

Introduction To Meet The Mexicans – Modern Mexico Through The Eyes of Modern Mexicans.

If you are a tourist who wants to know more about Mexico than how to order a *margarita*, you'll enjoy this book. If you want to live in Mexico as an expatriate, you need to read this book. If you have no desire to go to Mexico, but want to know more about the country and people than the rhetoric you get from newspapers, television and passionate proponents and opponents of illegal immigration, this book will help you get a bigger picture. If your only knowledge of Mexicans comes from stories about drug dealers, migrants and politicians, you'll gain a better perspective of the country from this book.

Contrary to what you probably read in the popular press, most Mexicans do not feel like second-class citizens compared to the United States. Most Mexicans are not illegal immigrants. There is a Mexican middle-class and while some of the most optimistic say it is growing, they are in the minority. Most Mexicans say that the middle-class is shrinking. Most people told me that the amount of money it takes to live a middle-class lifestyle ten years ago has gone up fifty percent. I did not meet one person who said his wages had gone up fifty percent.

Regardless of that debate, the point is that most Mexicans don't live on dirt farms, wear *sombreros* and eat only beans and tortillas. Most Mexicans stay in Mexico because they think the quality of life is better there than that in the United States. They are the ones who keep the country growing. They are the glue that keeps the society together. These are their stories.

There are some people in the United States who simply will not believe anything about Mexico, unless it agrees with their preconceived notions. There are such closed-minded people on the left and the right. Those on the right only hear the negative. Those on the left only hear the positive or apologetic. I try to be in the middle, which probably means I will displease both sides. More importantly, I will present the stories of the Mexican people I talked to and know without a political bias. Some of the interviewees I heartily agreed with. Some challenged my own preconceptions. Some are (in my opinion) out in left field, but together all these people make up the mosaic of Mexican society.

Mexico and Mexicans elicit some pretty powerful feelings on many in the United States. Like all racial hatreds, they are irrational and ugly. People have been hating those who are different than they since time began. The hated eventually become at least superficially integrated and the haters move on to another group. I occasionally get hate emails from my web site www.mexicomike.com. It's a pretty innocuous site, about living in Mexico, hot springs, driving and travel in general. Of course, there are some parts where I talk about misconceptions about Mexico, as I do in this book. About once a month I get a hate email telling me, "Go back to Mexico where you belong," or "Mexico-lover" or worse. The amusing thing is most of the emails call me, "a stupid Mexican," as if that settled the issue. While I may lack the mental acuity of the email writers, I am as

gringo as I can only assume they are. But I doubt anyone would begin an email with, “You stupid *gringo*.” Wait – that did happen! I guess it goes to show that there are xenophobic and hateful people on both sides of the *Rio Grande*. So, if you are one of those folks, you probably won’t learn anything here, because the very concept of this book is to challenge narrow-minded thinking.

From the beginning, let me say that this is not a whitewash of modern Mexican society, or a debate on the immigration issue. Neither is it about people living hardscrabble lives. There are plenty of books about those things. This is something different.

There are problems in today’s Mexican society and the Mexicans you’ll meet in this book talk about them. Who better to understand the issues than those affected by them? A few of the people I interviewed had worked in the United States (legally or illegally) at one time in their lives. Obviously, their views of the immigration issue will be different than those of who oppose it.

Still, you can learn from their stories. I fear we get a lopsided view of illegal immigrants from both sides of the US media. Not everyone who crosses illegally is, “just trying to feed his family.” Mexicans will be the first to tell you that, while that is indeed true for most *mojados* (Mexican slang meaning literally, “wet ones,” but figuratively meaning, “someone who swam the river” or an illegal immigrant), some have made the journey for more selfish reasons.

Some are simply running from the law. Some are running from their family. Some just want more material goods. People are people. Also, not all Mexicans who emigrate to the United States are unskilled. There are skilled workers coming to the USA and Canada as well.

More than just a book of anecdotes, there will be analysis of why things are the way they are and how they have changed from the way they were in the past.

