

By Nancy Gerlach, SuperSite Food Editor Emeritus



We are both well and still happy that we embarked on our adventure in Mexico. In spite of all the negative stories that circulate about the violence, our area remains peaceful and each year we are here, we love it all the more. The downside of our location is that the word has gotten out and we've had a huge influx of expats moving here from the US, Canada, and Europe. To give you an idea, last year we had 3 families from NM and 4 couples from Norway here full-time. Given the population of both places, that's a lot of people from small areas. I won't even get into the number of Texans. If you add the flocks of snowbirds escaping winter to the number of full timers it adds up to a whole lotta white faces speaking English. But we couldn't put a fence around New Mexico to keep people out and we certainly can't here.

And all of us have an impact on the Mexicans and the area just by our presence. The most noticeable effect is, of course, on the prices of real estate and the cost of construction and building supplies. We were lucky we did the bulk of our renovations when we did and that we didn't do massive changes. The people who are moving here now seem to want huge houses with all the luxuries and amenities found in north of the border houses, even if they will only be used for maybe 6 months in a year. Now our house is huge compared to the 900 square feet we had in Albuquerque, but compared to many now, not so big.

Another change we have seen in the past year is the growing number of U.S. food products on grocery shelves. On occasion we can now get Gold Medal flour and C & H brown sugar, and fairly regularly Toll House chocolate chips, Wolf brand chili, and even Jiffy cornbread mix. I say "on occasion" as the stores, and I'm including Costco and Sam's, haven't mastered the concept of when you stock an item and flies off the shelves, restock it. All of us operate on the adage "if you see something you want, buy a bunch as you may not see it again for a long, long time." For example, one of the Mexican grocery chains brought in Campbell's Pork'n'Beans and within days it had disappeared. A friend was telling us about a Mexican lady he met at a party and somehow these beans came up in a conversation. She said she saw them in the store and called her son because she knew he had developed a taste for them when he was working in the States. He told her to buy every can on the shelf and all the cases in their storeroom. So she got every can and we haven't seen them again. Since many of the Mexicans here have worked, studied, and/or lived in the States, it's not just us gringos nabbing the foreign goodies.

The biggest change we've seen is in the number of Mexicans speaking English. I believe that all the children take English in public schools and some in language schools, and even some of the fishermen's wives are taking basic English classes from expats in our small village. We are doing our part by helping a young man who needs to pass a language proficiency test to attend a university in the U.S. for his doctorate. Everywhere you go, if you are stumbling in Spanish, there is someone there to help with a few words in English. And I mean everywhere! Even the government offices and many businesses now seem to have English speaking or even bilingual Mexican employees. With our limited Spanish and someone's limited English, we rarely run into language problems except in rural areas where maybe only Maya is spoken. Probably not a good thing for us English speakers as it makes us lazy, but good for the Mexicans as they are emerging as a power in the world and understand the importance of being able to communicate. I do believe that if you speak Spanish and English you can pretty much communicate around the world. Plus learning another language when you are a child is easy and so hard at our age.

Last year we said we wanted to start traveling again and we have. In the spring we took a trip to Chiapas an area that is so different from here, it was like visiting a foreign country. We first stopped at the Maya ruins of Palenque. The Mexicans have known about this site, which is possibly the largest of the Maya sites, for many years but only started excavating a part of it in the mid '90s. It is fantastic! I always thought that Chichen Itza was the jewel of the Maya ruins, now I think, because of it's setting, it's Palenque. Although if you do come to Mayaland you must see Chichen. Palenque is in the middle of a rain forest and we timed our visit to be the first people there, so we saw the ruins with few tourists around. It was like we were there alone. The site was shrouded in low clouds making it look very mystical and after we were there for short while, the howler monkeys in the surrounding jungle gave us a serenade. If you've never heard them they are incredibly loud and they don't call them howlers for nothing. So far they have unearthed a number of tall structures and with the exception of one, they allow you climb to tops and the views are breathtaking.

