

COME! TRAVEL WITH MICHAEL

MEXICO

2 Cities - 2 Cultures - 2 days
May 2008

There are no sticks of wattle stuck in the sand forming retaining walls in the spectacular 21st century Palm Jumeirah land development in the sea off Dubai.

Nor do workers have to rely in little boats to transport landfill to bring the area above the level of the sea.

However, more than 500 years ago in the shallow waters of Lake Texcoco in Mexico, the Aztecs mobilised lots of men in many little boats to develop the world's first artificial islands using mud, lake sediment and rotting vegetation. Initially, this was for agricultural purposes, but later, these islands formed the foundations of the city of Tenochtitlán. Today, modern Mexico City stands on these same foundations and is living evidence of the ingenuity of the Aztecs and their culture.

2 Cities – 2 Cultures – 2 Days

This is my tale of two cities and two cultures - experienced in just two days!

It is a tale that encompasses cosmopolitan Mexico City – the old Tenochtitlán and the pre-

Hispanic holy city of Teotihuacán with its Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon; a tale of sore legs and aching back; of climbing innumerable steep, narrow and uneven stone steps to get to the tops of pyramids (well, one of the pyramids); and then of walking endlessly over uneven pavements and cobblestone streets to see many and varied parts of Mexico City.

The Legend of the Pyramids

An hour's drive to the North West of Mexico City lays Teotihuacán, once the largest-known pre-Columbian city in the Americas and now the site of the amazing Aztec Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. The whole city is a UNESCO heritage protected area. According to legend it was where the Gods gathered to plan the creation of man. Construction of Teotihuacán commenced around 300 BC, with the Pyramid of the Sun built by 150 BC. The city reached its zenith approx. 150-450 AD, when it was the centre of an influential culture. Parallels with the similarities of the Pyramids in Egypt race through my mind. What are the connections? Lines drawn between Teotihuacán, Giza and the North Pole form a perfect triangle



Aztec Temple of the Sun in the foreground and Temple of the Moon to the rear

Teotihuacán was abandoned for unknown reasons before the Aztecs developed Tenochtitlán.

The conquering Spaniards

Imagine when the Spaniard Hernán Cortés arrived here in 1519 expecting to find a few savages or Indians and instead found the Aztec Emperor, Montezuma II leading the thriving and largest culture in Mesoamerica. Montezuma was so well organised, he would eat fresh fish every day brought from Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico by a human relay of running couriers. Montezuma, thinking the blond Spaniard was the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl or a deity sent by him, let down his guard. Cortes captured Tenochtitlán in 1521 with the help of other Indian tribes whom Montezuma had enslaved. Soon after; he began to build Mexico City on the Aztec ruins and brought many Europeans over to live here, eventually becoming the most important European city in North America.

Visiting the Pyramids

For whatever reason on previous trips, I never

had the time to see the famous Aztec Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. A local Mexican friend Manu who is most knowledgeable in historical matters negotiated for the taxi to take us on the hour-long drive to the archaeological site and to wait for us. As always, it is exhilarating to see these monuments to history close up and to walk where ancient civilisations once lived. The hard part is trying to fathom the history and the unfamiliar names of the main players.

The main God of the Aztecs is Quetzalcoatl depicted as a “Snake with feathers”. The only image I could find of him in situ was in stone on one of the ceremonial platforms but there was a more detailed reproduction in the excellent Museum of Archaeology that we visited before starting our “climb”. Contrary to Christian belief where the snake is depicted as The Devil, the snake



Michael standing on the “Avenue of the Dead” with the Temple of the Moon in the distance



represents wisdom and fertility to the Aztecs.

Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas all respected the Elements. The "Pyramid of the Sun" was dedicated to the god of rain and the "Pyramid of the Moon" was dedicated to the goddess of lakes and streams. In times of drought, human sacrifices were made to the Gods on top of a Pyramid. It sounds quite barbaric to hear how a human being is taken with hands tied and placed lying on his back on a circular stone altar where an obsidian knife is used to make a swift cut across the chest and then the heart is pulled out. There's a channel and hole in the altar where the blood drains down to cover the top of pyramid to 'feed the Gods'. Ultimate sacrifice!

The city's broad central avenue, called "Avenue of the Dead" is kilometres long and is still flanked by impressive ceremonial architecture, including the immense Pyramids and many lesser temples and palaces. I walk and climb all over with adrenalin pumping trying to absorb the spectacle - feeling not even a niggle at the time. Little decorative effects still remain after thousands of years. In a visit to one of the palaces near the Moon Pyramid (fairly intact), I see a remarkably well preserved courtyard with columns of glyphs studded with obsidian decoration; and in one of the rooms there's a colourful frieze of parrots in what was once the home of a priest that I'd like to copy to decorate a sun room in a future home.

Colonial Mexico City

When I'm ready to drop and thinking of a nice cold beer, I realise I still have kilometres of up and over the steps on each side of the many ceremonial stands that intersect the Avenue of the Dead all the way back to the waiting taxi. Then on reaching the entry to the Historical Centre of Mexico City we have to endure the modern day hazards and try to negotiate the tangle of noisy, chaotic traffic. Thank God for the two and three policemen on every corner in their helmets and white sashes waving their arms and madly blowing whistles but effectively keeping cars moving and getting me closer to that now life and death cold cerveza.



At the very centre of the colonial Centro Historico with its history, magic, legends and where everything began is the Zócalo. This is the town square with the imposing Spanish Baroque-style Cathedral, the Presidential Palace and the site of the former Aztec ruins of Tenochtitlán. The soft clay subsoil beneath Mexico City, which I mentioned earlier was originally built on a lake bed has caused the sinking of many of the buildings in this historic centre. Underground tunnels to stabilize the cathedral have prevented its collapse and have stabilized the uneven inclination of its sinking.