While I like Mexico and Mexicans, I **won’t** insult you with a biased, rosy picture of all things Mexican. I let the Mexican people tell their stories, the good, the bad and the ugly. My job is to tie their stories together, not to wrap them up in a fancy package with a bow of insincerity. My rose-colored glasses are safely stored with my Nehru jacket and love beads. If you are too young to know what those are, I will save you a trip to the encyclopedia or more likely, Wikipedia. While rose-colored glasses have been around for centuries, denoting an uncritical way of looking at things, the other odd items are hippie attire from the 1960’s.

What is middle-class?

I started out wanting to define middle-class by income. I found out that, while it is a useful gauge for foreigners to understand the term, most of the Mexicans I talked to defined it differently.

In Mexico you cannot determine middle-class by the amount of money you make. It is the social as well as the economical. Middle class in Mexico always is going to have some kind of help in the house. A maid, cook or gardener. – Antonio Prado, school director, Puebla.

The way I see it, the people in the middle-class have an education. – Gustavo Arenas M., physician, Tampico, Tamaulipas.

Defining middle-class in economic terms proved to be almost as difficult. When pressed, many Mexicans said middle-class income ranged from a low of ten thousand to twenty thousand pesos a month for a family of four. [Translating that to dollars is fraught with danger. When I first started writing the book in early 2008 the peso was around 10.1 to the US dollar. That made the figure about \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month. During the writing of the book, the peso plummeted to as low as 15.4 to the US dollar. At the time of publication the peso was steadily recovering and was 13.8 to the US dollar].

Middle-class Mexicans share some of the same values as the middle-class anywhere, which makes them somewhat easier for foreigners to relate to than the very poor or the very rich. People of all economic classes have similar goals: decent housing, a better life for their children, a few creature comforts and a comfortable old age. The difference is how they achieve these goals and how they measure them.

For those in the middle-class, higher education is the golden key to unlocking the treasure chest of a better life. While a bigger car, bigger house and more consumption may be part of what they obtain on their journey, they are seldom the goal, as they so often are in the United States.

Family Is King

The improvement and enjoyment of family is the real goal for most Mexican people who aspire to attain or maintain middle-class. The other “things” are useful only if they contribute to the primary goal. For instance a bigger house is seen as a way to have more room for visiting family members or to have an apartment for parents when they need to move back in their later years. A larger car is more valuable because it can carry more family on trips in comfort.

Please note that I say here, as in the rest of the book, “most Mexicans.” There are some status-seekers who just want a bigger car because it is bigger or more of a status symbol, just as in the United States. But usually status-seekers have already attained middle-class status and want the symbols to appear to be upwardly mobile.

You’ll seldom see just one Mexican in a car, unlike in the United States. This is not a recent phenomenon having to do with ecological awareness. It’s been true as long as I have traveled in Mexico, and that is a long time. A trip of any length is a family affair.

Advanced degrees are prized and worked for, not merely for the status and the extra money they generally confer (though of course those aspects are part of the motivation, it would be naïve to ignore them), but for the greater good of the family.

In short, if you understand that family is primary and everything else is secondary, you will have the key to unlocking Mexican culture. I believe this issue is important enough to have its own chapter.

Better way of life?

Outgoing Mexican President Vicente Fox created a stir in the United States media when, in November 2006, he said that Mexicans should be proud of their heritage and glad they were born Mexicans and not in the United States. American right-wing media jumped on this statement with both feet, loudly deriding it. After all, they said snidely, isn't it a universally accepted fact that it's better to be an American than a Mexican? Otherwise, why are so many Mexicans clamoring to cross the border? They admitted that it might be better to be a Mexican if you were born rich and privileged, but for the average Mexican, being born in Mexico was hardly better than being born a serf in medieval Europe, they sneered.

Boy, did they get it wrong.

Even if that is your view, you will benefit from reading this book. If that is not your view, you'll have some ammunition to debate such xenophobic characters. Mexico and Mexicans are going to be part of the national debate in the United States for a long time. Here's a chance for you to speak intelligently, instead of emotionally about the Mexicans.

