

Personal View

El Gran Café de la Parroquia is the focal point of social life in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico. Brightly lit with white tiled walls, it is constantly crowded with a varied clientele who represent a cross-section of the port's inhabitants. Scores of waiters with white jackets and black bow ties manoeuvre between the tables, balancing trays on one hand at shoulder level. Coffee is brewed in a large antique metal urn with a chromeplated eagle perched on the top. It is served in a tall glass, dispensed by a waiter carrying two kettles—one containing the coffee and the other hot milk. To attract his attention the customers chink their empty glasses with a spoon—a sound which provides an almost continuous background accompaniment.

Most of the patrons are men. Old men wearing panama hats pass the time of day in leisurely conversation, short-sleeved businessmen discuss financial affairs over lunch, and the tourists, sipping iced fruit drinks, idly watch the world go by. A constant stream of vendors parade through the building, selling everything from lottery tickets to chewing-gum. Perspiring shoeshine boys labour squatting at the feet of customers who continue their meals with studied indifference while extending each foot for attention. The ceiling fans keep the café relatively cool and there is no incentive to hurry out into the tropical sun.

Veracruz is not part of the recognised tourist circuit in Mexico, but it is said to have a flavour reminiscent of Havana before the revolution. Friendly and noisy, but with a relaxed atmosphere, it was the city which captured my imagination on a four-week visit to Mexico. A prominent feature is the music of the ubiquitous marimba bands. Several play outside the cafés all day and most of the night, frequently in competition. Two or three men play together on one marimba, a long wooden instrument with a sound like a xylophone, waving sticks like tendon hammers in a cheerful rhythm. They are sometimes joined by a mariachi band, trumpets blaring, or itinerant minstrels with guitars, serenading the girls at the café tables. It was here that Hernan Cortes landed in 1519 to begin the Spanish conquest of Mexico and this was the port where the galleons loaded gold for Europe. Buccaneers sacked the town on several occasions and an old fort overlooks the entrance to the harbour—a testimony to its more swashbuckling days. Veracruz is now one of Mexico's principal ports but it still has the appearance of a Spanish colonial town.

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Mexico is not popular for foreign holidays from Britain because of the distance and the absence of cheap transatlantic flights to Central America. This may account for the lack of available tourist information. My knowledge of Mexico was previously confined to its geographical position in relation to the USA. I had a vague vision of arid desert scrub dotted with cacti and dusty horsemen clad in sombreros and ponchos—an image resulting from a diet of spaghetti westerns and the Cisco Kid. North Mexico is indeed desert, which is hot, dusty, and inhospitable, but the central and southern areas contain a staggering variety of scenery, vegetation, and climate—from the cool summer evenings of Mexico City at 7350 ft to the tropical humidity of the Pacific or Gulf coastlines. Great ranges of rugged wooded mountains with snow-topped volcanoes contrast with the flat expanse of the Yucatan peninsula covered by dense tropical forest and with the wide cultivated valleys of central Mexico. Mexico is in the process of rapid development and modernisation, catalysed by the discovery of huge oil deposits, which provide a welcome boost to the Mexican economy. This

is offset by a high birth rate, rampant inflation, and a low standard of living among the large peasant population. Destitute Indian women clutching grubby children sit begging outside the chic boutiques and modern offices in downtown Mexico City; and the shanty towns which house many of the city's 12 million population stretch for miles on the outskirts.

The medical precautions necessary for a visit to Mexico are daunting. Vaccinations against typhoid, polio, and cholera are recommended (though not compulsory) and daily prophylactic chemotherapy is required for malaria, which is endemic in some areas of the Pacific coast. The main problem, however, is the chronic diarrhoea, known locally as the "turistas." Unfortunately this is unavoidable, regardless of the care taken with drinking water and the spicy food. Large stocks of antidiarrhoeal agents were required to keep gastroenteritis under control, especially on long bus journeys. The indigenous population seems to be immune to the enterogenic bacteria and presumably possesses either a completely different intestinal bacterial flora or a cast-iron digestion.

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The principal attractions are the archaeological ruins. An amazing profusion of pyramids, temples and remains of pre-Columbian cities are scattered throughout Mexico, representing a numerous and diverse group of peoples which include the Aztecs, Toltecs, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Olmecs, and Mayans. On the central plateau of Mexico, one hour's drive from the capital, is Teotihuacan, an ancient city which was abandoned several centuries before the arrival of the Aztecs. Two vast stepped pyramids stand near the "Street of the Dead," a mile-long avenue flanked by numerous smaller pyramids and temples. The scale of these monuments is staggering and impressive restoration work has been done to preserve them. Unlike the Egyptian pyramids they were not constructed as burial tombs but, surmounted by temples, were used for religious ceremonies and human sacrifices, a practice which particularly upset the Spanish conquistadores. The ancient cities of Uxmal and Chichen Itza in the Yucatan are outstanding examples of Mayan and Toltec architecture and are littered with giant stone heads of feathered serpents, stelae, and the hooked nose of the mask of Chac, the rain god, which adorns the temple walls. One of the most spectacular sites is at Monte Alban, where the ruins are perched on a levelled mountain top high above the city of Oaxaca, surrounded by a panorama of mountain ranges.

A trip to Mexico and its archaeological past would be incomplete without a visit to the superb National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Indian artefacts from various civilisations are beautifully presented in an attractive modern building, from the 15th century Aztec calendar stone to the jade burial masks of the Mayans. The museum entrance is guarded by a stone monolith, which represents the rain god Tlaloc. When Tlaloc was transported from the archaeological site to the museum a terrific rainstorm drenched the city.

Mexico is an exciting country and prices are still relatively cheap by our standards. The combination of Spanish and Indian cultures has produced a fascinating ethnic mixture and a visit is a rewarding and enlightening experience.

BRIAN M FRIER
Senior registrar

Edinburgh