From Palenque we took the very twisty road through the mountains to San Cristobal de las Casas. This road is a two lane number that goes through many small villages with many many *t opes*

(speed bumps.) Jeff says it's a good road but it still took us around 5 hours to go 200 kilometers or approximately 125 miles. The road winds through the mountains in the Zapiaista country of Chiapas. In some of the small towns we saw murals painted on walls with pictures of a masked Zapatista and lots of political slogans. The last big protesting they've done was against the signing of NAFTA. In addition to this area being very political, it also is a drug area so there is a huge military presence. We were stopped a few times and had our car and luggage searched. A soldier at one road block told me they were searching everyone for guns and drugs. In all the villages that we passed through and in San Cristobal itself, the native people still wear their traditional dress (*huiplies*) and are very protective of their identity and way of life.



We finally climbed to 7,000 feet and arrived at the colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas. The cobblestone streets of the city are lined with walls of tile roofed brightly painted houses with only a door and maybe a window on the street side, and which open into beautiful courtyards filled with flowers and trees. The huge artisans market is filled with local arts and crafts including colorful woven *huiplies* similar to those in Guatemala. I must confess to being a very greedy girl there! We bought clothing for both Jeff and I, baskets, pottery, and in the city market stocked up on the local sausages and great cheeses. We also visited a couple of

villages. One where all the women are potters, and one where they keep their traditional Maya religion alive in a very old Catholic church. Many years ago the villagers got disgusted with the priests trying to change their culture, so they killed them and took the church as their own. They threw out the pews and have decorated the statues of the saints with mirrors and ribbons. They cover the floor with pine needles, fill the place with fresh flowers, and cover the floor with many many burning candles as part of their ceremonies. There were a number of groups of people kneeling, praying, and conducting their own healing rituals including one that was done while we were there that involved killing a chicken by wringing it's neck. They claim that this is the only Catholic church that the Vatican has no control over. Now the biggest threat they have to their traditions are the modern day missionaries trying to get them to convert to Christianity which would change their way of life. In this particular town if you do convert you have to leave the village and community. The people in San Cristobal and especially in the surrounding areas do not like to have their pictures taken, so if you want to, they may ask for money or they turn their backs to you. In some places such as the above village, if you take pictures of things you shouldn't, they may take your camera/and or memory card all the way up to throwing you in jail, fining you a couple hundred dollars US, and confiscating your camera. They have their own village police that carry clubs and monitor the tourists for this. They are serious about it. We loved Chiapas but didn't have time to see all we wanted to, so we will definitely return.

In addition to our trip to Chiapas, we've been taking many day trips. This area is so rich in culture and history that we never tire of being on a road we haven't traveled before to see something new. When we moved from New Mexico there were still so many places we just didn't get to, that we making an effort to see as much of Yucatán as we can. And we are also finding so many great places to take visitors that aren't in the tour books.

We missed getting our hands in dirt so we have started to garden again but on a much smaller scale than we did on La Media. Here we have to buy and bring in dirt, we can't buy soil amendments, and with the salt air and the wind to contend with, it's like learning to garden all over again. We've filled one planter with exotic, at least to us, palms, hibiscus, bougainvilleas, and other tropical and flowering plants. In another area we are trying vegetables and herbs. We planted a couple of gourds and they went wild growing over the top of the ramada we built for shade and we had gourds hanging down through the slats of the cover. It looked great but they did so well, they blocked the sun to the plants below. We had to constantly prune them and still wound up with a harvest over 2 dozen gourds from just two plants. The tomatoes and squash we planted not so good. They had lots of foliage and no fruits. But our most treasured crop has been New Mexico green chile! We have 5 plants that just keep producing in spite of the *Nortes* (wind storms)taking their tops off. I didn't think they would even grow here because of the high humidity, wind, and salt , but Jeff said "why not?" Sure glad he proved me wrong. We planted too late in the season to avoid the winter storms, but the plants so far have kept coming back after a hit and produce pods. Now we are eating chiles rellenos and green chile stew....everything is perfect in paradise! We've found that what grows here, grows like crazy and the what doesn't is just part of the learning curve.

As I said before, we just seem to enjoy Mexico more and more the longer we are here. There always something new happening or new things to see and we obviously love talking about it. We're enjoying our "retirement" too and although we have days of kicking back and relaxing, most days we think we need more hours in day to get stuff done. Life is good. We hope you too are well and happy and that 2012 is the best year for us all.