I think it's important to take the emotion out of the discussion. "Better" is an argumentative term. While I may like corn "better" than broccoli, that doesn't make corn any better for you. Life in Mexico would not suit most Americans. While we say we believe in things like, "family values" and "want to put family first," we don't mean them the same way that Mexicans do. For many Mexicans, family is absolutely the most important part of society. For most Americans, yeah, family's important, but so are careers and other things that conflict with the family. There are many other examples but that is the most obvious. Whether our way of life is "better" or not is not the issue. Our way of life is what we know.

Success and money

A successful life in Mexico for Mexicans is not just measured by the amount of money in the bank or the number of consumer goods in the houses. A successful life is a combination of family, artistic expression and social awareness. Successful Mexicans

have found a balance of those qualities that many Americans seem to have lost in our pursuit of more big-boy and big-girl toys to fill our homes and garages.

Before you think I am too idealistic, let me say that most Mexicans **outwardly** are just as materialistic as most Americans or Canadians. People are people. In the struggle to advance in society, materialism is a way of keeping score. Like most things about Mexico, appearances can be deceiving. I've spent thirty years learning to understand Mexico and I am still learning. Asking a Mexican to explain his culture in its entirety to a foreigner is like asking the average American to explain all aspects of his culture to a foreigner. He can explain his view, based on what he knows, subject to his own prejudices. Even then it's harder to explain something from the inside out than from the outside in. That's why I wrote this book. I've tried to get a cross-section of Mexican people with differing academic and social standings to piece together the mosaic that is their society.

Balance

What I'm trying to say is that most Mexicans have found a balance between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. I don't know that Carlos Slim (a Mexican who is either the richest or one of the richest men in the world, depending on the year) is any less materialistic than any other member of the Fortune 100. I also admit that there are people in the Mexican middle-class who aspire to a life of unbridled consumerism as a mark of their place in the world.

What I am saying is that **as a general rule**, this type of person is less prevalent than in the United States or Canada. Success is not just about money.

One generalization that's generally true enough for me to stick my scrawny neck out on is that most Mexicans within the broad definition of middle-class are essentially happy with their lives. Like people from any society, there are things they do not like about their government or their society in general, but essentially, they believe that although life could be better, it is essentially good.

Critics will immediately pounce on that statement with the shopworn line, "*If life is so good in Mexico, why do they all want to come here?*" That's the point. They (the Mexicans) do **not** all want to come here. In fact, most of the middle-class Mexicans I've met and asked have stated empathically that they would not live in the United States, given the choice. I've also interviewed some people who are less than middle-class, who have been illegals in the United States. Surprisingly to Mexico-bashers, they preferred life in Mexico to that of the United States.

Mojados or illegals

All too often, the only Mexicans most Americans know, or know of, are the illegal immigrants working here, or if they've been to Mexico, the waiters and taxi drivers

they've met briefly in tourist resorts. Even some expats don't really get to know average Mexicans. There are thousand of Americans and Canadians who are part of a reverse migration who think living in Mexico has more to offer than living in the United States or Canada.

Why people come to the United States illegally is something that many others have covered and outside the scope of this book. In fact, since most attention has been on illegals, Americans aren't aware of the majority of Mexicans who do not leave their country to come to the United States.

All I will say about the subject is that of the Mexicans I've met who came, worked and returned (either voluntarily or who were deported), most are glad they came to the USA and glad they returned home. While the *otro lado* (*other side, meaning the other side of the border, or the United States*) is a great place to make money, the culture is not as warm and life is more stressful. One man expressed it beautifully, *When you are in the USA, even the birds sing in English.*

Contradictions

While most of the people interviewed have upbeat attitudes, just like people in any culture, some express some negative impressions about life in Mexico. Yet, as you read even these stories, you will see that, on the one hand, people can see the negative in a broader picture, but accentuate the positive in their own lives.

Rudy, from Tamazunchale is a perfect example of this. You could search the world and expect perhaps for some Indian holy men, not meet a more upbeat, giving person. Yet, part of the story he tells is of unemployment, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, the decline of family values and enough to make you want to cry. Sandwiched between those slices of negativity are the meats of his life. He says that he is very happy and would not want to live anywhere else. He allows that he is rich in friendships and goodwill. He has devoted his life to a philanthropic, altruistic project.

