion engines are not required to have catalytic converters⁴ – except for Mexico City, where in spite of the requirement they are not effective.⁵ Street violence is almost nonexistent in San Miguel, with the real criminal activity compartmentalized to disputes between its local drug retailers and to murderous rivalries in the town of Celaya 50 km (31 miles) directly south of the city, where 34 police officers have been killed in the last three years.⁶ However, in 2019, over 100 murders were committed in San Miguel in a war between the cartels Santa Rosa de Lima and Jalisco. Mayor Mauricio Trejo put an end to this threat to the life of San Miguel by creating several heavily armed police units, which patrol the streets – especially in gringo-frequented areas like the *centro*, City Market, and La Comer market – in compact trucks, armored and mounted with machine guns. These units are among the highest paid in Mexico, insulating them from cartel bribery. Exercising a real warning to drug suppliers is one thing, but it must be said that drug consumers fuel this trade, and much of that side of the problem is from “recreational” gringo drug users.

Except for a few five-star hotels like the Rosewood and the Casa de Sierra Nevada (a block south of the Jardín, the main square in front of the Paróquia, or parochial church, a garish pink wedding cake icon visible from every part of San Miguel), the food scene is rather disappointing. Outside the five-star hotels, chef Donnie Masterson at El Restaurante and chef Matteo Salas at Àperi have followings, and rave reviews can be found online for this or that restaurant – of which there are about 700 if you count the listings from a TripAdvisor search – but there is not one Michelin-rated restaurant in the entire state of Guanajuato. John Mariani of *Forbes* magazine summarized his findings from a second visit after his impressionable first trip to the town:

I found no *restaurante* I would ever choose to eat at again, or recommend – despite asking local authorities where to dine. Again, owing to the tourist crowd, the *restaurantes*, including those that claim to serve true Yucatan cuisine, offered vast menus of the same dishes, including hamburgers, mozzarella and spaghetti Bolognese. The Mexican dishes were bland – not as good as any twenty Mexican restaurants in the U.S. that I could rave about – and mostly variations of tacos, quesadillas and burritos filled with the same ingredients; service was friendly but without any local charm.⁷

¹ de Gast, Robert, [Behind the Doors of San Miguel de Allende](#), ISBN 9780764913419, 2000, pages 3-9.

² <https://www.yahoo.com/news/mexico-city-residents-faced-water-100737727.html>

³ https://www.numbeo.com/pollution/compare_countries_result.jsp?country1=Mexico&country2=United+States

⁴ https://tucson.com/news/blogs/senor-reporter/emissions-tests-required-in-mexico-but-not-catalytic-converters/article_330c6e04-1f92-11e1-a900-001871e3ce6c.html

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1361920901000104>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/29/mexico-election-violence-celaya>

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmariani/2018/04/28/a-dispassionate-view-of-san-miguel-allende-by-john-mariani>

Unless you rent in some gated enclave like a hotel, or in one of the estates in the mountains surrounding the town, the tiny plots and narrow streets place you in close proximity with the locals. There are no “comps” for these houses:⁸ Most neighborhoods are decidedly mixed, with houses close-by varying greatly in price. On the street, behind an ordinary stucco wall may be an INFONAVIT⁹ basic one-bedroom, or an elegant, terraced casita with several courtyards with splashing fountains.

