

Urban Camping in Guadalajara, Mexico

By Kat Avila

Tums is my friend. I packed it with me, just in case. And I ended up searching for it often before I went to bed, and I lent a spare roll to another American in distress. It's not that Mexican food is bad, but spicy or heavy foods give me diarrhea. The "American" food I ate - MacDonald's, KFC, Burger King - didn't help things much. After I left Guadalajara, Mexico, I thought I wouldn't need Tums anymore, but my stomach rebelled against the overnight switch from all Mexican food to all Japanese food (my first week back in California I attempted to make up for all the sushi, sashimi, and tempura I hadn't eaten in a month). My stomach is starting to settle down a little, though I think I really need to stop experimenting, like what I just did with four bottles of mystery Japanese beverages, tossing down a sample of each, one after the other.



But returning to the subject of Guadalajara, why did I go? After my second attempt to get hired to teach English in Japan fell through, I decided I would forge ahead with the latter half of my plans, which was to visit Mexico after Japan. Guadalajara (from the Arabic *wad-al-hidjara*, stone-strewn river) seemed like an appropriate place to start. Founded in 1532, it is the second largest city in Mexico and the capital of the state of Jalisco. There is a nice blend of the historical, cultural, and modern within the city. Tequila, mariachi music, and the Mexican Hat Dance originated from this area. The city is also proud to be known as Mexico's Silicon Valley.

On my way from the airport to downtown, the taxi driver asked if I was going to buy a house. The question caught me by surprise, but then I remembered reading there were many Americans and Canadians who had retired here, mostly around nearby Lake Chapala, Mexico's largest freshwater lake.

The inn where I stayed cost me a little over \$300 U.S. dollars for the month, though I was wishing later I had had the money to upgrade to a better quality lodging. My second-floor room overlooked a busy, narrow downtown street. There was scant insulation against the vehicular and pedestrian noise and traffic. Every night I pushed my suitcase up against the thin, partly glass-paned side doors that opened out onto a small balcony, and I used books to seal the cracks beneath the doors. I did this to keep out the noxious bus fumes and chilly night air. It occurred to me, more than once, there would come a morning someone was going to find me dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.



City buses, though convenient and only a few pesos to ride, are pretty noisy animals. Fortunately they did not run all night; otherwise, I might never have gotten any sleep. Every morning around 5 a.m., the loud roar of buses speeding down the street woke me up. But buses weren't the only source of noise.

One evening, as I lay in bed sick with a cold, I entertained myself by following the ghostly shadows of passersby projected on the dimly lit screen of my bedroom wall. It was an eerie parade of forms with no distinct heads, no arms, no legs. Most of the time I didn't see them, but I could hear who, or what, was on the street - an angry man yelling, "PUERCO! (PIG!)"...another man screaming hysterically over and over, "NO-NO-NO-O-O...!" while possibly being robbed and assaulted...bad-ass youth cruising by in boomcars...women shrilly cackling over the lame jokes of their companions...someone's headlights cracking during a rear-end collision. Once, a drunk insisted on serenading the entire street. He was eventually drowned out by a car alarm that refused to go off. I was asked by a concerned friend why I didn't change rooms. What?! Then what would I have to write about? This was Mexico hitting me full in the face.



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The location of my lodging was bad, the location was good. I was within walking distance of the heart of the city, where I spent many evenings people-watching. There was a Friday night when the full moon was out, beautifully suspended in silver white splendor just to the right of an ornate cross rising from a dome of the Sagrario Metropolitano, part of a larger structure known as the Catedral Basílica de la Asunción de María, or, simply, the cathedral. Turning to study the strategically lit architecture of the impressive cathedral, any doubt I had had that I was in Mexico disappeared.



At first, I didn't see much difference between Guadalajara and my hometown of Santa Ana, California. (I blurted this out to an English-speaking guide at the Instituto Cultural Cabañas [Cabañas Cultural Institute]. His advice was "Don't walk fast...observe what you see.") After all, the majority of people who live in Santa Ana are of Mexican descent, and Spanish is spoken throughout the city. Many billboards and store signs are in Spanish. Plus, I often listen to Spanish-language radio stations in California because I like rock español (Spanish-language rock-'n'-roll).

However, Santa Ana is neither full of architectural reminders of colonial Spain as Guadalajara, nor can it boast of world-famous murals by José Clemente Orozco. Also, the rhythm of Guadalajara is slightly different with a work day that starts and ends later, lunch usually being taken between the hours of 2 and 4 p.m. Some smaller stores closed their doors at that time.