Challenges to understanding

It's difficult for a foreigner to truly understand the Mexican culture, or cultures, since like in the United States or any other country, there are different cultures within the country. Most of this book is focused on middle-class Mexican culture. I don't presume to have written the definitive work on modern Mexican society. I do believe that I have presented a collage of verbal photographs of a variety of Mexican people in their own words.

One of the dangers of any foreigner trying to explain the Mexican culture is that his own prejudices will come through. Thus foreigners writing about Mexico often idealize or demonize the culture. Another danger is that one aspect of the Mexican culture is to tell

you what people think you want to hear. This is something that confounds foreigners trying to do business in Mexico.

Another is that he will fall into the mosh pit of generalizations, calling something a cultural trait when in fact it may be localized or true in only certain circumstances.

There are important regional differences and regional prejudices. For example, when I asked people whether they felt Mexico was safe, they invariably said that their area of the country was safe, but that the big cities were not. Excluding the border cities, there are three major cities (several million) and half a dozen minor ones (500,000 to a million). People in the south thought Guadalajara was a fine place to live, but that Monterrey was unsafe (ranked as one of the safest cities in the world for US Consular postings). People in the north called Guadalajara unsafe and Monterrey just fine. Most everyone agreed the Mexico City was unsafe. However, even Mexico City had one defender who said it was a safe place to live. Of course, he would have just been toying with me, though I do not think so.

No one had empirical evidence of the relative safety of the cities they called unsafe. It was just their prejudices speaking. There were certain regional prejudices, just as there are in the United States and most countries of the world. People from the North think they are more industrious than those from the South. People from the South think that Northerners are not true to their roots.

There is a Mexican saying, *Cada Quien Habla Como le va en la Feria” es decir, si te diviertes en la feria y ganas premios, vas a regresar contento y hablaras bien de la feria, pero si por lo contrario, te mareaste en los juegos, no ganaste nada y perdiste dinero, hablaras pésimo de la feria y no se la vas a recomendar a nadie.*

Roughly translated, it says that you will describe the fair according to how well you did at it. That means that if you go to a county fair and have a good time, win a lot of prizes from the games and so on, you will tell everyone you meet that the fair is a great thing and they should go. But if you go to the fair, lose all your money and don't win even one stuffed bear, you will return home and tell everyone that they should stay away from that awful fair.

On the other hand, the same challenges are faced by nationals writing about their own culture, with the added drawback that they are so used to certain aspects of their own culture that they don't see them as worthy of comment. No matter how you slice it, this type of writing is prone to peeling off the skin, but perhaps not getting to the heart of the matter.

For example, I could write about upper-class society on the East coast of the United States based on the one member I met, but I don't think it would be very accurate. My invitations to events thrown by the Kennedys and the Rockefellers always get lost in the mail.

Mexico is a physically huge and culturally diverse country. There are many strata to Mexican society that are hard for foreigners to understand. Mexicans in general are appreciative when a foreigner takes a real interest in their culture. Even so, it's not easy for foreigners to really understand Mexican society, because it is full of contradictions, unspoken traditions and conflicting codes of conduct. One thing I've been blessed with is that people open up to me and in my nearly thirty years of traveling, reporting about and living in Mexico, I've gotten to know Mexicans from all levels of society. I've known many Mexicans for years and been involved with their trials and tribulations through the economic ups and downs and revolutionary political changes that have occurred in that time.

On the other hand, being a foreigner, I may have a better perspective to explain Mexicans to Americans and Canadians. Despite the overall optimism of the Mexican people, there is a pessimistic fatalism in the culture that colors what Mexicans say about themselves. Is that contradictory? You bet it is. ¡*Bienvenidos a México!* Mexico is a country of contradictions. It is not easy to understand Mexico, because just when you think you have something figured out, you find a whole set of opposite "truths" lying just beneath the surface. To understand Mexico, you need to be a social archeologist or experienced onion-peeler. I fall into the later category.

For that reason, I have let the Mexicans talk about themselves in this book. No matter how empathetic I may be, I am still and will always remain, an outsider, a foreigner, a *gringo*. A less popular, but more accurate term would be an *Estadounidense*, as pointed out by my Mexican friends. That word, however does not roll off the tongue very easily, so I often revert to using *gringo*.

