

## Chapter 11 – Abraham Cadena – Traffic Cop to Real Estate Magnate – San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato

San Miguel de Allende in Guanajuato state is in the center of the country. San Miguel (as it is commonly called) is perhaps the best-known colonial town to American and Canadian tourists and expatriates. It is also a popular Mexican weekend destination for people from Mexico City. Its colonial architecture, moderate climate, artistic community and stature as a UNESCO World Heritage Site have made it a popular destination. The *churriguesque* or elaborate Spanish baroque architectural style of the main cathedral makes it one of the most photographed Mexican churches. There are thousands of foreigners living here – in 2005, the official foreign population (mainly Americans and Canadians) was 14,500. In 2009, it was estimated by Abraham to be about 16,000. The population as of the last official census of 2000 was 59,691, though it feels like a small town. Abraham thinks the population is more like 100,000 in the city and 160,000 in the *municipio* counting the 46 *ranchos* and two villages.

Abraham Cadena is seventy-one years old and had lived in San Miguel de Allende all his life. We've been friends for eighteen of those years. Abraham (pronounced Ah **bram**) is one of those people other people just immediately like. He is a small man in stature but a giant in personality. He remembers everyone and when you are with him, he seems to have no more important thing to do than talk to you. He cannot walk or drive down a street in San Miguel without dozens of people greeting him, both Mexicans and foreigners.

*Abraham, can you tell us a little about your life?*

Of course. I was born in San Miguel. I worked as a police patrol officer, then chief of the traffic police for six years. When the new administration came into power, we all had to quit because the new governor wanted to put his own people in the positions. That was just the way things worked.

After the police, I was working at an *artisanias* shop. [This is typically a shop that sells locally-produced regional artistic goods, from wall-hangings to furniture]. I made colonial furniture. I was doing okay, but there was a year when I began to export to California and Texas. I sent the furniture by railroad. Sometimes the clients didn't have money to take the furniture out of customs, so it was sent back to me. I went broke.

*Maybe that is one more reason we hit it off. I imported goods from Mexico and went broke too. The only things I made money on were velvet Elvis paintings and whips from Hualahises, Nuevo Leon.*

Yes, many people try to import or export artisan goods from Mexico and many go broke [laughs]. Fortunately I got into real estate in 1974. I started with Mr. Clyde Fuller, an American who lived in San Miguel. When I was in the traffic department he had an

accident and I helped him. He was very nice and appreciative so he asked me if I would like to learn real estate. He was a captain in United States Army with General Patton.

*You mentioned that the new governor appointed his own people. What do you say about corruption in the government?*

Before, there was less corruption than there is right now. I believe this is true in all three areas of the government: municipal, state and federal.

*Has the economic crises affected life in San Miguel yet?*

The crises have not affected San Miguel de Allende much. SMA real estate has dropped a little since the crises, but not much. Now is the time to buy real estate, actually. The Mexican people want to put money in the land. Few Mexicans invest in the stock market. Years ago, I invested in the stock market and I lost a lot, so I say to myself, never will I invest in anything but real estate.

*What are the main things they most Americans don't understand about Mexico?*

Many Americans seem to be afraid to come to Mexico. They don't understand that there are different parts of the country. San Miguel is not the border or Mexico City. San Miguel offers a lot of security for the foreign and Mexican visitors. It is a calm city. San Miguel doesn't have pollution and crime like some big cities. It is a wonderful place to live. I would not live anywhere else.

*Many people in the United States do feel that Mexico is unsafe. What would you say to them?*

*[AUTHOR'S NOTE] It is interesting that often people who live in an area will think that their area of the country is very safe, while anywhere else is suspect. For instance, Abraham said that he did not think Monterrey is safe, yet it is considered by many as the safest big city in Mexico. And if you ask someone in Monterrey if Guadalajara is safe and they will generally say no.*

When people say Mexico is not safe, as I said, they are not considering that there are different parts of Mexico, like there are different parts of the United States. Here in San Miguel, I can say honestly that young ladies can walk safely on the streets at night. *[The double entendre of the American slang of streetwalker was lost on Abraham, so don't let it enter your little head either. He meant exactly what he said].*

There are a lot of children who are safe to be out playing alone in the squares and walking home at night. In the big cities of the Republic that is not true. I think the *centro* [downtown] is very safe. Guadalajara is very safe. Monterrey is not safe. Querétaro and all the *Bajío* [the central area of Mexico in which San Miguel is located] are still very safe.

