

## Chapter 7 – Towards Developing More Than a Sound-Bite Understanding of Mexico.

The most common response to my question, “What is the major misconception you think Americans have of your country?” was surprising to me. Many Mexicans said, *I think that most Americans think we still wear sombreros, huaraches and lean against a cactus. That and they think we are lazy. If you can dispel those myths, maybe they will learn who we are.*

Mexico is considered an upper-middle-income economy by the World Bank. To put that into perspective, the next category level is high-income economy and it includes Germany, Australia, Japan and much of Europe. The USA is in the next category above, high-income. Mexico is mainly an urban society. The biggest buyers of gaudy bejeweled sombreros (besides mariachi minstrels) are probably American tourists. [I have to admit I do not have the statistics to back that up, but I certainly have seen more of those hats in the back seats of tourists crossing the international bridges than I ever saw in Mexico].

Most Americans have sound-bite impressions of Mexico. Most of those sound-bites have been negative. The earliest I remember was the infamous quote by Frank Sinatra, “Don’t drink the water,” which so offended the Mexican sense of national pride that officials banned him from returning to Mexico. Ol’ Blue Eyes did not invent the phrase. It was commonly repeated by American tourists returning from the country, usually prefaced by something like, “Mexico is a great place to visit, but ....”

For those of you too young to remember Frank, he was a singer/actor/celebrity. Who he was is unimportant. What is important is that he was someone famous and his was the quote heard round the world. It would be like the Beatles saying, “India is a great place, but don’t drink the water.” The paradox about the Frank Sinatra quote is the water was the least likely thing Frankie would drink, unless as part of a mixed drink served in a top-flight bar where only purified water was used anyway. Frank had no real fear of drinking unpurified water. He was just being acerbic. He’d had a bad experience with Mexico and was lashing out. His mediocre film, *Married On The Rocks* (1965) had offended Mexicans so much that he was briefly banned from the country.

I’ve noticed this in talking to former expats who’ve left Mexico. Their reasons for leaving always have to do with the country’s failings, never their own. The same is true of most people who come back from a vacation and are immediate experts on Mexican people and Mexican culture.

I was talking to Walter Bishop, who reminded me of that phrase. *American people always have some reason to denigrate Mexico or to be afraid of her. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, people said they were afraid to visit because of health issues. Today it is a fear of drug violence that keeps them away.*

He touched on an important point. Most Americans know little in-depth about our southern neighbor (less than most Mexicans know about the United States), but everybody has an opinion about what Mexico is like. These opinions are formed from sensational news stories, or memorable quotes like the Frank Sinatra one.

## **Corruption**

Perhaps no area of Mexican life is more complicated or misunderstood than that of corruption. As Orlando Hidalgo, the spa owner from Cuernavaca said, *“Of course it is easier to pay a little mordida than to do things the right way. But it is our duty as citizens to stop it. It takes two for a corrupt society to work. I would say that today, about fifty percent of our people refuse to pay bribes.”*

He was speaking of corruption in general, from that of the businessman who pays a bribe to get a permit to that of an average citizen who pays a bribe to a traffic cop instead of getting a ticket.

Those Americans who dislike Mexico loudly point to examples of corruption as proof that it is an inferior country. One problem with pointing fingers is that when doing so, there are three fingers pointing back at you. The United States is not immune to corruption.

As Arnoldo, an executive in Monterrey said, *“It’s that corruption in America is on a different scale, a grander scale. While you don’t have the average traffic cop suggesting that you, ‘pay the fine on the spot,’ you have executives of companies like Enron bilking investors and employees, lobbyists buying congressmen and senators and corrupt contractors taking government projects, but all this is done more quietly. Sure we have big-time corruption too, I mean just look at many of our presidents who leave office millionaires, but what most Americans really mean when they talk about the corruption in Mexico is the small stuff, because that is all they know about.”*

While the Spaniards who conquered the Aztecs and created modern Mexico didn’t invent corruption, they did elevate it to an art form. Most Mexicans I’ve talked to are more aware of the influences the Spaniards on their culture than most Americans are of our colonial history. This could be because the Spanish colonial period lasted longer, ending only in 1821.

As Teresa Rodriguez, an executive who lives in McAllen, TX said, *The Spaniards who came to Mexico were adventurers. They were of the lower classes and basically lazy. They wanted to come, take and go back with riches.*

*Even though you don’t want to help corruption, because that is corruption, you have to think how valuable is your time? Both sides are responsible. The police won’t stop asking you for money if they know people will pay. But if the police are getting paid such low salaries, they will keep asking for more money.*

## Safety

In my relatively innocuous life as a travel writer, I seldom get hate mail. That is, until I had the audacity to talk about safety in Mexico. This is such a hot button issue. Here is a reasonable take on it, based on what actual Mexicans who live in Mexico have to say, coupled with my own personal experiences of traveling frequently by car in Mexico.

But first, let me quote from an email from a fellow I know who drives to Mexico a lot and asked my take on the relative safety. I had told him the driving through Reynosa was unlikely to be harmful to his health. *After all*, I opined, *it is hardly like driving through Beirut*. He responded:

*Mike:*

*Ironically, I go to the Middle East for work and I always tell folks that it's not as bad as the news sounds (e.g. you're statistically more likely to get killed by a car accident, by far, than by a terrorist, even in trouble spots).*

There have been enough news reports of thousands of killings (although I have a healthy distrust of such statistics) in 2008 and 2009 from the fight against the drug cartels. With very few exceptions (notably the bombing of the 2008 Independence Day festivities in Morelia), the clashes have been between the police or army and the gangsters. For the most part, these clashes have been on the border (with a few exceptions). Yet, Americans have the impression that Mexico is in the middle of a civil war and probably expect a *narcotraficante* version of Pancho Villa to ride onto the news screens. They think that Mexicans live in fear of being murdered.

