The Eye

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San Miguel de Allende · Issue 3
February 2026
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The History of Jazz in San Miguel

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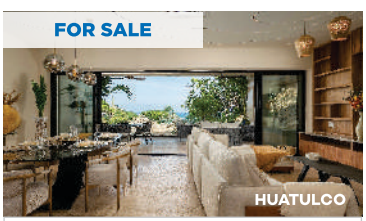

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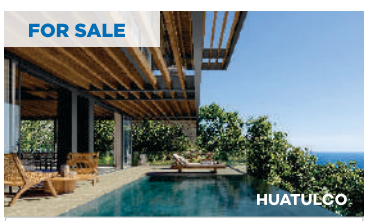

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Editor's Letter

"I'm going to Graceland, Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee
I'm going to Graceland
Poor boys and pilgrims with families
And we are going to Graceland
My traveling companion is nine years old
He is the child of my first marriage
But I've reason to believe we both will be received in Graceland"
Paul Simon, singer and songwriter

If you are reading this, you have probably already undertaken a lot of journeys to get here. A pilgrimage is often associated with religion, but there are many other roads than the one to God that lead to salvation. Maybe salvation is too powerful a word for some journeys- communion, perhaps.

It would make sense for this topic to tell of my own journey to my Mexican life almost 30 years ago, but when I think of pilgrimage, I think of a road trip I took with my daughter.

Even though I had already been living in Mexico for close to 15 years, I had several items in Canada that I didn't want to part with: art my father left me when he died, a few pieces of furniture. We all have things we don't want to part with just yet. I purchased an old Canada Post truck, filled it up, and my nine-year-old daughter and I took a road trip from Montreal to Huatulco.

It was hot, like driving in a sardine can. The radio didn't work, but we had an iPod that played music through a speaker. In college, I was briefly obsessed with a book called *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*, which likened the Elvis following to a religious phenomenon. So when my daughter and I found ourselves rumbling along the highway near Memphis, Tennessee, the words to Paul Simon's Graceland came back to me: "My traveling companion is nine years old." Without hesitation, we veered towards Graceland.

What back in the 1970s was considered a mansion now just looked like a large suburban house. I asked people on the shuttle if it was their first time, and for most, it wasn't. For many, it was an annual pilgrimage; for some, like us, a curiosity. Were we part of the pilgrimage or observers?

We toured the house, and when we reached the Jungle Room, my daughter said, "Like the song." She meant *Walking in Memphis* - we had listened to it on some stretch of highway through Ohio.

Saw the ghost of Elvis
On Union Avenue
Followed him up to the gates of Graceland
Then I watched him walk right through
Now security they did not see him
They just hovered 'round his tomb
But there's a pretty little thing
Waiting for the King
Down in the Jungle Room

As people, journeying, searching, and having faith in something other than our own immediate existence is perhaps the most unifying human experience. Does it really matter if we call this feeling and belief by different names?

See you next month,

Jane

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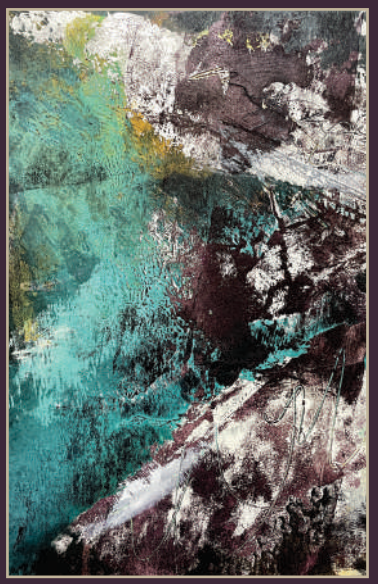

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Zen and the Art of MotorMind Maintenance

By Kim Malcolm

For some reason, I thought a weeklong silent Zen meditation retreat — called "sesshin" — would be an important life experience. And it was, although maybe not in the ways I expected. I certainly chose a good one. It took place at Mar de Jade, a gorgeous resort on a secluded beach north of Puerto Vallarta. The priest, Norman Fisher, was once the head of the San Francisco Zen Center, and understands the "western," non-Zen mind. The description of the retreat welcomed "beginners." I don't have a Zen practice, but I've read books about Zen, so I was a beginner, right?

I arrived at Mar de Jade in the early evening of the first day, just in time for a brief orientation and our first "zazen"– seated meditation. There were about 60 of us in the meditation hall where I found a square mat on the floor with my name on it. Following the lead of those around me, I sat down on the mat and closed my eyes. I began breathing, believing the evening would bring internal quiet and the first in a series of small but significant revelations. This was a wrong belief. My mind was the opposite of peaceful and my only revelation was that the excruciating pain in my hips and back would not be tolerable for six more days. Never mind, I thought. I was there to learn, not to be comfortable.

Each day after that had an identical schedule. Routine sometimes causes me to break out in hives, but, strangely, I enjoyed the predictability. We were awakened at 5am to the sound of clacking wooden sticks. The day began with light exercise followed by eight 40-minute sessions of silent meditation, a 2-hour work assignment, dharma talks, prostrations, and three excellent vegetarian meals. Besides the wooden sticks, the sounds of each day were gongs, bells, crashing ocean waves, birds and the low rumble of a banda band playing at the other end of the beach. We chanted, but we were otherwise mostly silent.

It didn't take long for me to realize that this retreat was not going to be warm and fuzzy. Perhaps, I thought, it is hard to make friendly connections when no one is talking and your homies are working to accept the fact of universal suffering. Still, the feeling of sobriety surprised me. I'd read Norman Fisher's book about Zen practice, which described the objectives of bodhisattvas — our Zen muses — as generosity and joyful engagement. I didn't see much of either from the other participants. For the sake of not complaining, I will spare you the details.

A little frustrated with the prospect of a week of somber, I was determined to continue so I could understand a little about Zen Buddhism and enjoy the beach. Also, there were no refunds LOL. Hoping to avoid feeling too somber myself, I began giving little notes to people. "Thank you for playing the gong for us this week." "I love your blouse." "I like sitting behind you because your posture is perfect." During our free time in the afternoon, I went swimming in the warm ocean and looked for shells on the beach.

After three days of monkey mind during every one of our meditation sessions, I raised the issue of somber at my brief meeting with our priest. "Because of the Bodhisattva's path," I said, "I was expecting a feeling of warmth and caring." He gently explained that Zen practice is one of austerity and many come to it who are trying to get through life's challenges (I apologize if I am not precisely reporting the content or spirit of his words). He knew that I was the only participant who did not have a Zen practice and mentioned that even Zen practitioners don't normally attend a weeklong sesshin who haven't first attended several one or two day silent retreats. Um, apparently reading a few books didn't even qualify me as a Zen beginner. "Are you ok?" he asked. I replied that yes I actually was, but I didn't say I was ok partly because of Roman.

Roman is Mar de Jade's pastry chef. He lives in the village near the resort and makes breads and desserts for 100 people every day. My work assignment each day was to help Roman, and I loved my job. Cutting strawberries and rolling out dough for two hours cleared my mind of the racket it produced during our meditation sessions. Roman got me through the week. Although we weren't supposed to talk and I don't speak much Spanish anyway, it was obvious that Roman is generous and joyfully engaged — just like a Bodhisattva.

"Before enlightenment, chop wood and haul water. After enlightenment, chop wood and haul water." — Buddhist saying

Kim Malcolm is a retired U.S. citizen and author based in San Miguel de Allende. Having traveled to 73 countries, she brings a global perspective to her writing, which often explores culture, place, and personal experience, with many essays rooted in her life in Mexico.

Follow her blog Camino Milagro: www.kimmie53.com

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LA CONDESA

PRIVADAS

The Most Beautiful Churches in SMA Centro

By Michael Solof

It happens all the time. You're new in town and want to see something special, or maybe you simply have a couple of hours to fill and feel like exploring somewhere different. That's where this little walking tour comes in.

Today, we'll visit four of the most beautiful and historically significant churches in San Miguel de Allende, all located within a few blocks of Centro. Along the way, we'll touch on their architectural styles, histories, and why they continue to matter to the life of the city.

San Miguel de Allende is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its well-preserved colonial architecture and striking religious buildings. Let's begin at the heart of it all.

The Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel

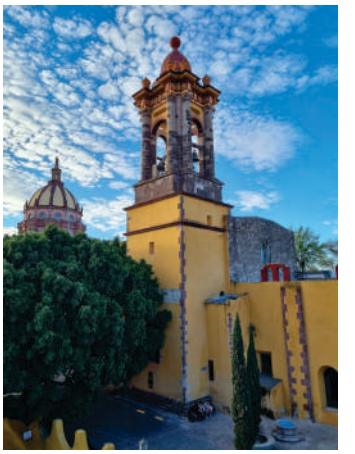
The Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel is the city's most iconic structure. The original church dates back to the early 17th century, though it underwent major renovations and expansion in the late 19th century. Its dramatic neo-Gothic façade was redesigned by local architect Zeferino Gutiérrez, who reportedly drew inspiration from European Gothic cathedrals.

The church is constructed from pink cantera, a volcanic stone widely used throughout the city and valued for both its durability and warm tonal variations. This material has become closely associated with San Miguel's architectural identity.