Furthermore, Guadalajara has a distinct center. It radiates out from the cathedral which is surrounded on all four sides by plazas: Plaza de Armas (Weapons Plaza) to the south, Plaza de Guadalajara to the west, Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres (Rotonda of Illustrious Men) to the north, and Plaza de la Liberación (Liberation Plaza) to the east. On the east side of Plaza de Armas is the Palacio de Gobierno (Government Palace), where I stood in a stairway with my head arched back to stare at Orozco's bigger-than-life Father Miguel Hidalgo, the father of Mexican independence, setting fire to everything. While I was taking in the mural, church bells started to solemnly toll in the background, adding to the drama of the intense piece.



At the Plaza de Guadalajara was a free, outdoor exhibit of French photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand's touring project, *Earth from Above*. The magnificent, wonder-provoking photographs were aerial views of locations from all over the world. According to the web site (<http://www.yannarthusbertrand.org>), among the aims of the project are to reflect on the earth's geography and its peoples, and to get citizens thinking about what sustainable development for our small planet means, especially as developing countries (four-fifths of the world) compete with industrialized countries (one-fifth) for limited resources.



The Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres was fenced off for renovations. The Plaza de la Liberación, between the cathedral and the Teatro Degollado (Degollado Theater), was a pleasant open space to sit and rest. On one side was a long row of shoeshine stands. On the other side was an air vent where children released colorful "octopus" balloons (round balloon for the head, long balloons for the legs), then went running after them when the creatures floated back down. Following the powerful January 21, 2003, earthquake that killed over 25 people in Colima, a city south of Guadalajara, there was a truck collecting food donations.

From the Plaza de la Liberación, I usually wandered off in the direction of the Instituto Cultural Cabañas and the sensory overwhelming, very crowded Mercado Libertad (Liberty Market), which was a multi-floor indoor swap meet. Along the way, I stopped to watch clowns and other street performers, incautiously sampled the wares of food vendors (I have a weakness for flan), and critically looked over handicrafts. A guidebook says, "Mexico is a land of salesmen, and bargaining is a way of life." But I don't like haggling. This put me at a serious disadvantage, since the moment I opened my mouth to ask "*Cuánto cuesta?*" (How much does it cost?), the vendors pegged me as a tourist and hiked up the prices. It was much easier and affordable to do my shopping with a native Mexican.

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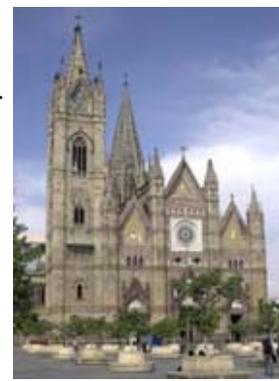
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Sometimes on my own and sometimes with new friends, I visited the local towns of Zapopan, Chapala and Ajijic on Lake Chapala, Tequila (did the José Cuervo factory tour), and the handicraft-filled Tlaquepaque and Tonal. On the bus to Lake Chapala, I watched a good Spanish dub of the latest Harry Potter film, *The Chamber of Secrets*. When I reached Lake Chapala, the lake had receded so far out from the pier I pantomimed binoculars and asked, "Where's the water?"



With a new Mexican friend who was an English teacher, I managed to get a behind-locked doors look at some precious paintings at the cathedral. One incredibly upbeat friend I made because I joined a group of students at an English-language school for karaoke. Her family was very hospitable. With her redhead cousin who works for IBM, we hung out together for a couple weekends, even finding time to window shop at Centro Magno and La Gran Plaza (it has a Sears!), Guadalajara's premier shopping malls in a sea of malls. Another new friend was someone I originally met via e-mail regarding a LatinoLA.com article I had written last year on the Japanese animation and comics scene in Mexico. It turns out she is a well-known Mexican cosplayer (http://www.geocities.com/im_a_fantastic_cat). She's also the only person I know who can score four perfect games in a row on a 10-square, double-play dance machine, and hardly break into a sweat doing it! Two other people who kept me amused were a handsome, erratically brilliant German drifter who had taught English in Laos and Nicaragua, and a very wry-humored New Mexican graphic designer with a brown belt in karate.



Spending the month of January in Guadalajara was enough to satiate my curiosity. Now it's back to scrambling for money to pay my bills. And it's so much quieter. There's only a cat yowling outside my bedroom window, and he won't be there very long.

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