There are two kinds of expatriates. The ones who integrate themselves into Mexican society, usually by marriage, and those who live in the country, but remain apart. The ones who have integrated themselves into Mexican society become Mexican and are able to offer good observations about the society. The ones who remain apart often misunderstand Mexican society as much as anyone who has never been to the country. In conducting these interviews, I interviewed both native-born Mexicans and some expatriates. I have included only those expatriates who have married into Mexican families and truly integrated into the culture. Not all expatriates who marry Mexicans marry the culture. There were plenty of expats I talked to who remained apart from the culture around them. While their stories were interesting, they did not fit into this book.

There is a positive bias to this book, but it is not unrealistically Pollyannaish. There are problems with Mexican society. There are inequalities. There is unfairness. Let these people tell you the truth as they know it and you will learn that, with all the obstructions to living a fulfilling life as a Mexican in Mexico, the net result is that people can and do triumph. In the end, when you put this book down, I hope to have imparted to you an honest, true vision of the Mexican spirit, as told by the Mexican people.

A little humility goes a long way

I offer the following observations, not because my evolution in understanding the Mexicans is so important, but because it is representative of many Americans and our attitudes towards the Mexican people. We are not intentionally arrogant; at least I would like to think not. But our attitudes and understanding are formed from the parameters of our limitations.

Many of us are quite happy to jump to conclusions or dine on half-baked assumptions. We can generalize about a whole race of people based on brief conversations with a few service workers. Thus many people become “Mexico experts” based on limited knowledge.

I’ve seen this phenomenon among expat Americans too. Some of them will develop a “relationship” with their maid or others who work for them, going to weddings or birthday parties but not realizing that their very status as *patron* prevents them from knowing things about their lives as well as a stranger would.

On the one level, like most American tourists, I “knew” many waiters, busboys, desk clerks and taxi drivers. I carried on conversations with them that lasted for a few minutes to half an hour. I asked the same things that most other Americans asked, feeling proud that I had learned the Spanish necessary to frame the following questions:

“What is your name?”— (*Como se llama?*)

“Where are you from?” — (*De donde eres, tu?*) — I felt particularly proud of using the familiar form of “you” (*tu*) instead of the more formal *Ud.* I thought it made me sound cool. I no doubt overused it, but fortunately Mexicans allow a lot of latitude for *gringos* who speak even a modicum of Spanish. It also helps that Mexicans are less formal than many other Spanish-speaking nationalities.

“Where were you born?” — (*¿Donde nacio?*) Again, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Since the place of birth is very important to Mexicans, I figured I should show that I was hip enough to know that.

I won’t bore you with the rest of my bilingual sophistication, but the bottom line is that I no more “knew” the Mexican people than I knew how a factory worker in Detroit felt about life.

On another level, I suffered from a certain arrogance disguised as egalitarianism from my sixties radicalism. The thoughts and opinions of the “common person” were of far more importance than those of the “elitists” or bourgeois. Thus I saw that the story of a peasant from Oaxaca was intrinsically more valuable than that of a shopkeeper or a businessman.

My time of living in Pto. Escondido, Oaxaca opened my eyes a little bit. Since I lived up the hill from town where there were no foreigners, I at least saw what it was like to live as many of the proletariat did. My water came from a tank on the roof, not from a city line. It was warm only at the end of the day, so hot showers were a distant memory. I

cooked on a propane burner and slept on a cot. Eventually, I moved into the middle-class by loaning my landlord money to buy a refrigerator for my *casita*. In some respects, I was still the “rich *gringo*.” I had a tin roof and many of my neighbors had thatch roofs. Poverty or plenty is all a matter of perspective and appreciation for what you have.

I bragged to the “rich” American tourists that, “I lived like a Mexican.” That was pure arrogance and lack of understanding of a society more complex than the black and white paradigm I’d formed. I lived like my neighbors, yes, but there were plenty of Mexicans who lived comfortably in town with city water, hot showers, stoves and real beds (although the custom was to put mattresses on top of concrete forms rather than box springs), televisions and many of the “luxuries” of the middle-class everywhere.