Inside, visitors will find stained-glass windows, soaring arches, religious artworks, and impressive bell towers that dominate the skyline. Today, the Parroquia is one of the most photographed and recognizable churches in Mexico.

Over the years, the Parroquia has also accumulated its share of local legends and ghost stories — a common fate for historic churches. These tales belong more to popular imagination than documented history, but they add another layer to the building's mystique, especially when seen at dusk.

Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concepción (Las Monjas)



Located near the Jardín Principal, the Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concepción— often referred to as *Las Monjas*—is one of the city's architectural highlights.

Construction began in the mid-18th century, and the church is a fine example of Mexican Baroque architecture. Its most striking feature is the dome, which was inspired by European cathedral design and rises elegantly above the surrounding streets. The façade and dome glow beautifully in the late afternoon light, thanks again to the use of pink cantera stone.
Inside, the church contains richly decorated altarpieces covered in gold leaf, along with artwork created by local craftsmen. The church is dedicated to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, reflecting strong Spanish colonial influence in both its architecture and devotional focus.

Each year, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception is celebrated here, drawing a primarily local congregation and reinforcing the church's role as a living part of San Miguel's religious life.

Templo de San Francisco
(Corner of San Francisco and Juárez)

The Templo de San Francisco is among the oldest churches in the city. Construction began in 1683 under the direction of Franciscan friars, who played a central role in spreading Christianity throughout the region.

The exterior reflects restrained Baroque design, combining pink stone with white stucco for a striking but understated contrast. Inside, however, the church is far more ornate, featuring a beautifully crafted altar, decorative ceilings, and religious artwork.

While the church itself sits within the bustle of Centro, nearby courtyards and surrounding streets offer quieter moments for reflection. Each year, the Feast of Saint Francis is celebrated in early October, marking one of the church's most important annual events.

Templo del Oratorio de San Felipe Neri
(Insurgentes 12)

The Oratorio de San Felipe Neri is an excellent example of 18th-century Baroque architecture paired with deep civic and religious significance.

Founded by the Oratorians—a religious order devoted to preaching, education, and community service—construction began in 1748 and was completed in 1753. The church's elegant façade, carved from local pink stone, features intricate detailing that highlights the craftsmanship of the period. Its bell tower makes it a prominent landmark along Calle Insurgentes.

Inside, visitors will find a finely detailed altar, religious icons, and murals depicting saints and biblical scenes. The Oratorians were instrumental in establishing educational institutions in San Miguel, and their influence extended well beyond the church walls.

The Feast of San Felipe Neri is celebrated each May, maintaining the Oratorio's role as an active center of worship and community life.

A City of Churches

The churches scattered throughout San Miguel de Allende offer a window into Mexico's layered history—colonial ambition, religious devotion, artistic expression, and everyday life unfolding over centuries. While it would take weeks to visit them all, these four provide a rich introduction, all within a short walk of Centro.

Enjoy your travels—and take your time.

Michael Solof leads SMA Adventure Hound, a group which takes locals and newcomers to brunches and dinners at different restaurants every week and he also offers classes in the art of smartphone photography. You can contact him at WhatsApp +1-443-310-9214 for more info and to reserve.

The Eye

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Nevado de Toluca

By Diana Rodríguez Aquino

Nevado de Toluca, also known as Xinantécat, is a dormant stratovolcano located in the state of Mexico, Mexico. It is one of the highest peaks in Mexico, standing at approximately 4,680 meters (15,354 feet) above sea level. The volcano is part of the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt and is located about 80 kilometers (50 miles) west of Mexico City.

I signed up with a tour to explore the Nevado with a day climb. The day before I prepared all my clothes (first thermal layer, second polar layer and third waterproof layer), boots, accessories (gloves, hat, UV glasses, buff) and backpack (food, toilet paper, water, cash, change of clothes, sunscreen). I was excited and I went to sleep early to be well rested.

I got up at 5am, got all my gear and left for the meeting point with the excursion team. The guides took a roll call of the entire group, and we left for Toluca. Along the way I rested a little, since what lay ahead were eight intense hours of constant effort. As we advanced, I felt the drop in temperature. Before reaching the park entrance we made a stop to eat something light and use the bathroom.

We continued with the trip and in a matter of minutes you can see how the environment changes, the temperature drops even more, and we entered a forest, the closer you get to the base camp nature changes again, everything becomes more arid as you approach the base of the mountains. We arrived at the camp, and they gave us picks and a helmet.

The beginning of the climb was very hard, it is the first push to adapt to the climate and altitude. I was barely warming up, but as we progressed, I began to adapt. The first stop was twenty minutes in and the guides advised us to eat something light and drink water. Afterwards, we proceeded to go down towards the lagoon.

In the Nevado there are two crater lakes, the Moon Lagoon and the Sun Lagoon. We went down to the Moon Lagoon to surround it and began our ascent. We took one last rest before beginning the real challenge, reaching the summit. It is around three hours of ascent. Arriving at around 3800 meters above sea level we take a break and eat something sweet, which is crucial for having energy.

The last hour of ascent is the most difficult, it is a very steep slope and later you have to climb, this is where you must be very careful, since with any false step you can fall into the overhang. At this moment the temperature dropped a lot, and I began to feel less air, it was difficult to breathe and of course the physical effort was greater, because you are climbing between stones.

Finally, after climbing for about an hour we reached the top. The best feeling of the day was knowing I'd made it. From this point I could clearly see Laguna del Sol, an indescribable view. This was the perfect moment to recognize all the effort we'd made, we were 4500 meters above sea level.

Subsequently, we descended into a small valley to eat a well-deserved meal, rest, and prepare for the descent. For some people this is the most fun part and for others the worst part. Going downhill is like skiing on land, some people go very fast, while others go downhill and fall. If you have a good rhythm and are not afraid of falling you can make the descent in no time. My biggest tip is, let go, don't be afraid of falling, it can happen eventually, enjoy it and when you least expect it you will be arriving at Laguna del Sol.

Here we rested a little more and waited for the group to come together again to leave. From this point you can see how high you were and the entire journey you took to get to the top. The last hour of the excursion is dedicated to returning to the base camp and saying goodbye to Nevado. Finally, between laughter and talks, we arrived exhausted but very happy. It was 3pm, we returned just in time for lunch. In a typical Mexican dining room, they served us quesadillas, sopes and coffee. Now yes, you can eat as much as you want and get ready to head back to Mexico City. This was an amazing experience and I highly recommend it.

Despite its status as a dormant volcano, Nevado de Toluca still poses some geological hazards, and visitors are advised to take precautions when exploring the area. Additionally, the volcano and its surrounding ecosystems are protected within the Nevado de Toluca National Park, which aims to preserve the natural beauty and biodiversity of the region. There are several tour companies that offer day trips like this.

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Sanjuaneros: Up to a Month Away from Home, with a Promise to See the Virgin

By Estefanía Camacho

Cihualpilli, also known as the Virgin Mary in her invocation of the Immaculate Conception, whose image is housed in the Cathedral-Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos in Jalisco, receives up to seven million pilgrims each year. In this representation, the Virgin "condenses the meaning that precedes motherhood," as Felipe Gaytán Alcalá explains in his book *Las semánticas de lo sagrado* (*The Semantics of the Sacred*).

To get there, the *sanjuaneros* (believers who set out from the Bajío region toward San Juan de los Lagos) walk approximately 80 kilometers over a period of nine to twelve days. Some depart from the Parish of Saint Anthony of Padua in San Miguel de Allende, others from Querétaro or San Luis Potosí, and those coming from farther away leave from Aguascalientes, adding up to a total distance of 200 kilometers or more.

They set out in late January. In 2026, they departed on January 21 from the well-known "Y," an intersection formed by a famous roundabout in León, through which other pilgrims from nearby cities also pass. "I'm leaving from the Y," they notify one another in a Facebook group of nearly 84,000 members, where they share everything from announcements to form departure groups in their hometowns to photos from the journey, weather advice, and, above all, blessings for the road.

In 2026, the passage of approximately 350,000 travelers through the state of Guanajuato is expected, a place referred to as "pilgrim transit territory," according to Luis Antonio Güereca Pérez, the state coordinator of Civil Protection for the Secretariat of Security and Peace of the State of Guanajuato. These figures have been repeated over the past two winters, although the number, he says, has been declining.

"I should tell you that before 2020, before the pandemic, the number of pilgrims was much higher: around 450,000 to nearly 500,000 people passing through the state. However, when the pandemic hit and all this type of activity was suspended, something happened: the rhythm or the motivation was lost. We don't know exactly what occurred, but we haven't been able to recover the large numbers we used to have," he tells me in an interview.

Not everyone stopped during the pandemic. That is the case of Paty, a 44-year-old woman who lives in León. She has made this pilgrimage for 30 years. The first time she went, she was 14. After one of her children fell ill frequently, she asked the Virgin for his health. "Since then, he hasn't gotten sick," she says. That was 17 years ago.

"I promised that if my son didn't get sick again, I would never stop going." So, during one of the pandemic years, when there were very few pilgrims, she went with her daughter, without many supplies, because there was no one selling food or lighting the way at night with flashlights. They got lost.

