

Hi,
(this is a long one, sorry)

"No, I don't see any warnings about Mexico", said Julius, my travel agent, when I asked him about the delicate situation in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. "No Danger" said the guy in the Mexican office of tourism in LA, in response to the same question. Well, after seeing the TV reports in my first nights in MC (Mexico City) and talking with two trustworthy Mexicans, I decided to go to the central office of tourism in MC and find out once and for all if I can travel to that area. The answer that I heard there contained the same words as in LA, but with some additional exclamation marks: "No! Danger!!!!". When I demanded to know what is the nature of that danger and if there are shootings in the streets (repeating the question in my fine Spanish: "Hay boom-boom en las calles?") the answer was "Yes!". I was very depressed since Chiapas was supposed to host the middle third of my trip and some of its highlights. I decided also to give up the last third of my trip in Yucatan due to problems in rearranging the hotels and flights. After some thinking, I decided to prolong my stay in the central area, fly to Acapulco for 3 days and return earlier to LA. Eventually, I was even happier with the new plan since I discovered how exhausting is a trip in Mexico and how older I became and that the 12 days in this special country were just right. Besides, I realized that my life will be complete even without seeing all the Maya and Aztec sites. Perhaps it's inverse-psychology, but it worked for me. . .

And now - Mexico! In the first days I was floating in the air, unable to believe that I'm again in Latin America to which I longed so much. The *deja-vus* kept coming to me: The Indian faces and clothing, the Latin men with the oil in their black hair and the mustaches, the street vendors who ask you "compra me, senior" (buy from me, sir), the colorful craftsmanship, the hard sights of cursed poverty and misery, the wild drivers who couldn't care less for the traffic rules or for the life of the pedestrians, old fashioned things such as shoe-shiners, bell-boys in elevators or kids who sell newspapers in the streets by shouting their headlines, the strong Catholicism, the central plaza in each city or village (although there it's always called "El Zocalo" and not "Plaza de Armas" as in south America), the streets that are named after historic dates, and, of-course, the Spanish language (El Castellano). However, Mexico has many unique features of its own. By the way, the American influence there is amazing: All the famous food and store chains, from MacDonald's to Wal-Mart, are everywhere, some TV channels and newspapers are just Mexican versions of the American original, the Walt Disney inheritors make probably more money there than in the USA, and Santa-Clause is the most beloved figure in this time of the year and even there he laughs "Ho-Ho-Ho". It's also an outrageously (and surprisingly) expensive country.

The slogan of channel 7 on TV there is "TV7 - desde la ciudad mas grande del mundo" (from the world's largest city). And indeed, MC is huge in every possible sense. It is not a charming or beautiful city and it suffers from many urban illnesses, but it certainly has a lot to offer to visitors. My 8 days there (2 of which were dedicated to the close towns of Taxco and Puebla) were busy from morning to night. This is why the following 3 days in Acapulco were perfect for my aching muscles and head (that had to absorb so much information in such a short time). This trip had many facets and I'll describe them below:

- History, Archaeology and Anthropology:

Definitely the center of any serious trip to Mexico, a country that has 3000 years of history. The ruins or remains of the many ancient cultures that inhabited that country are everywhere. The two peaks were the visit to the celebrated museum of anthropology in MC and the trip to Teotihuacan, a site near the capitol. The museum is considered one of the best in the world and is a remarkable one (and so was its first class restaurant). It presents all the Mexican cultures and fascinating remains (for instance, a big jaguar-shaped sculpture with a bowl in its back in which human hearts were

offered by the Aztec to the sun god). As for Teotihuacan - this was the most important city in Mexico in The Classic Period (300-900 A.C.) and you can see there the two big pyramids of the sun and the moon, as well as temples to other gods. One realizes there how advanced was their knowledge in math, astronomy, engineering and masonry.