Your day begins with a medley from the rooftops of the more modest houses. Roosters begin crowing at about 5:00am, followed by dogs barking shortly thereafter, and then around 8:30 or 9:00am, trucks with loudspeakers begin blaring the sale of natural gas or the offer to pick up metal junk, including ovens and home appliances. The roosters and dogs are something of a puzzle: The presence of roosters would seem to preclude the presence of chickens, whose fresh eggs might well be fertilized; and since the dogs bark through the night at the least provocation, their owners must surely ignore them, rendering them useless as sentinels. In other words, the animals would seem to be useless, or at worst a nuisance, not just to gringos lacking the early risers’ habit, but to their very owners. Sometime during the morning, a garbage man wearing dark blue pants with a yellow stripe at the knees will walk along the street, clanging together two metal bars. Akin the medieval cry of “bring out your dead,” his noise signals for you to bring out your trash – completely useless exercise, since the garbage trucks arrive on the same mornings, twice a week. Throughout the day, as often as not, the air is punctuated with explosions of remarkably loud firecrackers. Inquire of the locals as to what occasion is being observed, and they will usually say none. What, life is good; do you need a reason to celebrate? Well, didn’t one of the countless *revoluciones* begin on this date? No? OK then, didn’t *abuela* have her first communion on this date? No? OK then, a birthday? Oh, what the hell – BANG! In the late afternoon, after a long siesta of recuperation from their early morning barking, the dogs set in again, possibly in anticipation of the arrival of their owners. In the evening, more firecrackers, and maybe every second or third week, a full fireworks display illuminates the sky from somewhere behind the Paróquia, showering dissolving spheres of red, green, and white over the electrified Christian cross atop its tallest spire. At all times of the day and evening, honkings, hollerings, and incessant bell-ringing in defiance of any clock or schedule from the town’s many churches echo round about, amplified by the stucco-walled cobblestone streets. Parades – some marking religious festivals, some purely secular – are frequent, with booming bass drums, plenty of trumpets, and piercing *gritos* – that athletically sustained howl originating from Miguel Hidalgo’s cry of independence from Spain on the morning of September 16, 1810, a cry that apparently only Mexicans can produce.

Probably the key to identifying the soul of San Miguel is the peculiar society of locals and gringos – or more properly, their lack of society. First, because of the language barrier, gringos float like oil on the water of a community that is mostly indifferent to them, outside the primitive lingo of buy and sell; and second, the gringos have around them none of their children, which are indispensable for any society.¹⁰ The closest admixture of the two communities is in the numerous philanthropic organizations sponsored by the gringos, mostly for the benefit of local youth, but otherwise the interests of the two are worlds apart. Go to a musical concert, an opera (mounted by young Mexicans aiming at jobs outside San Miguel), or to an art showing, and cast your gaze over the heads of the patrons there: You will witness nothing but a sea of white gringo heads – the retirees who patronize the arts. Go to a *fiesta brava* (bullfight) in the Plaza de Toros in the *calle Recreo* (when the current mayor deigns to allow it), and you will witness nothing but *los marrones*. The locals put up with the ever-growing influx of *norteamericanos* because they know that should they be scared off – by a spike in crime,¹¹ by a fall in

⁸ According to long-time San Miguel realtors and AMPI agents Lane Simmons and Ron Walters.

⁹ Mexican home-loan institution equivalent to the FHA in the United States.

¹⁰ Read the account of these separate societies in Sheila Croucher’s *The Other Side of the Fence: American Migrants in Mexico*, pages 39ff: <https://books.google.com/books?id=onLj5GaR-LkC&pg=PA39>

¹¹ The crime index for Mexico is 54.1; for the United States it is 49.2 (see <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>). The “crime index” is the number of crimes per 100,000 population; the included “crime” includes murder, non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, theft, and auto theft.

the dollar against the peso – their livelihoods would plummet. The Mexican economy in general is booming, but in San Miguel the average monthly income is just \$327.29USD, and less than 9% have a university degree.¹²

And what happens when the town's standard of living rises, as we sincerely hope it does? The evidence of history is very clear: Populations remain tranquil when enduring a poverty that must be endured; but they become restless and demanding when they experience a felt trajectory of improvement. Thus the “nearshoring” of an American manufacturing plant outside the town might have the locals realize that the plant's native engineers and foremen can not only patronize, but can also buy the casitas and hotels and bars and restaurants, can afford to send their kids to university – in short, can have them realize that they don't need the foreign tourist dollar anymore.

But ah, a socialist government will always reign in Mexico City – no Javier Milei on the horizon there! – and its close partnership with the cartels may succeed in keeping the citizens of San Miguel in penury, a poor town beholden to rich tourists. *Vive la revolución!* – meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

There is another option other than the future of prosperity or of status quo just sketched above. And that is the future of decline. It would result, most likely, from this very Catholic people casting out the entire lot of unbelievers as the arriving tsunami of sodomites, “Pride” flag-wavers, and politically rabid youth strives to become flamboyant examples to the children of Mexico.