"My daughter's feet started bleeding halfway along the route. We stopped, and we got lost. Then the coyotes showed up. One of them was about to attack us. My daughter lit the way with her cellphone so I could throw a stone, but there wasn't just one coyote. There were about ten."

They had to jump into a ditch. "The Little Virgin is very miraculous," she recalls, describing how they were able to see a military barracks nearby. From there, some personnel fired at the coyotes to scare them off and helped Paty and her daughter out of the ditch.

“Sometimes people don't even have money for bus fare,” María Concepción Quiroz tells me. She has been a devotee for approximately 50 years, but now she offers food to pilgrims passing through on the night of January 23. She recalls that when she first began making the pilgrimage, people endured many hardships — cold, hunger, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion, and it was difficult to find water or food. That is why she wanted to offer some relief.

She offers her home —“*tu casa*,” as Mexicans say when we speak of our own home and offer it to a stranger— as a place of rest for approximately 40 people.

“They bathe here, we make hot chocolate at night so they can fall asleep, and for food, well, we give them carnitas, salsa, beans, rice, noodles, potatoes. I mean, everything we can, whatever we're able to help with.”

In addition to offering her home as a place to spend the night, they also go out onto the route in a pickup truck to transport food. So that pilgrims do not have to stop and lose time, they prepare bagged lunches and hand them out to those who pass by. “Sometimes more people come, sometimes fewer, but everything gets eaten,” she explains, referring to the roughly 50 kilograms of food she prepares, not counting the 40 liters of salsa she cooks with the help of her grown children and now her daughters-in-law.

Throughout the year, they save together to be able to give away this food, which amounts to an expense of approximately 15,000 pesos, she confides.

Her altruistic work has brought her public recognition, to the point that she has appeared in television interviews, although the matriarch of the Quiroz Aguilar family does not like to boast about her efforts.

According to the state coordinator of Civil Protection for the Secretariat of Security, the issues they pay closest attention to include traffic accidents on the highway, food poisoning, people who become lost, occasional fights, and elderly pilgrims.

This time, Civil Protection officially launched the coordinated operation among authorities from Friday, January 9, through February 5, when travellers stop passing through Guanajuato. Personnel from the Guanajuato Ministry of Health, the Red Cross (through its local chapters), state firefighters, and the National Guard are also present.

On January 20, 2026, the eve of the departure for most believers, the forecast indicated that the lowest temperature would occur at seven in the morning on the 21st, dropping to 9 degrees Celsius.

This January, pilgrims walked illuminated by lamps that provided enough light along the path, they crossed train tracks, sometimes alongside a stationary train, detoured around fields of maguey that lengthened the route, and walked for long stretches next to high-speed roads, where freight trucks sped past, often in blind spots. Some travelers coming from the State of Mexico spent up to a month away from home, according to television reports.

Arrival in San Juan de los Lagos

Ideally, pilgrims arrive on February 2, which coincides with the celebration of Candlemas. The Candelaria is a popular religious celebration that commemorates the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, the Virgin's purification after childbirth, and the Virgin of Candelaria, another Marian devotion. Tradition in Mexico also dictates that whoever ate *Rosca de Reyes* on January 6 and found the small figurine (representing Baby Jesus) must offer tamales and *atole* to the rest. However, the Immaculate Conception is also venerated in May, on August 15, and on December 8, although the longest pilgrimage takes place in mid-January.

While San Juan de los Lagos awaits the arrival of tens of thousands, the Cathedral-Basilica (the country's second-most visited Marian sanctuary, after the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City) is already hosting processions and dances. All of this is done to honor a figure measuring just 33 centimeters and weighing over 300 grams, adorned with eighteenth-century Baroque-style ornamentation–which is why Paty calls her with love “little virgin”. The Virgin, made from corn-pith paste, was crafted in workshops in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

According to testimonial records from 1623, the Virgin performed her first miracle by restoring the life of a young trapeze artist who had reportedly died after falling from a swing.

Estefanía Camacho is a freelance Mexican journalist working across media and digital magazines. She is a specialist in gender, SMEs, economics, and business.

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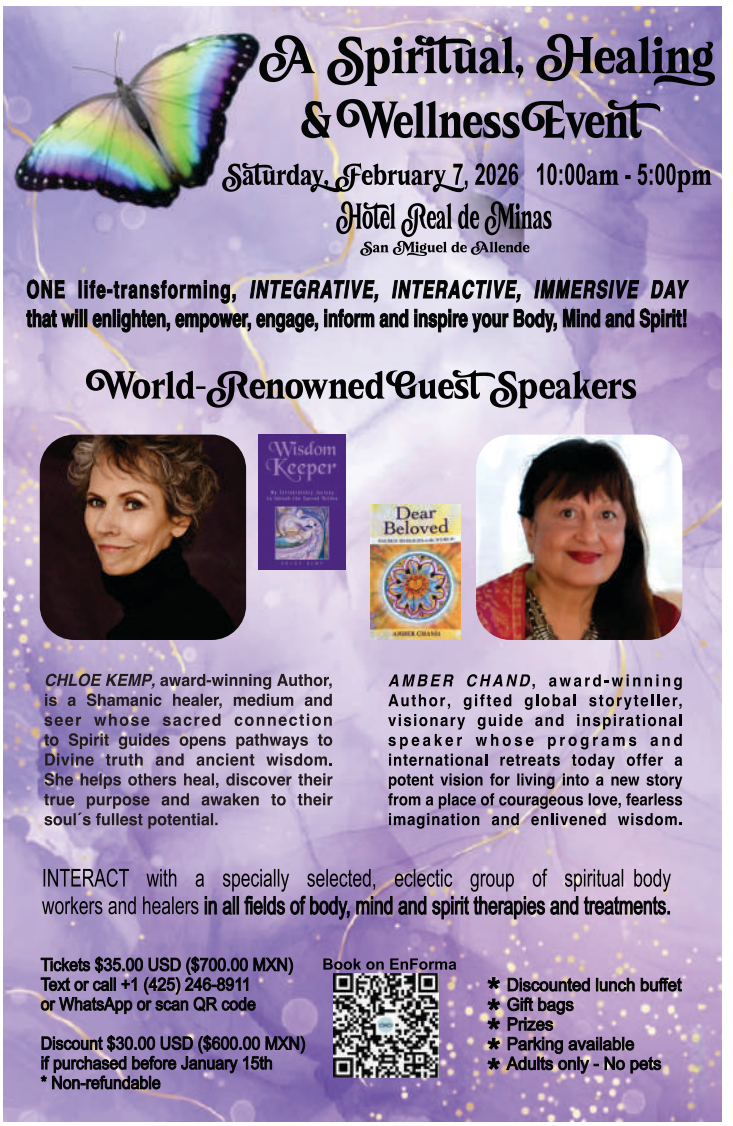

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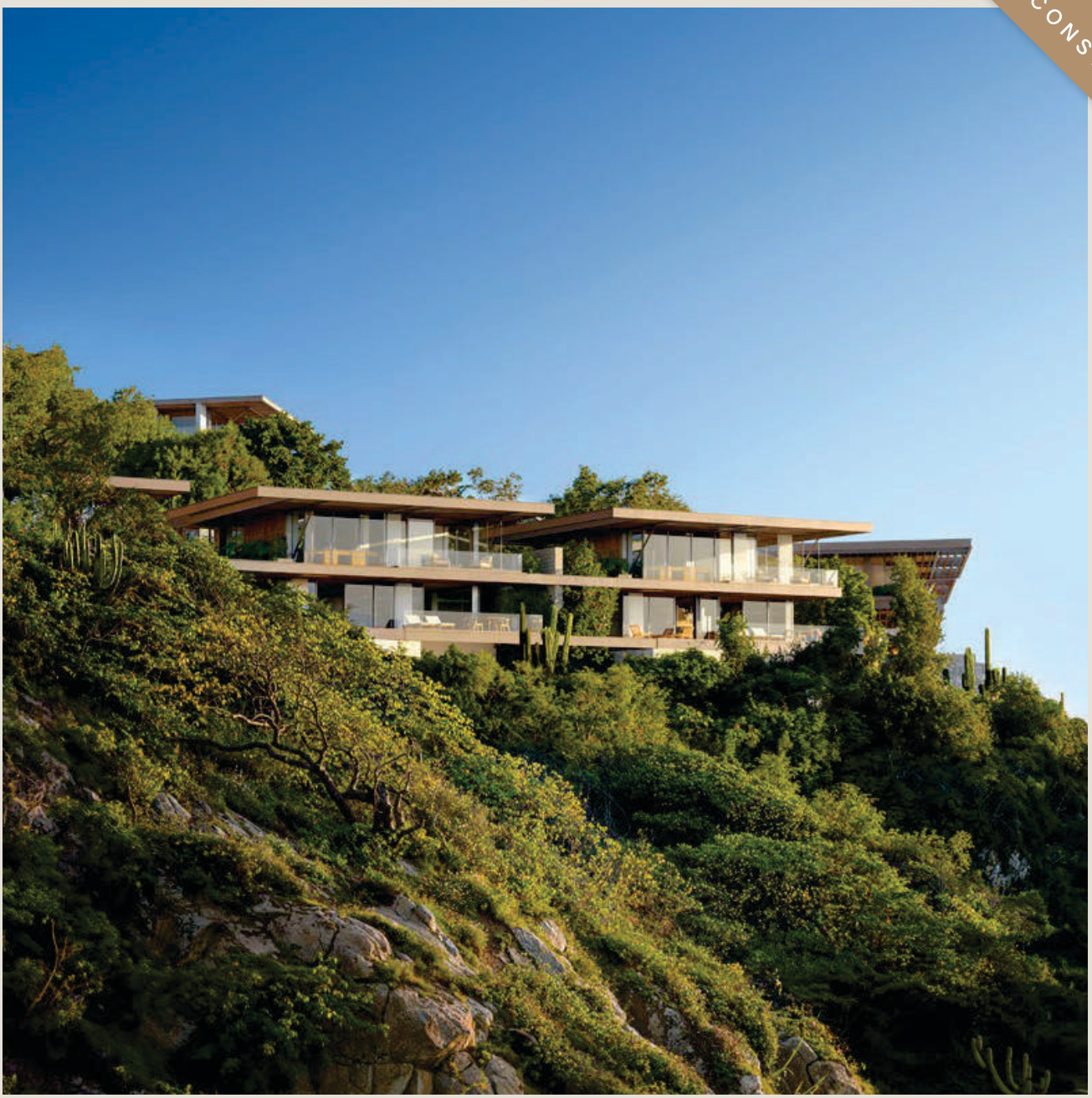

