

ONE SATURDAY MORNING

Art DeFehr from San Miguel

February 2013

To my Palliser friends: I started to write a few notes to our great group at Palliser this morning, and to congratulate you on a good order start to the month of February, but got carried away with my commentary. Hope you enjoy learning a bit how we live down here. Art

Greetings to all from Paradise, at least relative to the snowstorm today in the Eastern US and Canada. Warm days (29/84) and cool nights at +7, plus lots of sunshine is not hard to take. Last night, we attended the opera *La Boheme* in our Dodge City style opera house for 400 built in some other century. There are lots of concerts, boutique movie places, and left wing lectures and documentaries: nobody has heard of FOX NEWS down here (or does not admit it). The American satellite service has a weak signal, so everyone buys the better SHAW satellite service and watches Canadian news and ads. I actually share one service between San Miguel and our Lake of the Woods cottage. With internet, I wake up to Marcie and Larry on CBC Winnipeg.

Hundreds of restaurants; most very small—no chain restaurants are permitted in San Miguel. Starbucks got by somehow, but is very discreet. Many rooftop bars with great views; plenty of jazz and guitar at night.

Between the winter season effect and U.S. politics, it seems like Canadians may come close to outnumbering Americans this winter: We are everywhere. We met our neighbor three doors up the hill, and discovered he was born in Winnipeg and as a teenager lived five doors from my home in North Kildonan. A great mix of interesting people: San Miguel sort of self selects who chooses to come here and put up with some of the inconvenience in exchange for the charm. We estimate there are about 5000 full time expats in SMA, and another 5000 seasonal expats in summer, mainly from Texas and a similar number in winter with a strong emphasis from Canada, in a total population of 100,000.

There are short term visitors, but they usually are connected to friends who live here. Air travel is just complicated enough to keep out the charters and less-than-committed tourists.

A recent unintended consequence of the drug wars and recession is that Americans come less (Canadians presumably do not get the news or simply decide that the cold weather overcomes other doubt and keep coming) and wealthy Mexicans, especially the young and beautiful, are making San Miguel their weekend place of choice. Americans consider anything south of the Rio Grande dangerous; for Mexicans, San Miguel de Allende (SMA) is considered the most safe. There is a new toll road from Mexico City, so it is an easy three hour drive for them. There is a cluster of beautiful hacienda homes south of town which rumor has it belongs to members of La Familia—one of the cartels. Who knows, but that might explain why SMA has been off limits to any violence for years. Week nights, the locals and our type of expat dominate the streets and restaurants. Suddenly on weekends, there are high profile Mexican weddings—with associated loud bands—and much better dressed and younger couples taking over the 5-Star hotels and better restaurants. The weddings may be families from northern cities such as Monterrey, but the risk of kidnapping and such is considered much less here for a large

gathering of wealthy people. On weekend nights, most of us head home around 11:00 PM and we pass the young and beautiful in short skirts and five inch heels lining up at some of the new clubs developed for these folks. It does have the effect of creating a more diverse range of establishment in town.

The chatter is that the new mayor is working at upgrading SMA to attract higher end visitors. A small convention center is under construction, and efforts to create an elaborate Arts Center like Banff. This will attract more business visitors and international arts events and keep hotels full during weekdays. The expat crowd is a mix of groups. Some are quite wealthy people—often where the wife is artistic and her wealthy husband agrees that SMA is a good compromise; Another very large group is single women who consider this one of the best places for a female who is single for any reason to live comfortably and feel safe, make friends and enjoy the stimulation of an artistic and intellectual community. The estimate is that about 70% of the expat community is female. The third group is couples like ourselves. It is very possible to live in SMA on a very low income by renting the older and smaller apartments, cooking your own meals, buying locally, and this is what many people do. With the rumors of upgrading, these people fear that the price of housing and the selection of markets and restaurants and events will cater to a higher income crowd. We all have mixed feelings about that, because we like the present simplicity but also enjoy the new restaurants or shops that show up.

Our house is great, but it takes a lot of work to get the last details done. Down here we do not go to a wholesaler or catalogue to select anything: The question is simply “what do you want?” then you quite literally design everything. If we put in a stone floor, we have to decide which one of several available stones, which shade, with or without flecks, what size should the pieces be cut, and what pattern laid down. What size and color of grout. Do you want to put a texture on the stone: straight or at an angle, and what kind of texture. Should they seal the stone? And so on. And that is only one floor. If we want a rug: what kind of weave, what colors, what pattern, what size, with or without fringe. Sometimes the vendor has limited English and we have limited Spanish, so sometimes outcomes are a bit unpredictable. However, your imagination can roam. Then you can go artistic. We bought one carpet in super bright colors from Toller Cranston, the Canadian artist known more for his paintings. He was the figure skating champ of the '60s and '70s and lives just down the street.

My office is a cube covered in black tile on the exterior. It has a 10 by 10 door/window facing south (swings open) into a zen garden with a single orange tree, a water feature with stepping stones, and over the wall I look up at a green hillside of multi-million dollar homes—all owned by Texans with too much money. On the side, I look into a very small and quiet tropical garden I share with Leona's room, with a center of a simple baptismal fountain copied from an old chapel in the area. The fountain is surrounded by white lilies like a Georgia O'Keefe painting. I am surrounded by a selection of my books, a fireplace, pictures to remind me of family, and I'm currently listening to Jennifer Warnes singing Leonard Cohen. My office also has great chair to read in, and a sofa to take a nap!

