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January in Guadalajara

Differences from home emerge, large and small

By Kat Avila | Web Published 1.23.2003

"Don't walk fast...observe what you see."

-- A museum guide at the Instituto Cultural Cabanas when asked about the city of Guadalajara



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Friday night there is a full moon, and it suspends itself 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.

I am gazing at the moon from across the street with a bonus view of the Palacio de Gobierno through a brilliantly lit gazebo. Tinsel Christmas decorations put up by the city still abound everywhere. Now turning to study the strategically lit architecture of the cathedral, I think to myself that any doubt I have that I am really in Mexico is gone.

It has taken me many years to come to Mexico. My father never made it. Though Guadalajara is not any more representative of Mexico than Los Angeles is of the United States, I probably could not have started in a better place for a deeply Mexican experience. This city is the birthplace of tequila, mariachi music, and the Mexican Hat Dance. It is also the site of Mexico's Silicon Valley.



Initially, I did not see much difference between Guadalajara and my hometown of Santa Ana, California. After all, the majority of people who live in Santa Ana are of Mexican descent, and Spanish is seen and spoken most everywhere. But, as my stay in Guadalajara lengthens, differences have started to emerge from the background, some big, others small.

Colonial Spain is wrapped around the heart of the city in the form of historical churches, religious art and institutions, and colonial buildings. The rhythm of the city 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. I like the fact that Guadalajara has a distinct center where people of all walks of life can mingle together and be entertained by street performers and sample the delicious snacks and desserts from nearby food carts. And I watch and observe for myself, as well as for others who may not have the opportunity to venture forth as I have.

A man with a recorder flute passes by and breaks me from my reverie. It's time to go home. By 10 p.m., the area around the cathedral will be empty of people and all that I have seen will be part of memories.

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