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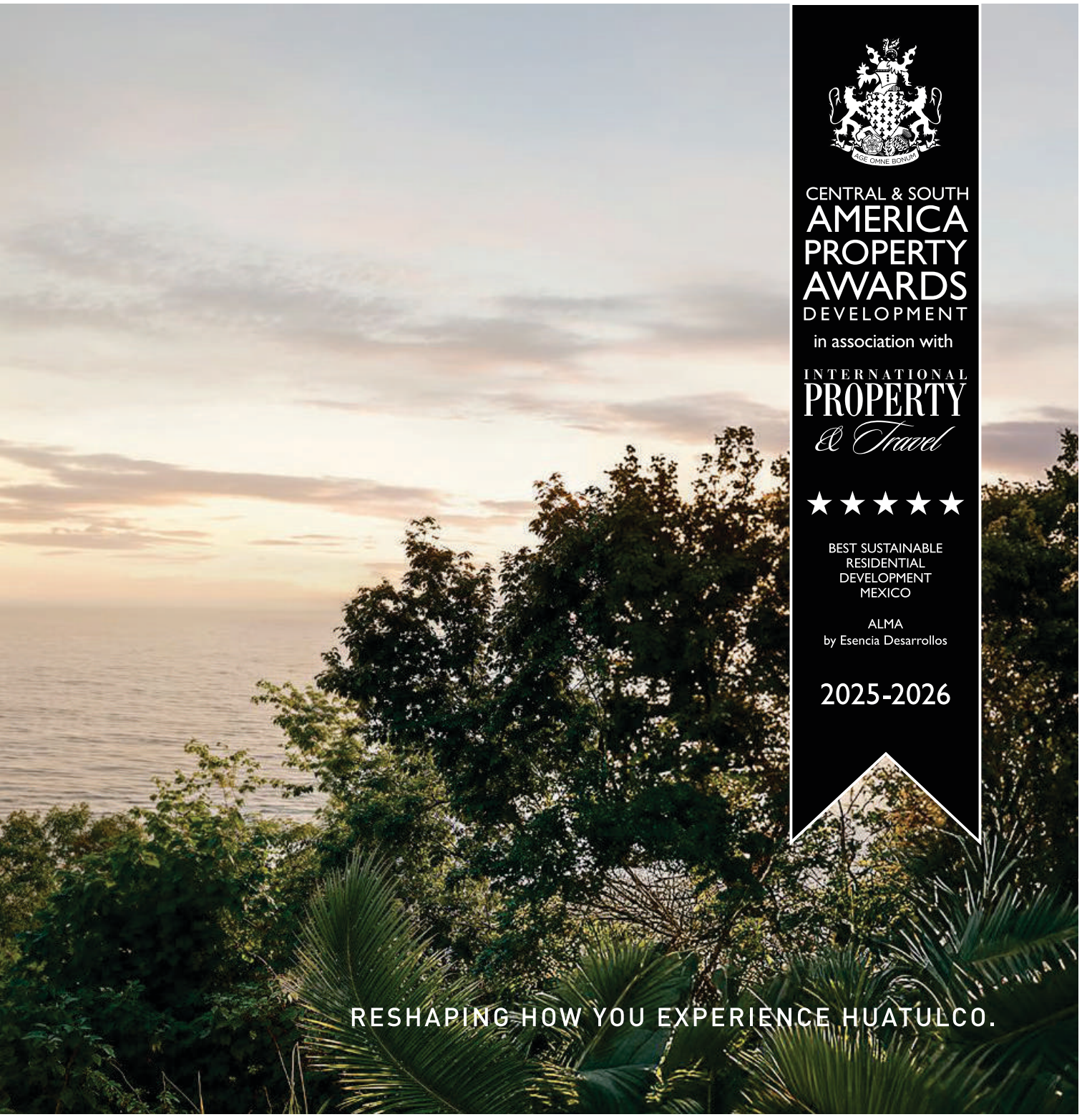

Set amongst the lush landscape of Huatulco, ALMA embraces visual integration, low height, low density, sustainable design, and an elevated living experience.

With perfectly framed ocean views, ALMA calls to those in search of a balance of nature and architecture.

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On the Page:
Books That Shape Our View of Mexico

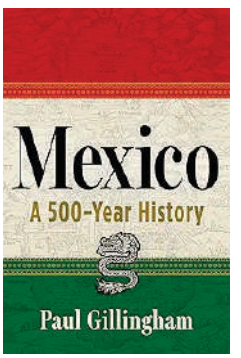
By Carole Reedy

Living in Mexico for 30 years hasn't only settled my understanding of the country; rather, it has expanded it. New research and reading continually reshape my previous viewpoints. Novels and nonfiction narratives are my guide, although numerous personal encounters have enhanced my knowledge.

An education is never complete.

Here are some contemporary histories and classic texts to guide your understanding of this great land.

***Mexico* by Paul Gillingham**



This new tome surprises with a topsy-turvy view of our nation. Sometimes it's hard to believe that now, 500 years later, Mexico survived the literary earthquake we call our history.

Milenio, the popular and prestigious Mexican daily newspaper, calls *Mexico* "unique and, from now on, indispensable for anyone who wants to explore Mexican history with sincerity."

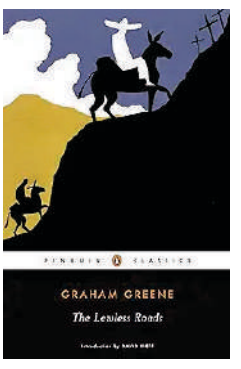
It is so easy to get things wrong when writing or relating stories orally. Peter Frankopan from The Telegraph tells us that this "fine account does well to remind that the best history is about fact, not fiction."

Gillingham begins with the misconceptions of the role of the Spaniards in the early 1500s: their original goals and intentions and their relationships with various communities across the country. Over the next 700 pages, *Mexico* recounts great human displacements and epic battles. Most important, Gillingham constantly stresses the global economic forces that shaped each period of the country's history.

Álvaro Enrigue, respected author of the brilliant novel *You Dreamed of Empires*, in his New York Times review says: "Gillingham's 700-page book is imposing, yet it is an absorbing read, from the amusing and skeptical cadence of the first line that describes the embellished estimates made by the Spanish of the indigenous armies they encountered."

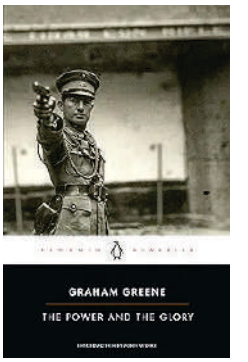
Buy a copy and slowly read the unimaginable 500-year history of Mexico. As has been suggested in my other book column recommendations, also pick up a copy of *You Dreamed of Empires* as an accompaniment.

***The Lawless Roads* and *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene**



Few people are familiar with the Cristeros War (1926-1929). Mexican history often stresses the importance and dominance of the Catholic Church, brought to Mexico from Spain in the 1500s.

The Cristeros War was a reaction to the Calles laws, introduced by the then-president (from 1924 to 1928) Plutarco Elías Calles, which reduced the power of the church. The short rebellion in rural Mexico was eventually settled with the help of Dwight Morrow, ambassador to Mexico from the US.



You might recall that President Benito Juárez in the previous century severely limited the power and extreme wealth of the Catholic church.

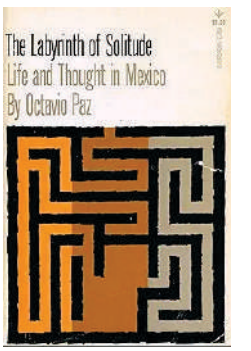
British citizen Graham Greene thought of himself as a Catholic Agnostic. These two controversial novels describe different aspects of this short but significant time in the complicated history of Greene's travels to Mexico to see what the effects of the conflict on Catholicism there had been.