- Art:

I was exposed to Mexican paintings only here in the museums of California (and later in the excellent Rekanati museum in Caesaria) and just loved it. In Mexico I could enjoy this wonderful art in more than a dozen museums, galleries or exhibitions (the last one, and a good one, was in my last hour in Mexico, in the airport). The leading Mexican painters of this century were Tamayo, Orozco, Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo and - the greatest of them all and the husband of the latter - Diego Rivera. Their styles were different: for instance, Tamayo's and Kahlo's paintings are personal while the other three used their art as a vehicle to convey a political or social message. The ones who earned my greatest admiration (in fact, already before that trip) were the last two. This couple is probably the closest thing to royalty that Mexico has ever had. Rivera, one of the prominent painters of this century (but this is my opinion) was a Mexican hero and his young wife was admired everywhere as a most talented and pioneering woman who fulfilled herself (there was even a play on her in Broadway - "Frida"; does it remind you of "Evita"?). He was 23 years older than she was and wasn't very loyal (sounds like Picasso). They lived in a most beautiful house in MC (that is today "Museo de Frida Kahlo") until her premature death in 1954 (she was confined to a wheel-chair since a severe accident in a young age). Her paintings are usually based on her powerful face and are very strong and mesmerizing. His paintings are much more diverse: there are cubistic paintings (the one called "The Architect" is an outstanding masterpiece, so I thought), social-realistic ones (they were both very communist) and - his greatest works are his huge murals (wall paintings) that cover the walls of many central buildings. Lets describe those shortly: awesome!

- Architecture:

MC hosts some remarkable buildings that left me very impressed. I'll mention only three, though there were many more. The first one is El Palacio de Bellas Artes - a stunning palace, the exterior of which reminded me of the old opera house in Paris, while the interior (designed and built 28 years later) is in a totally different style that looks like the interior of the Empire State building (that, now that I think about it, was built in around the same year). The second - the central library in the huge university - a 10 story-high building covered from all sides by an enormous mosaic depicting the history of Mexico. And the thirs building is the ultra-modern stock-share building. Fascinating or charming houses are found also in the picturesque towns of Taxco and Puebla. The latter may be viewed as an outdoor museum of architecture; words cannot describe the beauty of its buildings and the unique mixture that the different styles create.

- Cuisine:

The food sold in the streets or in simple restaurants is simply. . . bad, fat and disgusting! If you think I'm harsh, try to stand for 2 minutes beside one of those frying pans without feeling nausea. In the more affluent restaurants it's different: the food is more delicate and sophisticated, tasty and interesting (and quite different from the Californian Mexican food). By the way - their pancakes are very good and the cappuccino is out of this world. As for salsa - if here it's red and comes mild, medium or hot, there it is green and comes only in two degrees: boiling and burning. And yes - the Corona beer (la cerveza mas fina) is sold for fifth the price charged in the nervy pubs of Tel Aviv.

- Religion:

Jesus, they are soooo Catholic. I won't describe the Christmas celebrations, but I'll tell you about Villa de Guadalupe - the most sacred place in Mexico. It is the place where the virgin of Guadalupe

appeared in front of an Indian man, called Juan Diego, in 1531. This nice virgin gave our Juan a piece of cloth with her image on it, as a proof of her appearance. Our beloved guide, Pepe (what a name!), told us that the figure of Juan Diego may be seen moving in the virgin's eyes on that piece of cloth!!! He added , proudly, that "believe it or not, but researchers from Germany and from NASA weren't able to explain this and other remarkable phenomena". Anyway - every year, on December the 12th, millions of pilgrims from the entire world are coming to the basilicas that stand there today and pass by that piece of cloth. They march the last 100 meters on their knees! I mean - those who can, because many of them are cripple and come to get healed. We were there exactly one week after that day, in which 3.5 millions gathered in and around the basilicas and sang, together, for the virgin. But even when we were there, we still saw parades of pilgrims and convoys of wheel-chairs. No one jumped on his feet and cried out loud with joy "I'm cured!"; at least not when I was watching.

I didn't tell you about the wonderful Mariachi bands (who still sing classic hits such as "La Cucaracha" or "Bamba-la-bamba-la-bamba"), the good spirit of the Mexican people (especially when they join the Mariachi singers and applaud afterwards and demand more songs - "Otra, Otra!"), my conversations with them "De Israel?! Ohh, la Terra Santa, Jerusalem, que bueno!"), Acapulco or many other things (such as the fact that I saw only one Israeli and 4 Japanese throughout the whole trip). But I think that enough is enough.

Hasta luego,
Tamir