A huge green, white and red Mexican flag with the national symbol of an eagle eating a snake in the centre waves in the breeze. Mexico City has its beginnings firmly rooted in Aztec history. It is said it is here that the Aztec



saw an eagle eating a snake on the top of a cactus, and this was the sign from their God Quetzalcoatl to build their city of Tenochtitlán – which today is Mexico City.

Delicious! At last I sit and enjoy the cold beer, Mexican-style, poured over ice cubes with fresh lemon juice and salt around the rim of the mug before a late lunch at El Cardenal in the Old Town. The current-day owners started this now revered eatery for Politicos and “Ladies Who Lunch” in the Sixties to revive native Mexican, pre-Spanish cooking. Tito, the son of the owners says “Our restaurant is trying to rescue the cooking of the ancients.” And I took him up on this and had a basic dish of the Aztecs, a tomato flavoured chicken broth with fried strips of tortilla, and on the side some pork rind crisps, avocado, onion, black chilli, and fresh cheese. After a long cat-nap, I went off to the Mexican version of Soho in the Condesa area for dinner at the authentic French Bistro Mosaico where I happily settled for simple corned beef sandwich. There has to be a limit to the number of meals I can consume in a day.

Cosmopolitan Mexico City

Mexico City is located 2,250 metres above sea level nestled in a valley between two ranges of the Sierra Madre (that reach all the way north in the Rocky Mountains of the US). Today it has a population of 18 million people. After this short visit, I saw much that makes me believe that Mexico City could well stand as one of the most impressive of world cities – even with incredible contrasts of many suburban areas crying out and in much need for improvement. Squat, square houses jumbled close together cover whole tree-less hillsides. Billboards sprout along

busy, traffic-choked highways of too many cars and trucks belching black fumes. And industry encroaches bringing the usual smog and unhealthy atmosphere.

My change of mind on Mexico started with the flight here from Havana on Mexicana Airlines – in a new Airbus 320 with on-time departure, understated stylish interiors, beautifully groomed and attired hostesses and my fish wrapped in a banana leaf with bean sauce - the best airline meal I can remember.

I first visited here 37 years ago, and also on a number of occasions subsequently on business. I still have memories of smog and chaos then but now I am amazed at what I find with changes for the better that have obviously transpired over recent years. Decorative high fences surround heavily forested city parks. Mansions in local style painted with bright colours or draped in ivy now stand in landscaped surrounds serving as offices along tree-lined smaller cobble-stoned streets. Flags fly in the breeze. Luxury hotels, exclusive art galleries and spectacular monuments intersperse the length of long tree-lined boulevards. Specialty stores of the best European fashion, kitchen and furniture companies stand side-by-side with Mexico’s finest – all cutting-edge in design. Fine food and fresh produce seems to be everywhere. What I used to regard as South American understated



Museum Franz Mayer in Mexico City – so many colourful buildings throughout the city

'chic' is definitely alive and thriving in this city.

Mexico City has many different colonias (neighbourhoods) where you find different 'flavours'. Polanco is located just in front of Chapultepec Forest and is a beautiful and elegant residential neighbourhood with many quality stores, restaurants and hotels, gardens and wide boulevards.

I stayed in this area in the trendy W Hotel for 'young things'. What was I doing in a room with shower as an integral part of the bedroom with a hammock slung from wall to wall? And where every member of staff wears a wireless ear-piece and microphone; and the Concierge desk is marked simply with "Whatever. Wherever" typifying its trendy attitude to service.

On my other day of discovery we drove south on the second level of the two-tiered highway to the quaint little town of Saint Angel. It still manages to preserve some of its original character with cobblestone streets, brightly coloured houses in oranges, mustards and rusts, and restaurants serving good Mexican cuisine, but it is fast being absorbed into the urban sprawl. I seem to be having more than my share of Aztec soups, on



Bed & Shower all in one room – and with red ceiling at W Hotel in Mexico City

this occasion a bowl of Pozole made from white corn with pork, a hint of oregano and a squeeze of lime. In an attempt to be adventurous, I added a spoonful of Rajas cooked with corn, cream and cheese, with slices of Puelan chilli with my Mexican scrambled eggs.

The Arts and Crafts market in the Saint Angel town square is held under shady trees and around a bubbling central fountain. It is many cuts above the usual stereotypical fluoro-coloured Indian embroidery and paintings in



Colourful souvenirs abound in the Crafts Markets

purples, reds, oranges, lime and yellows usually found in local markets. Good art hangs on the fences and in the little stores there were fine examples of jewellery, ceramics, silver and fashion items showing the tasteful blending of Mexican and Western cultures. I invested in a local ceramicist who'd won many international competitions and am carrying one of his pots home with me for that new niche in Elizabeth Bay. I'd reached my limit now and came back to the hotel lugging my purchase and missing the planned visit to the colourful little town of Coyoacán, a hippie meeting area and once the home of famous Mexican artists, Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera.



The large ceramic pot purchase

Dare I mention food again? But, at my farewell lunch with my travel agent friend Rodrigo who planned my whole itinerary through South and Central America, I had what he had – more soup - chicken and rice with the now usual side dishes of freshly cubed avocado, chopped white onion, coriander and chilli. Time now to pack the suitcase for the 12th time in a month – I am finally leaving the Americas to return home.



Tourist Police in sombrero in Mexico City



Little Sebastian took a shine to Michael at breakfast