*The Lawless Road*s is an account of Greene's Mexican journey that takes him from the northern border towns to San Luis Potosí and Mexico City. From there he goes to the nearby rural state of Puebla and then to Chiapas. But his primary interest was in Tabasco, home of the atheist activist and cacique of the state, Tomás Garrido Canabal.

In 2005, *The Power and the Glory* was chosen by *TIME magazine* as one of the 100 best English-language novels since 1923. John Updike calls *The Power and the Glory*, "Graham Greene's masterpiece…The energy and grandeur of his finest novel derive from the will toward compassion, an ideal communism even more Christian than Communist."

For Graham Greene fans, this novel of southern Mexico it is often cited as their favorite by the author.

***The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz**

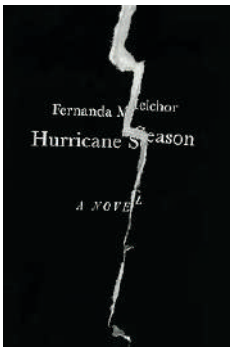


Octavio Paz is virtually a household name in Mexico, admired and respected by people from all walks of life. Through his remarkable literary skill, Paz brings Mexico's complex and fascinating history to life, offering richly crafted narratives that illuminate the essence of Mexican identity.

In 1998 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his "impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity."

His most famous work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, is an indispensable and deeply illuminating read for anyone who lives in Mexico, visits, or seeks to truly understand the country. With a gentle yet compelling force, Paz draws readers into the deepest chord of the Mexican people, revealing the inner workings of their collective. Paz observes that solitude is responsible for the Mexican's perspective on death, *fiesta*, and identity. Published first in 1950, the book explores difficulties of integration and cultural belonging.

***Hurricane Season* by Fernanda Melchor**

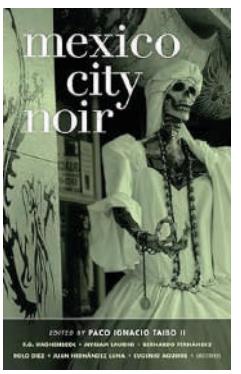


Regular readers of *The Eye* may notice that this title pops up from time to time in my recommendations. The novel touches on many different aspects of Mexican life, especially the spiritual.

The appearance of a dead witch is the impetus for a story that is full of rumors, mythology, suspicions, and traditions of violence. It is Melchor's style, however, that brings to life the mysterious workings of the people who live in the *pueblo.*

The Guardian review says it well. "A brutal portrait of small-town claustrophobia, in which machismo is a prison and corruption isn't just institutional but domestic, with families broken by incest and violence. Melchor's long, snaking sentences make the book almost literally unputdownable, shifting our grasp of key events by continually creeping up on them from new angles. A formidable debut."

***Mexico City Noir*, edited by Paco Ignacio Taibo II**



I recently ran across this anthology of short stories. These dark, acidic short stories reflect some unique-to-Mexico situations. Take note of the title of the book! This is a dark, somber series about police corruption, drug trafficking, the homeless, and the ultra-rich, to name just a few of the unforgettable characters.

All of the stories, told in different narrative styles, have one thing in common: they speak to, and about, a city the authors love.

The brilliant foreword by the much-loved editor of these stories, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, establishes the basis for these stories with a diverse cast of characters. Perhaps more important is the emphasis on the neighborhoods that drive the narrative.

Each chapter has a subtitle of a *colonia* (neighborhood): *Roma, Condesa, Centro Histórico, Colonia de Valle, Doctores.* Don't look for a list of cafes or clubs or a discussion about gentrification in these stories; a more brutal agenda is at stake here.

Despite the barbarous themes, editor Taibo relates that while "*Mexico City Noir* may not be sponsored by the city's department of tourism; but if anyone, from anywhere on earth, were to ask whether the writers recommend visiting Mexico City, the response would be both firm and passionate: 'Yes, of course.' Because this is the best city on the planet, in spite of itself."

Taibo also observes that the writers "take refuge in humor, a very dark humor, acidic, which allows us enough distance to laugh at Lucifer."

***Poems and Sonnets* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**

An article about Mexico, especially in an issue emphasizing the spiritual, cannot be written without a discussion about the monumental figure in our country, Sor Juana, philosopher, writer, and poet. We have written about her often over the past 15 years.

Considered the first feminist in the Americas as well as one of the most important writers in the Spanish language, in the 17th century she was defending the rights of women against the patriarchal norms of the time.

If you are a first-time reader of this significant figure in history, I would start with the poems and sonnets, especially the poem *Hombres Necios* that argues that men's taste and censorship are inconsistent and that they accuse women of what they themselves cause. It exposes the inequality and injustice that women suffer through sexism and discrimination against women.

Then, continue on to the 975-line monumental poem *Primero Sueño* (First Dream), an extensive philosophical allegory about the search for knowledge.

Learn from Sor Juana's most famous words: "I don't study to know more, but to ignore less."

Well said, sister!

Para los Animales
For the Animals

By Sudhir Amembal

San Miguel de Allende is often celebrated as one of the most beautiful small cities in the world. Its cobblestone streets, well-preserved Spanish colonial architecture, and arts scene draw admiration from residents and visitors alike. Just as remarkable is its strong sense of community, reflected in the dedication of both locals and expatriates who support a wide range of not-for-profit organizations.

Yet, behind this beauty lies a sobering reality. The city faces a persistent crisis of stray and abandoned animals, especially dogs. Every day, countless dogs struggle to survive on the streets, exposed to traffic, harsh weather during summer rains and winter nights; and, too often, human indifference. They roam hungry, thirsty, sick, and frightened — their eyes silently pleading for compassion and care. While dogs are the most visible victims, the number of homeless cats continues to grow, though they remain largely unseen.

Fortunately, San Miguel is also home to several animal welfare organizations working tirelessly to change this narrative. These groups rescue, rehabilitate, foster, and rehome abandoned animals, while also conducting sterilization programs that reduce suffering at its source. Their mission balances urgent aid with long-term prevention, offering both rescue and hope.

My own journey in animal welfare began in 1974. After years of involvement in India and the U.S., my wife and I moved to San Miguel in 2000, where I co-founded a local animal welfare organization. After a period away, upon returning, I reconnected with the animal welfare community and quickly recognized the potential for even greater impact through unity and collaboration. That realization led to the creation of *Para Los Animales* in July of last year.

Para Los Animales is a collaborative platform that amplifies the voices and work of seven dedicated partners: Dogs Without Borders Foundation, Esperanza Equina, Fundación México con el Corazón Nutriendo Almas, Lucky Dogs Club House, Rosey's Wish, The Balam Foundation, and Yo Amo Animalitos SMA. Each operates independently, yet together they have performed thousands of sterilizations and have rescued and rehomed more than 2,200 animals. Their results are a testament to their compassion and persistence. While six partners focus primarily on dogs and cats, Esperanza Equina provides sanctuary and care for horses in need.

Our mission at *Para Los Animales* is simple: to support, promote, and fund our partners. We connect them through a private group chat where leaders exchange ideas, coordinate efforts, and share resources. We also host regular meetings that encourage collaboration and strengthen our shared mission. To promote their work, our newsletters highlight each organization through in-depth articles, interviews, and a community directory linking readers directly to our partners' websites. The widely distributed newsletters strive to create lasting positive change in the lives of animals throughout our community.

We also provide financial assistance to our partners, both through direct funding and by mobilizing community support via our newsletters and website. The feedback we receive from our partners speaks volumes about our impact:
“Thank you for bringing unity and hope to our community.”
“Grateful to be part of a group with a common goal—for the animals.”
“Since PLA came into my life, I've enjoyed advocacy work a hundred times more.”

Looking ahead, we will step up our activities to continue to support, promote, and fund our partners as they continually strive to alleviate—and where possible, eliminate—the pain, misery and suffering of the city's most vulnerable animals: dogs, cats and horses.

You can lend your support by visiting:
www.paralosanimales.org, where you will find direct links to each of our partner organizations. We urge you to dig deep into your pockets to provide them with the financial resources they need; for together, we can make San Miguel de Allende not only beautiful in sight, but also in spirit — for every living being who calls it home.

Sudhir Amembal may be contacted at
sudhir@amembalandassociates.com

Jewish Pilgrimage Festivals in Mexico

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

Among the many pilgrimages that occur in Mexico, probably the ones with the oldest historical foundations are some Jewish observances. Known in Hebrew as the Shalosh Regalim, the "three pilgrimage festivals," the observance of these ancient practices was carried here by Jews who accompanied the Spanish conquistadors. They were practiced in secret, since the Spanish Inquisition imposed the death penalty on those who carried out Jewish observances.

Historically, the three Jewish pilgrimages occurred in the land of Israel during times when Temples existed in Jerusalem: Solomon's Temple, between the 10th and 6th centuries BCE, and the Second Temple, between 538 BCE and 70 CE.

