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January in Guadalajara, Part 2

Where everyday things become extraordinary and artful

By Kat Avila | Web Published 2.3.2003

The inn where I am staying is cheap, costing me only \$330 for the month. You get what you pay for, and my stay there can best be described as urban camping. My second-floor room overlooks a busy narrow street in downtown Guadalajara. There is scant insulation against the vehicular and pedestrian traffic. I have been using my suitcase to reinforce the thin doors that open out onto a small balcony and the street in order to keep out the toxic bus fumes and the chilly night air.

There is one bathroom for the floor. I keep a pack of Kleenex handy to use as toilet paper. At night, when I turn on the light, I can expect to see one or two cockroaches crawling around, if they move at all. They do not bother me so much, as I have encountered larger, healthier cockroaches in Hawaii. My showers I try to time just right to ensure there will be hot water, which means being aware how many guests are on the floor and when they are using the bathroom.

City buses are pretty noisy animals. Fortunately they do not run all night; otherwise, I would never get any sleep. Ghostly shadows of passersby on the street project themselves upward onto the dimly lit screen of my bedroom wall. Someone on the street yells, "¡PUERCO! (PIG!)" One night I hear blood-curdling screams - "NO-NO-NO-O-O...!" - a drunken tourist being robbed and assaulted? Last week a drunk insisted on serenading the street. He was eventually drowned out by a car alarm that refused to turn off. Drunken arguments. Shrill, cackling women. A couple of rear-end collisions. The loud roar of speeding buses wakes me up at 5 in the morning (3 a.m. California time).



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Adjacent to the inn, there is a factory that pushes out yummy-looking breads and pastries for a bakery on the nearest corner of the next block. Across from that bakery is a competing bakery. They feed the bus commuters and the students at a nearby English-language school. During the first weekend of January, the bakeries were selling "roscas," wreaths of bread that contain a tiny plastic image of the baby Jesus. Whoever gets the serving with the toy must throw a tamale party, with atole to drink, for everyone on February 2, which is also the day many people finally take down their Christmas decorations.

Recommended by my landlady, I buy freshly squeezed carrot juice at a snack stand not far from the bakery. If I order it to go, the old man pours the juice into a clear plastic bag, wrapping it around a straw with a rubber band. Some people drink carrot juice daily because they feel it gives good color to their skin or helps their eyesight.

Browsing the art section of a nearby Librerias Gonvill, I unexpectedly run across a Spanish-language copy of Guillermo Gomez Peña's EL MEXTERMINATOR. It surprises me to see something familiar here (I once wrote up a performance art event by Gomez-Peña). Performance artists and clowns. Another sight I have come to associate with downtown Guadalajara.

A clown teases the group of children crowded around him, telling them at the count of three the first child who runs up to him will get the long balloon in his hand. When the children reach him, the clown releases the balloon and the children run after the shrinking balloon whizzing all over the place.

Sometimes on my own and sometimes with new friends, I visit the local towns of Zapopan, Chapala and Ajijic on Lake Chapala, Tequila (guess what they are known for), Tlaquepaque, and Tonalá. I amaze myself on how far I can get with my meager Spanish ("Cuanto cuesta? How much is this?" and "Muchas gracias! Thank you!") and a smile. One friend I made during a night of karaoke singing Beatles songs and mariachi songs at the English-language school. Later I met her cousin who works for IBM. We hung out together for a couple weekends, even finding time to squeeze in window shopping at Centro Magno and La Gran Plaza (it even has a Sears!), Guadalajara's

premier shopping malls in a sea of malls.

I also met a Mexican cosplayer in person (http://www.geocities.com/im_a_fantastic_cat) who got in touch with me last year after she read my LatinoLA.com article on the Japanese animation and comics scene in Mexico. It is a privilege to meet someone who not only creates great costumes, but can score four perfect games in a row using ten squares (a double floor) on one of those video arcade dance machines!

Two other people who have kept me in good spirits are a handsome, erratically brilliant German drifter (who has taught English in Laos and Nicaragua) and a very wry-humored freelance graphic designer from New Mexico.

Visiting Mexico has made ordinary everyday things extraordinary and artful, though as I have become more accustomed to the differences that distinction is disappearing. The political border that separates Mexico from the United States is one that I have now experienced, after being on both sides of it, as dividing a people. On the other hand, Mexicans and Mexican Americans on the border have become binational and greater, better equipped to travel through a diverse world than monolingual, monocultural citizens.

Kat Avila writes on the Chicano and Asian American communities in California.

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