We found a unique lot that allowed us to shape the experience by first shaping the lot: a rare opportunity in a 400 year old historic UNESCO World Heritage site. We are at the base of a hill, so can walk flat into town but have just enough altitude that we can see the sun set over the town below and the mountains in the distance. We arranged to put all of our basic living spaces on one level to be realistic about our ages now and in the future. Our guests enjoy the casita on the second level and the rooftop affords the best views. We are a 10 minute walk on narrow cobblestone streets from the central square but only one minute from the main park in the city, with walks for walking or jogging, children's play area, a basketball court for locals. A mixed blessing is the local high school band that practices in the park every afternoon at 1830—same song, same degree of out of tune—part of the local color.

Every February the park hosts the “Candlelaria,” which coincides with a religious festival but is a three-week market of bedding plants, mainly flowers and shrubs of incredible variety. This crowds the park’s walks, so it makes it a bit harder to get your exercise but the beauty and color make up for it.

We thought it would be good to get a break from “projects.” Guess what? The Internet and email still work, so nothing really stops. Our first day we looked over our wall to the empty lot, there is a small hut for the caretaker of the larger property. We noted 4 children age 4 – 12 playing in the dust, and Leona said, “I guess I have a project.” Our Canadian neighbors had already become involved;—the children were not attending school because they could not afford uniforms and books, although classes are free.

They are now in school and we are involved! The expats down here mostly come from a socially activist background and continue here. There are reputedly more than 100 NGOs here to serve every kind of local need, which includes the small villages around us: This is a very poor region.

As a result there are as many fund-raisers as back home, but these are great social events that mix either the Arts or some aspect of local culture to create a Fiesta or Gala or sale of donated paintings, and become a great venue to meet people. Tonight it’s a “Gala” put on by the Opera folks to raise funds to teach music to kids in the villages; they had a bunch of those kids on stage last night as part of the opera.

Most older colonial homes tend to build around a central courtyard, and given the limited and expensive land, these spaces have limited light, rooms have ventilation only to the inside, and in winter these homes can be cold: There are no central heating systems here. Given our ability to shape the land, we could build to capture the “winter sun” to warm the rooms. But in the heat of summer, the sun passes straight overhead so it does not matter: the house is very comfortable as a result. We were also able to center the house so that we have a courtyard to the east, another to the west, and a small shaded tropical garden to the north. We also have patio space on the first roof level and on top of the casita, so we have sun, shade or wind protection at any hour and for virtually any condition of wind or temperature. Every home in San Miguel is totally unique in terms of lot size, location, slope, soil condition, view possibilities, and neighbors. This requires that every house has to have a very unique design and building solution, but this allows for creativity and some innovative ideas.

Because of the slope, we could hide a rather large garage and storage room under the main floor. Since we started with an undeveloped or redeveloped site due to the demolition of an old hacienda— we could organize our lot to face a nice narrow old road on the higher side, with the traditional walls and a simple door entry. The lower side will be developed by the owner into a privada, or small private road owned by the homeowners. Eventually it will have about 10 homes on it, and our garage will come off that lower entry.

However, we have not yet considered a car. We walk everywhere, and if we’re tired at night, we take a three-dollar taxi home.

Leona can do some more major shopping up the hill where there are large stores such as supermarkets and a department store, and she uses a taxi for that, but much of our shopping is done in the small stores and markets in town. Given the nature of the foreign community here, there are no end of shops such as “Via Organica,” or “Natura”; a weekly organic market, and many street vendors often selling great produce and flowers. We buy an armful of beautiful tropical flowers for the price of one stem back home. On Tuesday, there is a large market up the hill for locals and everybody else where we shop first,

then supplement from the supermarket. They have some great vendors: several truck fresh fish from both coasts to arrive for Tuesday morning, so we can buy unfrozen snapper, tilapia, shark or manta ray, and more. Chicken is like Hong Kong—"morning chicken"—butchered that day and cut to your specs.

Flexibility is a great virtue down here. We need to learn to live and work with the local rhythm. The garbage collection is a man walking down the street banging a steel rod on a steel plate that makes a very unique sound. When you or your staff hear that sound, garbage bags are quickly deposited outside the door, since a garbage truck will follow that sound by about 5 minutes. Miss that, and you wait till next time.

Church opportunities are varied and reflect adaptation to the local condition. We have participated in two different services. St. Paul's Anglican, (NOT Episcopalian they always point out for some unknown reason) which is quite traditional in a very lovely old stone church, and Unitarian Universalist, which is mainly American and Canadian. It has a broad scope which accommodates "born-again Unitarians," Jewish, and any others who show up. It is the most intellectual group in town and has great speakers plus a Boesendorfer grand piano. They always feature special music by someone of exceptional quality. Both services are followed by coffee.

Time actually passes very quickly down here as we approach the half-way point of our winter. We have had several guests and a number more will arrive in coming weeks. Entertainment is either visiting, or the events and concerts in town. Next week there will be a major Writer's Conference. Margaret Atwood was one of the speakers last year, and this year King of the "Book of Negroes" is the featured Canadian, plus many others. We will attend a number of these events. Visiting each other in homes is the other major activity here and people love to entertain, and see the interesting homes around town.

There are two good golf courses and many use them. There is a large bridge club, plus many other clubs. I had planned to do some writing, but between finishing the home and adjusting to life, the output has been minimal.

With good health, good friends, great climate and a fascinating context, we feel very much at peace here this winter. Hope it lasts. We do think about our family and friends back home and other places and look forward to connecting again – sometime.

Art