Three times each year, marking the beginning of the spring barley harvest, the beginning of the summer wheat harvest, and the end of the annual fall harvests, Jewish law, as written in the Torah (Jewish scriptures), commanded that members of the twelve tribes of Israel travel from their home territories, largely by foot, up to the Temple in Jerusalem carrying specific offerings.

The three pilgrimages were known by names that are still used around the world, including in Mexico today. The spring harvest pilgrimage was also known as Passover (Pesaj); the beginning of the summer pilgrimage, Shavuot; and the fall pilgrimage, Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths (Cabañuelas).

In addition to offerings of the choicest of the harvest, each of the pilgrimages required sacrifices of animals brought by the pilgrims to the priests at the Temple. The Passover sacrifice was a one-year-old unblemished male lamb. The lamb was a reminder of the sacrifice of a lamb and shared meal that took place about 3,300 years ago on the night before the Israelite slaves were freed in Egypt and began their long journey toward the Promised Land.

Shavuot involved offerings of first fruits and loaves of bread baked from the choicest early wheat, along with a diverse selection of domesticated animals. Once again, the animals were chosen from the best of the herds and flocks and examined to ensure the absence of any blemish. These sacrifices reenacted the ceremonial offerings that, according to the Torah, took place at the foot of Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given to the Israelites.

The most noteworthy animal sacrifice for Sukkot entailed seventy bulls offered over the seven days of the pilgrimage festival. Temple rites for Sukkot also involved a far less bloody ceremony: the water ceremony. Pilgrims lined the path the priests followed from the Temple down to a pool of water at the bottom of the Temple Mount.

As the priests descended to fill their ceremonial bowls and climbed back up to the Temple, the pilgrims sang and danced in joy. They continued singing and dancing as the priests poured the water, together with wine, over the Temple altar, assuring all that there would be sufficient rain to produce abundant crops in the following year.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem came to an end in 70 CE when the Roman army besieged the Temple Mount, almost completely destroyed the Temple, leaving only the Western Wall standing, killed a large portion of the Jewish population in the Holy Land, and sent thousands more into exile. With the destruction of the Temple and the end of priestly sacrifice, it fell to the rabbis to decide how Judaism could continue without pilgrimages to the Temple Mount or flesh-and-blood offerings. The discussions and debates that followed were recorded for posterity. Although physical pilgrimage ceased, the rabbis continued to refer to the festivals as the Shalosh Regalim, and each holiday remained a hag, the Hebrew word for pilgrimage, linguistically related to the Arabic hajj.

Since the end of the Inquisition in Mexico in 1820 and Mexico's independence from Spain shortly thereafter, the Shalosh Regalim have been openly practiced by observant (and not so observant) Jews. Passover seders, often large family and community gatherings, retell the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. On the seder table, along with other symbolic foods, is a shank bone, a reminder of the original sacrificial lamb. On Shavuot, meals traditionally include grains and fruits reminiscent of those once harvested and brought to the Temple. On Sukkot, ceremonies involve four species of ancient plants. A bundle of willow, palm, and myrtle, called the lulav, when shaken produces a sound likened to falling rain. Although the water ceremony exists only in memory, Jews still sing and dance as they shake the lulav and pray for a year of sufficient rain to foster the coming crops.

As the hag of Passover ends, those gathered for seders often call out in Spanish, "Este año estamos aquí; el próximo año, en Jerusalén." ("This year we are here; next year, in Jerusalem.")

2026 Festival Dates
Passover begins on the evening of Wednesday, April 1, 2026, and concludes Thursday, April 9, 2026.

Shavuot begins on the evening of Thursday, May 21, 2026, and concludes Saturday, May 23, 2026.

Sukkot begins on the evening of Friday, September 25, 2026, and concludes Friday, October 2, 2026.

Drs. Marcia and Jan Chaiken have been married for 62 years and have published many justice system research reports together.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The History of Jazz in San Miguel

By Salomon Maawad

It all began in August 1979, with an acoustic guitar and an alto sax, on a small, unassuming stage at Mama Mia Restaurant. San Miguel was a small, sleepy town at the time—blessedly quiet, with no buses and very little traffic. Its music scene, however, was about to explode into life.

The Luna family, owners of Mama Mia, were inspired by that first duet and offered me a three-month contract to play every weekend, if I could put together a jazz quartet.

Most of the musicians I knew lived in Mexico City, which at the time was a five- or six-hour commute. Nonetheless, that same year the quartet was formed, and soon we were playing at Mama Mia five days a week. And that is how the Downbeats began their long and amazing career.

The Downbeats included the legendary Marlow Wolf on piano, Chava Martinez on bass, Jorge Leal on drums, and me on saxophones. Over the years, almost one hundred musicians have participated in the band, and many decided to remain in San Miguel, enriching the culture immeasurably. Some became cornerstones of the local music scene—super-talented musicians such as Gil Gutiérrez, Bob Kaplan, José Luis Hopalong, Ken Basman, Toño Lozoya, and Gabriel Hernández. Others went on to different cities where they achieved international fame, including Lila Downs, Magos Herrera, and Janusz Bakum (musical director for Ricky Martin). Still others have passed on and are sorely missed.

In 1994, along with Elena Shoemaker, I created the San Miguel International Jazz Festival. I served as musical director, organizer, and part-time chauffeur. I also accompanied all of the visiting singers and solo artists, including Nora York, Etta Jones, Cynthia Hilts, Denny Berthiaume, Patrice Fisher, Allen Hermann, Bob Montgomery, Tino Contreras, Bob Ackerman, Betty Farmer, Butch Miles, Randy Bernsen, Claire Daly, Mary Ann McSweeney, Henry Cook, Ron Moewes, Dennis Perrier, Eddie Daniels, Tom Aalfs, Brenda Boykin, Tomás Ramírez, John Ronstadt, David “Fathead” Newman, and many more.

The first five years of the festival were incredible—and not just the concerts. After their gigs were over, musicians would head to local bars for endless jam sessions, sometimes going until four in the morning.

As for the Downbeats, the show goes on, with new musicians, new projects, and my original compositions continuing to bring new life and new sounds to the San Miguel music scene. Over the years, I have developed as a composer, and hearing these pieces played live remains a rare treat—one that any jazz lover will savor.

ENCUENTRO NACIONAL DE JAZZ

My latest project is the XXII Encuentro Nacional de Jazz. There will be three concerts, on **March 5, 6, and 7**. Each concert will be completely different, so you may want to attend all three.

On March 5, there will be a tribute to Brazilian jazz, featuring the Samba Sabrosona Quartet, performing music by Tom Jobim, a key figure in the world of bossa nova. He will perform *The Girl from Ipanema*, *Corcovado*, *Desafinado*, and more.

March 6 will feature my own Salomon Maawad Jazz Quartet. Over a musical career spanning almost five decades, I have been strongly influenced by the legends of jazz, drawing melodies, harmonies, and rhythms from across the musical map. By incorporating the exotic rhythms of avant-garde jazz, I have developed a style that is highly original, musically complex, and pleasing to the ear.

On March 7, internationally acclaimed vocalist Ginger Leigh—whose career spans pop, rock, blues, and jazz—will bring her deep, soulful, power-packed voice (Etta James meets Bette Midler) to San Miguel. Based in Austin, Texas, Ginger leads two bands: a nine-piece jazz variety ensemble (*Straight Up with a Ginger Twist*) and the Ginger Leigh Band, a six-piece pop-rock ensemble.

Ginger has toured the world for decades, earning acclaim for her distinctive sound and theatrical stage presence. In addition to being a great singer, she puts on one heck of a show. Her performance will celebrate the immortal Billie Holiday and feature some of her most unforgettable songs. With her blues-infused vocal style, weaving together Texas roots, blues heritage, pop sensibility, and jazz mastery, Ginger takes those timeless classics and makes them her own.

Known for her energetic and occasionally theatrical stage antics, Ginger's performances are tinged with humor and deep emotion—highly entertaining by any measure. This will be her second visit to San Miguel, and it is not to be missed.

All performances will take place at the Angela Peralta Theatre, beginning at 6:00 pm. **Tickets are 600 pesos (luneta) and 300 pesos (general admission).** Please support these projects. Your attendance will help ensure the continued presence of great music in our wonderful little city.

Who We Are

By Jane Bauer

Thank you for picking up *The Eye*. We're delighted to be here. This is our third edition in San Miguel de Allende, but we are not new to Mexico. *The Eye* began 15 years ago on the coast of Oaxaca, in Huatulco, as a small community magazine created to offer cultural context, thoughtful storytelling, and local insight for English speakers — travelers, residents, and those finding their way in Mexico.

What started as a modest print project has grown organically over the years. Along the way, *The Eye* has become a space for independent writers, photographers, artists, and curious minds who are drawn to Mexico's history, foodways, landscapes, and layered identities. Our pages are shaped by people who like to look a little closer, ask better questions, and share stories that don't always fit neatly into travel brochures or headlines.

Bringing *The Eye* to San Miguel feels like a natural evolution. This is a city with a deep creative pulse, a strong sense of community, and a long tradition of welcoming writers and artists from many places. We're excited to become part of that conversation. We welcome pitches and contributions from independent writers and creatives, and we're especially interested in stories that explore history, culture, place, and everyday life. We also aim to support the rhythm of the community by helping promote events, exhibitions, performances, and initiatives that shape life here.