One example of the gulf of misunderstanding between American tourists and the way many Mexicans lived at the time (this was in the early 1980’s) came about in the following altercation between me and some even more arrogant young tourists from California.

I was holding court at the one coffee shop in town, the one with an espresso machine, answering questions about what it was like to, “live like a Mexican.” I proudly told them that I had discovered the “best” coffee in the local CONASUPO [a now defunct government-subsidized program to provide basic foodstuffs at reduced prices] market. It was *Café Diplomat* instant coffee. While *Nescafé Clasico* was more common, I found this darker instant coffee to be superior. (Note that I used the word “superior”, when in fact it was merely more appealing to my personal tastes).

How can you be so foolish? Here you are living in a country with some of the greatest coffee in the world (another value judgment from an American, and one now that I am a coffee snob I disagree with – but at least now I say, ‘not to my taste’) and you drink that instant junk.

I don’t have a coffee maker, I replied.

That’s no excuse. They only cost twenty bucks. You should get one. And fresh coffee beans are way less expensive in Mexico than back home in San Francisco.

I was too hurt to explain to them that twenty bucks was my monthly food budget, that (in those pre-Wal Mart days), there was no place to get a coffee-maker without taking a bus for five hours to Acapulco, or that if I did, in those pre-NAFTA days, the duty on a twenty-dollar coffee maker would have been another twenty. [At the time Mexican appliances were considered, often rightly so, to be inferior, so people who could, paid a premium for foreign items], Plus, even though the beans may have been, “way less expensive than back home in San Francisco,” they were out of reach for most people in that town who didn’t make anywhere near the wages of folks, “back home in San Francisco.”

These darlings then sneaked out of the restaurant, leaving me stuck with the bill. The bill was about seven dollars, more than my weekly “entertainment” budget. I confronted them the next day in the street and they said,

Get over it. It was only a few bucks. Besides, I thought Mexicans liked to buy things for foreigners.

This encounter was not unique then, nor is it now. Foreigners come to Mexico with the belief that things are cheaper in Mexico (not always true, even in the post-NAFTA world) and that Mexicans place the same values on expressions of material goods as Americans. They also often have a vague idea that it would be impolite to not allow a Mexican to pick up the tab. That is true in many cases, but a little common sense should be applied. If someone of means invites you for a drink or a coffee, it generally means that he expects to pay for both. If you and a Mexican simply go to a restaurant together, you are each expected to pay for yourself. What I’ve seen happen way too often is that a Mexican of limited means will “invite” someone out of courtesy, but expect that the other person will have sense enough to make an equally polite excuse to pick up the tab. The most egregious example of this is when a foreigner is invited to a bar by a working-class person. That person may make ten or twenty dollars a day, yet spend all of it in a round of buying drinks. What I’d do in that situation would be to graciously accept the invitation and after the second round beg off and leave with some sort of excuse. Or I would make up a tradition like, “In my country, it is the tradition for the person invited to pay after the second drink.” Learning to be accepting of graciousness yet practical is an art learned mainly by experience.

Convoluting and illogical? Yes. But this little example illustrates just one example of the complexity of Mexican social structure and the challenges facing foreigners who try to explain it.

As Fate would have it, I am now a coffee snob. I even travel with a small steam espresso maker and have a Gaggia pump machine at home. I don’t buy Mexican beans because I prefer African beans. Acceptable coffee is the rule rather than the exception today, as most every restaurant has a coffee machine and there are Starbucks in most cities and many towns. Even when asked, I never compare Mexican espresso with what I make at home. I don’t want to run the risk of offending someone who is happy with what he has now. I have those tourists to thank for that insight. You know, they gave me a lot more than they took.

If you pick this book up at a garage sale twenty years from now, some examples will seem quaint. In fact, if I were to go to Mexico for the first time today, I would wonder what in the heck I had been talking about with the coffee-maker story. It is rare for a restaurant to serve instant coffee, unless you are in the middle of nowhere. Things change.

May you develop that attitude about your travels in Mexico and the world. You can get coffee anywhere. You don’t always get served wisdom.

END