The other sound bite impression is that everyone is in danger of being kidnapped. Americans tell me they are afraid to go to Mexico, especially with their children, since they are sure they will be snatched as soon as they cross the border.

Statistics indicate that the USA is more dangerous than Mexico, but statistics can be manipulated to prove either side. In the years from 2000 to 2007, the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) reported more than 800,000 missing persons each year. Most of those are children. Approximately 170,000 were over eighteen. According to *Excelsior* newspaper in Mexico City on January 14, 2008, there were 1,028 kidnappings in Mexico. The number of homicides in Mexico for 2008 has been reported with varying numbers, but 5,600 is a good one. The number of homicides in the USA for 2007 (latest full statistics available) was 14,831. To put things into perspective, Mexico has roughly one-third the population of the USA. To put that into perspective, most of the Mexican homicides were drug-related: army, police or gangsters.

Kidnappings are also up. "As of late November, there had been 943 reported kidnappings in the country, up from 630 in November 2007," according to the San Francisco Chronicle. As alarming as this sounds, the chances of being murdered or kidnapped on (for Mexicans or Americans) are actually quite small. Criminal justice expert David Shirk

who directs the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego told the San Francisco Chronicle that “The bigger concern for American citizens - for whom the odds of getting kidnapped or killed are still extra-small, something like the odds of getting struck by lightning.

Twenty-three million foreign tourists visited Mexico in 2008. There have been around 20 million for years. Using the statistics of the US State Department, between 2002 and 2005, there were 113 Americans who died in Mexico from homicides in the whole period. That’s 28 per year. Twenty-eight. 28! How many millions and millions of tourists went to the country in that time? 20 Americans per year died in Mexico from drowning. Eleven per year were suicides. How many people were gunned down in the entire USA in that time?

What was the point of all that numeric overwhelm? It was not to impress you with my math skills but to give you some perspective. The whole point of this book is to offer insight, to help Americans and Canadians get an appreciation for the reality of the culture of Mexico – the move beyond having a sound-bite understanding of a complicated country. The USA is a violent country in a sense, but we don’t think of it as such. When I give seminars on moving to Mexico, I always ask if there are any Canadians in the audience. There always are. I then ask them if they consider the USA a violent country or at least more dangerous than Canada. They always (though usually sheepishly) say they do. But they come here anyway.

We hear some numbers on a news report or see them in a headline in a newspaper about Mexico and imagine the country is in flames. The US consular service has indeed issued travel advisories for Americans traveling to Mexico. They have been doing that since I can remember and that is a long time. That is their job – to be alarmist, so that if something happens to an American, they can cover their proverbial backsides. God bless them, I know a lot of consular officials and they are good people, but they have to do what Washington dictates.

As the Gilda Radner’s *Saturday Night Live* comic character, Roseanne Roseannadanna said, *It’s always something*. In the 1970’s, Americans who were afraid to go to Mexico said they were afraid of revolution. In the 1980’s, these same people feared roadside robberies. In the 1990’s, I don’t think people afraid of Mexico had anything concrete to hang onto, so they just talked about corruption (which is interesting because I never understood why it should affect American tourists). And in the first decade of the 2000’s people justify a fear of Mexico because of drug violence. Of course, running through all the decades has been a growing hatred of illegal immigrants. In fact, many Americans believe that every Mexican who is not rich wants to come over to the good old USA and wash dishes or pound nails. That’s the stereotype I hope you will lose after reading this book.

It is true that many Mexicans do come to work menial jobs. It is also true that many Mexican professionals come to work in the USA. These professionals also go to Europe and Canada to work. People go where the jobs are and where they think they will

improve their way of living, just as my ancestors did when they came to the USA from Europe. But what makes those statements incomplete for painting a picture of Mexico is that the **majority** of Mexicans prefer to live and work in Mexico.

In my business of consulting with Americans who want to move to Mexico, a surprising number of them ask me how they can move to Mexico and work. I get all kinds – from doctors, dentists, chiropractors, bartenders, massage therapists, teachers, construction workers, entrepreneurs, dreamers and social misfits.

They just feel that they would have a better way of life in Mexico than in the United States. It seems that people of all nationalities move to other countries for the same reasons.

There are thousands of Americans and Canadians working illegally in Mexico since they live on tourist permits (the FMT tourist permit is **not** a visa) or FM3 retirement visas. Are they any different than the Mexican immigrants who work illegally in the United States? One of the advantages for foreigners living in Mexico is that they can pay a few hundred dollars a year and enroll in the government-supported social security hospital system. If that was all you knew about foreigners living in Mexico, you'd assume that they are mainly working illegally and entering into the medical welfare system. Sound familiar? I'm not here to debate that issue, but to use it as an example that there are always at least two sides to an issue.

This book is not political in nature, but I know that any book that presents a positive picture of the Mexican people will be called so. If your mind is already made up about whom the Mexicans are, if you can open your mind just a little bit, you just might find out that there are different types of people who call Mexico home. If your mind is not made up, this could be an opportunity for you to learn more about our southern neighbor.

Regardless of your political views, the best way to know the Mexican people is to simply go to Mexico and talk to them. After all, that's the best way to find out who the American people are too – isn't it?

Not all cultural differences are so serious. When I told one Mexican about our government subsidies not to grow certain crops: Rudy was so flabbergasted at this concept that he very nearly fell out of his chair laughing. *“You mean your government pays farmers not to farm? That is crazy.”*

END CHAPTER