Just as importantly, *The Eye* is designed to be accessible—for readers and for advertisers. We strive to offer small and local businesses an affordable way to connect with new audiences, without losing the editorial integrity that keeps a magazine meaningful. We're glad you're here, and we look forward to discovering San Miguel together.

www.TheEyeMex.com

Jazz & Blues Concert Series Winter–Spring 2026 San Miguel de Allende

The Festival Internacional de Jazz y Blues de San Miguel de Allende continues its year-round concert programming with a rich Winter–Spring 2026 series, bringing international and Mexican jazz and blues artists to some of San Miguel's most intimate and beloved venues.

In addition to supporting live music in the community, these concerts help fund and sustain the San Miguel Jazz organization, whose mission includes cultural programming, music education, and international artistic exchange.

Concerts are held primarily at Casa Cent'anni and Teatro Ángela Peralta, offering audiences an up-close listening experience that has become a hallmark of the festival's programming.

February 2026

February 7 – An Evening with Chet Baker, Jesús Espinosa – Casa Cent'anni

February 13 – Soul Divas Tribute, Karely Esparza & Jenny Beaujean – Teatro Ángela Peralta

February 14 – Valentine's Jazz Day, Jenny Beaujean
Casa Cent'anni

February 27 – Women in Jazz, Montserrat Borrego
Casa Cent'anni

Tickets: www.sanmigueljazz.com.mx

Long Journey Home

a personal essay by Bonnie Lee Black, January 2026

"What does 'died' mean?," I asked my mother when I was four and my best friend Ruthie, who was five, had just died of leukemia. I'd never known anyone who'd died.

My spirited young mother, who was not in any way spiritual or religious -- her whole philosophy of life had been, "When you're alive, you live; when you die, you're dead" -- made up a glowing story for me:
"Ruthie has gone to a better place," she said convincingly. "She's gone to live with God in his home in Heaven, where there is no sickness, no pain, and no tears. God saw that Ruthie – *such a good girl!* – had been very sick and in pain, so he decided she'd be happier with him. She'll never be sick again."

My first thought was, "Lucky Ruthie!" My second was, "How is it that my Mom suddenly believes in God?" Always before, the word God had only been an angry epithet in our house. But since that day – since the day my mother made up that story to console me – I've never feared death. Something about it felt profoundly true, even to the four-year-old me: This life on earth is not all there is.

Before she became ill, Ruthie had told me a little bit about God. Being a year ahead of me, she had started Catholic school, so every afternoon after school she painstakingly shared with me what she'd learned that day from the nuns.

"Look up there," Ruthie instructed me, pointing to the sky, as we sat on her front porch side by side. "See that big cloud? God is behind that cloud, looking down at us. He's like a loving father watching over us."

This was news to me, and I found it thrilling. In my Protestant family, which never attended church and where my father was always enraged and often belligerently drunk, the thought of a loving, caring, fatherly God up there somewhere was irresistible. I credit my friend Ruthie for putting me on my spiritual path.

It's been a long and rocky road, I confess. I'm eighty now; and when I look back on my life, I can clearly see the main turning points on this journey that have led me to where I am today, spiritually speaking.

In my adolescence, when World War III was raging at home in the runup to my parents' overdue divorce, and I felt desperate for some life guidance, I went to a gospel church in a neighboring New Jersey town with my friend Lindy and her family. Even after Lindy and her family moved away, I continued attending that church, faithfully and hungrily – the Sunday school classes, the morning worship services, the evening youth group meetings, the evening services. I went for the music – Bach in the morning and rousing hymns at night – for the Bible lessons, for the warmth of the people, for the messages of love and peace. I went to escape the strife at home and find a haven with the promise of Heaven.

In this small, white, clapboard church, God seemed real to me. Not cold and remote like the farthest star, but as close and vital as one's own heartbeat. This God was an all-knowing, all-loving, all-forgiving, ever-present *friend*, who was worshipped, not with repetitive phrases read from a book, but with simple, spontaneous language spoken from the heart.

So I began a daily habit of waking early to read the Bible and pray before getting ready for school. I spoke to God as if He were a caring parent, asking for guidance, help with my homework, strength for the day, more faith. I applied myself to my schoolwork and became an honor student. I strove to grow wings and rise above the battlefield at home.

The fatal flaw in this rosy self-portrait was my blinkered naivete, which I've regretted ever since. When I was nineteen, a much-older, professional man, who was intent on marrying a blond-haired, blue-eyed, naive virgin, and who professed to me the same religious beliefs as mine, charmed me into marrying him. I learned too late that I'd only been a means to an end for him: He wanted something he could not then buy because surrogacy was not yet readily available – a child of his own, a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed child "for his mother to raise," he later told me.

After our divorce and I was given custody of our baby daughter, he took her on a visitation and, along with his aging parents, disappeared.

I saw a lawyer in the office building where I worked, and he counseled me on what to do. At one point he leaned over his desk, cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth, and said, "From now on you've got to live like a *f*ckin' nun.* He's probably having you followed." This man had known my ex-husband, but he didn't know me. He didn't know I already lived like a nun.

The FBI agent who was assigned my case told me coldly one day when I visited his office and begged him for news, "You are just a number in our files."

An elder of my church took me aside one Sunday evening to inform me I could never marry again because our church didn't recognize divorce. If I did remarry, I'd be "living in sin," he said. (I immediately thought: *I don't need to bother to get married again to live in sin.*) I never returned to that church.

People who knew me and knew my story treated me pityingly, and I hated them for it. Good people who didn't know me but learned of my story regarded me with suspicion – because, after all, in their world, and according to their beliefs, bad things only happen to bad people.

Every doctor I visited about my severe stomach pain and weight loss tried to prescribe tranquilizers or antidepressants for me, but I refused them all. I chose to remain clear-headed and not drugged into docility. I chose to harness my pain and fury.

And so began my many years of boxing with God. I moved to New York for its promised anonymity, at the same time the Broadway musical, "Your Arm's Too Short to Box with God," had opened. *Ha!* I thought, seething, *MY arm's NOT too short to box with God!* My anger toward my God was incendiary. My prayers were vitriolic. *HOW COULD YOU?*, I shouted between clenched teeth, *WHY DID YOU LET THIS HAPPEN TO ME? I WAS A GOOD GIRL! WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS ANGUISH? WHERE IS MY BABY?! BRING BACK MY BABY!!!*

I often considered suicide because the pain of not knowing where and how my daughter was, day after day, month after month, year after year, was unbearable. But I knew that if and when she was ever found, she would need me. I had to go on living – eating, sleeping, working. I had to get through this. My marching orders to myself were, "You must be strong, you must go on!" And through it all I never stopped railing at God – *Why?! Why?! Why?!* This phase lasted for many years.

In New York I attended Columbia University on full scholarships; I enlarged my mind. In New York I met people of all colors, shapes, sizes, stories, ethnicities, abilities, and religions and had many Jewish friends; they enlarged my heart.

In New York I wrote a book in which I shared my personal story for the first time, and a prominent New York publisher published it. That book found my daughter for me and helped thousands of others who'd experienced similar heartbreak and loss due to parental child abduction.

In New York I learned a life-altering lesson: The God whom I'd been railing at for so many years had used me for good. This seeming tragedy had turned to triumph.

In my fifties I joined the Peace Corps and served for two years as a health and nutrition volunteer working with mothers and children in Gabon, Central Africa. After my Peace Corps service, I went up to Mali, West Africa, and created an economic development project working with Malian women and young girls.

Mali is a predominantly Muslim country, and I came to deeply admire the good, kind, generous, God-loving Muslim people I got to know in the three years I lived there. As part of my morning devotions I read N. J. Dawood's English translation of the Koran, and I was profoundly moved by the beauty of it.

Ten years ago I retired to the beautiful old small city of San Miguel de Allende in the central mountains of Mexico, and this is where I plan to stay. San Miguel is called *el corazon de Mexico* – the heart of Mexico. Mexico in its entirety to me has enormous heart, so Mexico has become my heart's home.

Mexico is a predominantly Catholic country, and I highly respect the Mexican people's adherence to their religious traditions. But I could no more become a Mexican Catholic than I could have become a Malian Muslim or a Jewish New Yorker. So I ask myself, *What am I now?*

It seems as if in all my years of grappling with God and stumbling upward along my spiritual mountainous path I've come up with my own religion, which is not a religion at all. "Religion" to me denotes manmade dogma, and mine eschews such dogma. I no longer attend church. I cannot honestly repeat the Apostle's Creed. I do not believe, as most manmade religions do, that women are meant to be subordinate. I do not believe, as most white men do, that white men are superior. I strongly believe all of us are equally valuable and all of us have important roles to play in this life on earth.

