

## Chapter 1 – Who Are The Mexicans?

To many Americans, Mexico is a poor country whose major exports are illegal aliens and drugs. Most people are against the latter and hotly debate their stand on the former.

This is not a political book. I have no soapbox, no opinions to justify. This is not a laser-focused social commentary. It's more of a wide-angle family portrait. In that family, as in most families, you have a mix of personalities and viewpoints. You may have nothing more in common with your great-uncle than sharing a common heritage, but he's still part of your family.

Overall, the picture drawn by the people telling their stories here about what it's like to be a Mexican is positive. I didn't engineer it that way. But I think that differs from most people's impressions of life in Mexico – and of the Mexicans who live in the United States. Not every Mexican wants to come to the USA and wash dishes. I met no Mexicans who wore *sombreros* or *huaraches*, talked like B-movie *banditos* or slept against cacti. Yet, those are the stereotypes that many Americans have of Mexicans.

Calling this a portrait of a nation would be presumptuous. It is a cameo of what several diverse Mexicans have to say about what it's like to be a Mexican.

While I may have physically put this book together, it was the Mexican people who wrote it. They told me their stories and I, as honestly as I could, put their words down to tell their stories. In some cases I corrected some grammar and I am sure that sometimes I made mistakes, but on the whole, I think I captured their words and emotions as best as I could. Occasionally I will elaborate on a concept or explain an idea, but my intrusions will be obvious. I am just the messenger.

It's easy for foreigners to get a distorted picture of Mexico. It's easy for writers to write truly of what they know of Mexico, yet skew it, based on their own sphere of influence. It's easy to miss the big picture. I realize after finishing this book that it is no more about the big picture than any other book about the Mexican people.

It's about the picture that I saw. If I were a painter, I would be a portrait painter, not a muralist. Try as I might, I could not be completely unbiased. I wanted to write about the mostly undocumented society in Mexico – the middle-class. One thing that was driven home to me was that in Mexico, middle-class is as much a matter of attitude as economics.

But we like things to be quantified, so here's a rough guideline to the definition of middle-class used in this book and more or less echoed by most people interviewed. The middle-class is loosely defined as a family of four making at least ten thousand to twenty thousand pesos a month. It's the working people and the professional people who keep the country running and growing. These are the people who populate this book. Yep, some make much more and a few who make less. And, yes, some of the people I interviewed worked as illegal aliens in the USA, but chose to come home to Mexico.

If you were an alien (from another planet, that is) and wanted to know what keeps a fractious America chugging along, you'd want to know more about the small businessmen, the salesmen, office workers, teachers, and entrepreneurs than about the drug dealers, Bill Gates, the Rockefellers or the politicians. You'd learn more from Studs Terkel or Dilbert than you would from *Fortune* or *Travel & Leisure*.

Travel writers entice us to visit a "tropical paradise," with an occasional quote from a taxi driver or busboy to give their glowing descriptions some human interest. I did it too, when I plied that trade. That's what people expect to read. Expats write of the joys of coping with societal differences like finding out how they can do without material things they were used to back home. They impress us with their ability to make friends with "the Mexicans," live in their five-hundred thousand dollar *casitas* and how their little corner of the country is "paradise." Real journalists titillate us with glimpses of the sordid and sensational, either of which includes drug lords, shootouts and politicians. That's their job. That's what makes news the world over.

Economists can tell us in excruciating detail why certain aspects of Mexican society work or don't work. The original draft of this chapter had enough statistics by the World Bank and by *INEGI*, the federal institute of statistics (*Instituto Nacional De Estadística Y Geografía*) to numb an enraged elephant. Fortunately for both of us, I cut them out. You can Google statistics. You don't need me for that. Numbers don't tell the true story or paint a realistic picture. I'm no artist, but will present you a mosaic of real Mexicans and how they live.

I'm not an economist, am no longer an expat and am a recovering travel writer. I'm a *gringo* who's made friends and enemies (never trust a man who doesn't make enemies – it just means he doesn't understand people) throughout the vast country, I've been asking questions and listening to Mexicans in all walks of life for thirty years. Most of the specifics of what I learned in the sixties (19, not 18) has little bearing on Mexico in the twenty-first century. Yet, the bigger picture, now a faded sepia print, has value because I've seen the country grow and change, while much of the essence has remained the same. The cultures change with the times: the culture adapts glacially.

In the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you that, like many idealists of the sixties and seventies, I tried to make a living importing *artisanias* (typical Mexican handicrafts). The only things I ever made money on were leather whips and velvet paintings, especially velvet Elvis's. For a time I was the Whip King of New Orleans (for selling them, that is). I say this to let you know that I did not always have the same high standards of integrity that I have today. Or maybe I was not as uptight. Mexicans thought it was hilarious a *gringo* with a Pancho Villa moustache drive out of town in a '66 Ford Mustang loaded with velvet paintings, whips and *piñatas*.