*What kinds of people come to visit or live in San Miguel?*

60% of tourists are from the USA. 25% are from Canada. You do not have to know Spanish to live in San Miguel. Most of the foreigners who live here do not learn Spanish, though many do go to classes at the *Instituto*. But they don't get to use it, because everybody speaks English.

A lot veterans of the second world war came to San Miguel after the war was over. Many of them stayed. Also, when Mexico was in the soccer world cup in 1972, the German team stayed at Taboada, [a hot springs resort hotel outside town], so since then a lot of people from Germany bought houses here.

*How do the Mexican people feel about all the foreigners living here?*

We love everybody. Everybody is very welcome in San Miguel [he beamed with pride at this statement]. We know it is hard to learn another language. That may not be true everywhere, but that is the way we feel in San Miguel.

In San Miguel the climate is beautiful all the year. Even more beautiful is the warmth of the people. The people who are living on ranches will invite you into their houses if you are walking around. Almost all the people are very nice.

*You worked and traveled in the USA, but came back to San Miguel. Why?*

I have traveled in the USA, mostly in Texas and to Hot Springs, Arkansas. That was forty-five years ago, from 1962-67. When I was in Hot Springs, I was working with the state government helping in diplomacy. It is beautiful country there and in all of the USA where I visited. The people were very nice and I made a lot of friends. I came home to San Miguel because it is my home. I would not want to live anywhere else.

*What can you say about education for children in San Miguel?*

I believe that the public school teachers have a very good salary. In private schools they don't get as good a salary. In the Catholic schools most of the teachers are nuns.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: You will see conflicting views of teacher's salaries. It is complicated, but essentially, public school salaries depend on two factors: where the teacher works and how strong their union is. This was provided by Antonio Prado of the Spanish Institute of Puebla.

Yes, full time teachers [elementary to high school] make between \$5,000 to \$8,000 pesos a month.

Some teachers in public schools in which there are strong unions, make more than private schoolteachers. From my experience many teachers prefer to work in private schools although they might make a little less because the students are not as rowdy as in public

school; teachers in public school sometimes are ridiculed by their own students and they have to put up with a lot.

There are three pay scales in Mexico depending on the city... A, B, C. Puebla [and San Miguel de Allende] is on the C scale which is the lowest scale. Mexico City, Monterrey, etc. are in the A scale. The difference is between 4 and 6 pesos per day.

[END OF AUTHOR'S NOTE].

I have a daughter who is public school teacher in SMA. There are very good schools for kindergarten on up. There are good schools. There are bilingual, United Nations schools too.

*Have you seen any effect from the economic downturn?*

A lot of maids and gardeners who went to the States and now are coming back to Mexico. A lot of people in different fields come to my office looking for a job. I think that the federal government made a deal with *Comercial Mexicana*, *Soriana* and *Liverpool* stores and others to hire people to boost the economy. I believe that the government agreed to give the companies a tax break for three years if they will do this.

We hear that in 2010 the USA will be in worse economic shape. Everything that happens in the United States happens worse in Mexico. Here we are not affected yet. A lot of people are buying and remodeling. Real estate is still moving.

There was not a lot of real estate financing in San Miguel. That is why we were not affected. If you could get a loan, the interest rates are higher than in the States. Interest is 11-12 percent for 5 years. 9-10 percent for ten years, 6-7 percent for 30 years.

*What about medical care? How is it for those who live in San Miguel?*

In Celaya there is a Social Security hospital that is very good. For regular care we have good physicians. There are hospitals in the big city of Querétaro.

*I read a story in a US newspaper about the nursing home industry, how it is growing in Mexico. True?*

*Alma* is what we call the place for old people, as you call a nursing home. We have two places here. They are private but I do not know them.

*A friend of mine, Desmond O'Shaughnessy, said that one problem in San Miguel is the "dry ones," or Americans who live here on tourist visas, run bed-and-breakfasts without permits and pay no taxes. What do you know about that?*

I don't know that they are illegally rented or not. I do know that the hotels are vacant because of all the B&B's. There are thousand of houses here owned by foreigners and rented out.

*Why do you like being a Mexican and living in Mexico?*

All people are proud of their country. Almost all my life I lived in San Miguel. San Miguel is my home. I have a lot of friends here. I worked in Mexico City, Guadalajara and the United States and I say this with no disrespect, but I would one thousand times rather live in Mexico than in the USA.