Who are these arriving gringos currently surfing the crest of the almighty dollar?

- Those with no capital or family support, whose only income is a paltry Social Security check, who otherwise would be living in a homeless shelter if forced to stay in the United States;
- the Gatsby-esque résumé fabulists – usually supposed members of the art world – who have come to town to “re-create themselves”;
- widows and their widowed girlfriends, wallowing in the mountain of cash left by the spouse who worked himself into an early grave setting up the old gal;
- sentimental retirees whose artistic ambitions were rekindled upon discovery of the old painter's kit or unfinished manuscript in the attic;
- wannabe *artistes* of the plastic arts, including the talentless bohemians who are convinced that they can horn their way into surely *one* of the 60 art galleries¹³ in town;
- the truly rich who know a real estate bonanza when they see one.

The shared general principle of this motley is a reflexive Leftism. They believe that all claimants on government largesse, whether citizens or not, should be satisfied; that abortion should not only be allowed without restriction or term limit, but should be enshrined as a right on the same footing as the First Amendment and should of course be fully funded by the government; that any personal income that raises a man's head above the mob should be lopped off and given to fund “gender-affirming care” without age restriction; in short, they are the wonkiest woke of West Coast liberalism, which location, it should come as no surprise, is the rotting log from under which half the gringos emigrate. Much of the remaining half are Justine-worshipers and inoculation Nazis from Canada who cackle delightedly at the prospect of peaceful COVID protesters having all their wealth confiscated, along with serving jail time.

The many writers who have flitted through San Miguel, with few of them staying, are Leftists to a man – or to a woman, or to an indeterminate gender. The Writers' Conference that takes place every February has cataloged these scribblers,¹⁴ but oddly does not list any who have risen to prominence after having taken its stiffly priced classes, the complete offering of which is tagged at \$1450USD.¹⁵

¹² <https://www.economia.gob.mx/datamexico/en/profile/geo/san-miguel-de-allende>

¹³ This is the count resulting from a wide-area [TripAdvisor search](#).

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/eJcvXdXAWNI?t=451> Two minor writers who made San Miguel de Allende their permanent home were Wayne Greenhaw and Sandra Cisneros.

¹⁵ <https://sanmiguelwritersconference.org/category/packages/>

One suspects that the agents hired for these classes come not to find talent, but to take monetary scalps from the bewildered in the above categorized list of gringos.

How is it that those possessed of such a lockstep conformity of thought should find their way to San Miguel de Allende? Surely this unity of mind precludes any depth of conversation at any gathering. What's to discuss? – Time to proselytize! Or: Bring on the canapés, it's time to gossip! It seems that those who have come to play the artistic game are much like those who attend get-rich-quick seminars: A middling bunch who are easily convinced of their own stupendous potential – after paying the price of admission. However, the Napoleon Hill crowd pay only money; the San Miguel artists pay by an instinctive profession of mental conformity. After all, how stupid do you have to be, not to know who gets published these days, who gets gallery showings, and who gets promoted in the art world? Not another *Quo Vadis*, for god's sake! Give us the victimhood story of the two-spirit lesbian Negroid quadriplegic from South Bronx! But oh yeah, another Piss Christ!¹⁶

Can any authentic culture, especially among the expats, grow in this thinly tenuous soil, where the gringos pretend to get the “real Mexican experience” in a town that is more like a faked nation at Disneyworld? Scant evidence has been forthcoming. Instead, the gringo retirees shuffle in, face-planting on the town's uneven sidewalks and cobblestones;¹⁷ they print up business cards with the word “painter,” or “writer,” or simply “artist” in script beside their names; they play the last scene in their lives on the stage illuminated by San Miguel's sparkling sun, among the kind and religious warm-skinned people of the south, and all are happy, for now at least, that the show is continuing its run.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piss_Christ

¹⁷ <http://gapyearaftersixty.com/sam-does-mexico-san-miguel-de-allende/>