A better writer than I once said that there are many Mexicos. I can only add that there are many Mexicans that make each of those Mexicos blend into one country. There is no more an "average" Mexican than there is an "average" American, Canadian, German,

Englishman or Frenchman. Not all the people you'll meet here are successful or have the lives they want. That would not be realistic; it would not be the big picture. Not all Americans or Canadians are successful or have the lives they want. But we are all part of the great collage of our cultures.

### ***Some Of The People You'll Meet***

Rodolfo Jongitud Reyes is a Nahuatl Indian in the small town of Tamazunchale in San Luis Potosí state. "What" he is, is hard to describe. Ecologist, English teacher, philanthropist, tour guide are all things he does. He's a self-taught man with a big heart, more friends than any man or woman I know, who uses the money he makes to improve the lives of his own people, who still live a primitive life. His optimistic pragmatism epitomizes the soul of the Mexicans.

Victor is an insurance executive with a large Mexican insurance company. He makes a comfortable income, and is representative of the basis of today's Mexico that will shape it in this century. He is one generation removed from humble beginnings. He sees the advantages of being a Mexican in Mexico and the attractions of living in the United States.

Abraham Cadena is a realtor in the tourist town of San Miguel de Allende. Today he makes a very comfortable income. A native of San Miguel, he was once a traffic cop in his town, a furniture maker, exporter who went broke and finally found his niche in real estate and dealing with foreign tourists.

Laura, a realtor who has worked with international companies, been married and divorced and is very content with her life. She is part of the new breed of Mexican woman who does not need a husband to feel fulfilled and part of society. She chose to live alone and make a better life for her children over staying in an abusive relationship.

Miguel is a hotel desk clerk in the little town of Matehuala in San Luis Potosí state who makes seven dollars and fifty cents a day, taught himself English, but doesn't want his boss to know (understanding that will help you understand more about Mexico) and owns a three-room apartment-home in an Infonavit subdivision.

Dr. Mark Reeves is a physician in Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua. He chose Mexico years ago and now his roots are in two countries.

Teresa Rodriguez is a Mexican professional who lives in the United States, whose insights into the good and not-so-good aspects of Mexican culture will surprise many.

Dr. Gustavo Arenas is a native of Tampico, Tamaulipas. He's young, positive and has definite opinions on many things, including regional differences between Mexicans.

Anonymous is a mid-level state politician who talked candidly about the realities and challenges facing his country.

William Bussear is an American quadriplegic hotelier married to a Mexican woman. He found acceptance in Mexico for whom he was, not the invisibility as he'd experienced in the USA.

Ciro Gonzalez is your typical young entrepreneur, who believes explains what Mexicans really mean when they say, "family values."

Roberto Vences works with tourists on the island of Cozumel who says the biggest obstacle to Americans understanding Mexico is that they don't listen.

These people will tell their stories in their own words. Most will be upbeat, but like a cross-section of any country's population, some will be dissatisfied. They are a disparate cross-section of a geographically, politically and socially diverse country. What unifies them is their Mexican-ness. What you'll get from them is an honest and probably different perspective and understanding of Mexico than you had previously. With this knowledge, you will be able to appreciate the country more when you visit and certainly be able to talk more intelligently than most Americans when cocktail party discussions turn to "the Mexican problem." Knowledge is power. Understanding is priceless.

This is not a political book, but a little understanding of Mexico's recent political history in relation to the development of the Mexican middle-class is necessary.

Mexicans' relationship with the United States is complex. There is a fierce pride in being Mexican and a strong respect for Mexican traditions. They do not always welcome the Americanization of Mexico, though as generally pragmatic people, they accept it as part of the way things are.

It would be disingenuous of me not to admit that the biggest challenges facing Mexican society in general are those of corruption and narcotics traffickers. While this book is not about politics, those two subjects often come up in conversations with the Mexicans.

I will let them tell you their views on the subject, but I think one thing will surprise you. Here in the United States, many people have gotten the impression that Mexico is a lawless land where *narcotraficantes* (narcotics traffickers) run rampant, terrorizing the general populace, shooting automatic weapons from their black Suburbans on a daily basis. The media would have you believe that the average Mexican lives in fear of being kidnapped or caught in a shootout ala Chicago in the Roaring Twenties.

Trust me, most Mexicans live without fear. True there are some pretty spectacular drug-related shootings, particularly (but not confined to) on the border with the USA. News

sources in 2009 claimed that thousands of people were killed in drug shootouts. Believe it or not, the average Mexican doesn't expect to be gunned down on the street.

But, you know, what I tell you is not important. What the Mexican people tell you is important.

What I sincerely hope is that after reading this book, you will have a new pair of glasses with which to view Mexico and the Mexican people, neither rose-colored nor darkly tinted.

END CHAPTER