But I've never stopped praying – not to a big old white guy in the sky tucked, like the Wizard of Oz, behind a cloud, nor to a young Middle Eastern man being tortured to death on a roughly hewn wooden cross, but to what I like to think of as the Great Spirit, the term indigenous Americans use. A benevolent power available to all, beyond description, beyond definition.
I believe in this God because I must. Where else could I possibly put my trust? Men? Money? Political or religious leaders? No. The God I believe in has brought me through hell on earth and taught me so much: Everyone has heartache. Everyone suffers pain and loss. This life is a test, the Koran says; we must just do our best.

I still pray every day. I pray for the things I lack: patience, tolerance, love, understanding, empathy, compassion, strength, fortitude, grace, wisdom, and more. And every day I get just enough of these to last for that day. I give thanks for my many blessings, especially for bringing me to Mexico, where my ashes will be buried on a mountaintop.

I have no fear of death; in fact, I look forward to the next realm, the last stop on this spiritual journey, where my soul will finally be at home. Maybe -- who knows? -- I'll even be reunited with Ruthie.

An honors graduate of Columbia University in New York, Bonnie Lee Black is the author of six books, including the memoir SOMEWHERE CHILD about her daughter's abduction by her father (Viking Press, 1981). Bonnie's essays have appeared in numerous literary journals, and for the past ten years she has been writing a weekly blog from her adopted home, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. For more information, please visit: www.bonnieleeblack.com

5 Kinds of Tacos—and When to Eat Them

By Alicia Flores

Mexico's national dish is so versatile it can be eaten at any time of the day, in any part of the country. But not all tacos are alike, and each type comes with its own history, flavor, and best moment to enjoy. Here are five essential styles of tacos and when to savor them.

1. Tacos de Guisado

These "stew tacos" are filled with home-style dishes like tinga de pollo (shredded chicken in chipotle sauce), rajas con crema (poblano peppers in cream), or chicharrón in salsa verde. Because they're hearty and comforting, tacos de guisado are a favorite midday meal, especially around lunchtime when you want something filling.

2. Tacos de Canasta

Also called "basket tacos," these are pre-made, wrapped in cloth, and steamed in a basket to keep warm. Typically filled with beans, potatoes, or adobo-style meats, tacos de canasta are cheap, portable, and sold by vendors on bicycles or street corners. They're a classic choice for breakfast or a quick snack on the go—perfect for commuters rushing to work or students between classes.

3. Fish Tacos

Born in Baja California and now beloved across Mexico, fish tacos are typically made with battered, fried fish topped with shredded cabbage, salsa, and a drizzle of creamy sauce. These light yet flavorful tacos shine at lunchtime, especially by the beach with a cold beer. They embody Mexico's coastal bounty and are a must for seafood lovers.

4. Tacos al Pastor

Perhaps the most famous taco of all, al pastor traces its roots to Lebanese immigrants who introduced the vertical spit-roasted method to Mexico. Marinated pork is shaved from the trompo, tucked into a tortilla, and topped with onion, cilantro, and pineapple. These tacos are best enjoyed late at night, when taco stands fire up after dark and the streets fill with hungry crowds looking for a midnight bite.

5. Barbacoa Tacos

Traditionally cooked underground with maguey leaves, barbacoa is slow-roasted lamb or beef that becomes tender, smoky, and juicy. Served on weekends, barbacoa tacos are a perfect Sunday breakfast, often paired with a warm consommé made from the drippings of the meat. It's the ultimate comfort food for family gatherings or to recover after a late Saturday night.

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Biblioteca Pública: We Build Community

By Ariadna Salazar

La Biblioteca Pública de San Miguel de Allende offers a wide variety of cultural and educational activities accessible to everyone. It is a cultural hub where you can spend a pleasant time reading, enjoy a conversation with someone new, or simply wander through its spaces and discover all it has to offer.

Since 1958, this nonprofit association has been located at 25 Insurgentes Street. As you explore the building, you will be impressed by its hidden murals and a spacious central courtyard surrounded by arches dating back to the 1700s.
This beautiful building houses four reading rooms with more than 50,000 books in Spanish and English. The collections include fiction, nonfiction, biography, art, history, travel, and much more.

La Biblioteca also includes the Teatro Santa Ana, with seating for 91 people, and the spectacular Sala Quetzal. Month after month, visitors can enjoy a high-quality program featuring theater, film, dance, talks, lectures, and book presentations.

Children and young people are an essential part of this community. They participate in artistic, creative, and reading activities where they are free to express themselves. In the Programming Club, for example, they learn to solve problems using the technological tools available to them.

Adults are also an important part of La Biblioteca's learning community, participating in music and art classes, as well as activities such as chess and yoga. Many are also dedicated volunteers and active promoters of culture in San Miguel.

Additionally, for students from San Miguel who require financial support, La Biblioteca works to ensure that those enrolled in high school and university are able to complete their studies through its scholarship program.

As a nonprofit organization, La Biblioteca carries out several fundraising activities. The main and best known are the House & Garden Tour and the Bookstore.

The House & Garden Tour offers an exclusive guided walking tour through some of San Miguel's most beautiful homes and gardens. It takes place every Friday at noon, and tickets can be purchased at the Bookstore.

The Bookstore offers new titles in Spanish and English, as well as used books, helping to generate funds to acquire new books for the reading rooms.

La Biblioteca has been dedicated to building a reading community in San Miguel for more than 70 years. It was founded in 1954 by Canadian Helen Wale, along with other volunteers, with the goal of helping young members of the community learn to read and study languages.

La Biblioteca is your home—and the home of a diverse local and global community that visits daily. Some of the lucky ones become full-time volunteers or donors.

Apply for your membership to borrow books, take classes, and much more. Learn more at **www.labibliotecapublica.org**.

How Food Inspired Colonialism in the 15th Century

By Raveen Singh

It's amazing to think that the spices sitting quietly in our kitchens today were once rare treasures. Coriander, oregano, or even sea salt — things we take for granted — were, centuries ago, expensive luxuries. They were used as currency, to pay taxes, and even as dowries. They triggered piracy, battles, wars, and ultimately centuries of European colonialism and conquest — along with slavery, exploitation, and the destruction of entire societies.

Here's how the craving for flavor reshaped the world.

Before the Rise of the Ottoman Empire

Before the 13th century, the world was broadly divided into East and West. The Far East — today's India, Southeast Asia, and China — was separated from Europe by the Middle East. When the Roman Empire collapsed around 500 CE, Europe fragmented into feudal states, a period often called the Dark Ages.

Yet Rome had left behind one lasting habit: a taste for luxuries from the East. Silk, tea, and, above all, spices continued to flow westward along the Silk Road. Overland routes passed through Persia, Iraq, and Turkey before reaching Mediterranean traders. Arab merchants controlled the trade, selling Chinese silk, Indian spices, precious metals, and even horses at enormous markups.

Spices were so valuable they were treated like money. A pound of saffron could cost as much as a horse. In 1393, nutmeg was valued at seven fat oxen. Peppercorns were used to pay taxes and tolls; towns kept their accounts in pepper. Brides received pepper in their dowries. Charlemagne even ordered farmers to grow herbs like fennel, sage, thyme, and coriander.

The Silk Road carried more than goods — it spread religions, art, technology, and ideas. By the 13th century, explorers like Marco Polo described the spice-rich lands of Java, India's Malabar Coast, and the South China Sea, fueling Europe's hunger for direct access.

The Ottoman Roadblock

When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, everything changed. The empire imposed heavy tariffs on goods passing through its lands. Maritime choke points like the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez were also under Ottoman control. For Christian Europe, spices became harder and costlier to obtain. The solution?

Find another route.

Portugal's Push Around Africa

Portugal led the way. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, proving the Atlantic and Indian Oceans were connected. Vasco da Gama reached India a decade later, opening the door to a direct maritime spice route.

The Portuguese established forts and outposts along Africa and into Asia, powered by advances in navigation and shipbuilding. By the mid-1500s, Lisbon had become a hub for Asian spices, its empire stretching all the way to Nagasaki.

Spain's New World Accident

Spain, emerging from the Reconquista in 1492, turned to exploration as well. That same year, Christopher Columbus — sailing west in search of Asia — stumbled instead on the Americas. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas divided the world between Spain and Portugal, with Spain claiming the western lands and Portugal much of the east.

Soon after, Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztecs, seizing gold and introducing Europe to new flavors like vanilla. Spanish conquests spread rapidly across the Americas, shifting focus from trade to colonization.

A Naval Race for Flavor

By the 16th century, five powers — Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and the Netherlands — were racing to control trade routes. All relied on naval supremacy. For about 150 years, the Americas consumed much of their attention, but the spice trade remained the golden prize.

Portugal grew rich, but by the late 1500s, its overstretched empire came under attack from the Dutch, British, and French. Spain, flush with silver and gold from the New World, shifted its energy westward.

What tied them all together was the same obsession: the pursuit of flavor.

The Global Consequences

What began as a quest for pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg reshaped the globe. European empires carved up territories, enslaved millions, and wiped out entire societies in their hunger for spices, silk, tea, and gold.

Seen this way, the Age of Exploration wasn't just about adventure or discovery. It was about dinner. The next time you grind pepper onto your steak, remember: wars were fought, empires rose and fell, and lives were lost for that tiny spice. The flavors we sprinkle casually today once carried the weight of empires — and their shadows still shape our world.

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