

Living Like A Native In Morelia, Mexico

by: David Wix

The beautiful, rustic, old, colonial city of Morelia is situated about halfway in between Guadalajara and Mexico City and has a thriving population of around 1,000,000 people. It has everything from historical buildings and monuments to modern-day conveniences, shopping centers, restaurants, movie houses, universities and colleges, etc. What makes Morelia special, though, is its people. Their backgrounds vary from native Indian to French to Spanish and other nationalities. Their greatest asset, however, is their warmth and friendliness.

What Brought Me To Morelia

Most of my life I have studied foreign languages and other cultures. I spoke Spanish as a child and then went on to other languages. In 1996, I was attending Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington for a degree to validate my business experience. Then, one day, a visiting international programs speaker came to one of my history classes and shared her experiences about living in the country of Sri Lanka (an island country just south of India). As I was in a transition period of my life and needing a change, I checked on nearby countries where I could go on an exchange program to re-establish my Spanish language skills. My school had such a program with Centro Mexicano Internacional (CMI) in Mexico that really appealed to my sense of adventure and interest in other cultures. So, I signed up for Spring Quarter 1997 and headed off to Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico.

Morelia would be my home from March 1997 until I moved to Guadalajara to enroll in a more advanced Spanish language program in August 1997. Even now, though, if given the choice of living in Morelia versus Guadalajara, Morelia would always win out. The city is vibrant with a deep sense of culture and history dating all the way back to the 1500's. Every day, on my way to school and back, I walked by old colonial style structures, buildings, statues, monuments, fountains, and parks, each with a story about the past. For instance, an aqueduct (called El Acueducto in Spanish), built in the 1700's to carry Morelia's water supply goes right through the center of town (El Centro). I passed this marvelous structure every time I walked the avenue (Calzada Fray Antonio de San Miguel) leading up to my school. Next to the Calzada is a wide cobblestone pathway with benches to sit and relax, read, or visit with friends. On one side of Calzada Fray Antonio de San Miguel are churches and schools. The other side has shops, art galleries, and a restaurant or two. All of the buildings appear to be at least as old as the Acueducto or older and are fairly well maintained.

Paying the bills

When I first arrived in Morelia, I was depending on financial aid from my school in the US. Within a week or so of arriving at my new school I was asked to substitute for an ill teacher to teach Mexican students enrolled in CMI's ESL (English As A Second Language) program. I found out that I loved teaching the Mexican students. And, as the school was very impressed with my teaching skills, they offered me a part-time job teaching all levels of English and Linguistics classes. Also, I began to work in the school's computer laboratory as a supervisor in the evening after classes were done for the day. Together, both of my positions paid about \$3 per hour. With the surplus from my financial aid and from what I earned, I lived on approximately \$500 a month or less. Out of this amount I paid for rent, food, travel, entertainment, and obligations I had back in the US. After paying my US expenses, I usually had about \$300 or less for my day-to-day living.

My monthly expenses generally amounted to approximately: \$50 rent, \$150 food, \$25 clothing, \$25 transportation, \$50 other personal expenses (laundry, haircuts, entertainment, etc). Now, some people may think one can't do too much on \$300 or \$400 a month. It can be done if one does not have to worry about the ownership and upkeep of an automobile. Granted, things were tight at times, but I always managed to go see movies at least a couple of times a month. And, I went to a lot of free or other low cost events such as concerts put on by some of the local schools or musicians. Movies, haircuts, and restaurant meals only cost about \$2.

Finding a place to live

Before I even left the US, I checked Morelia's hotels on the Internet and asked for recommendations from officials at my new school. The first place I found that I liked and stayed at was the Mintzicuri Hotel at Vasco de Quiroga No. 227. The rooms were very clean and comfortable at a rate of about \$8 a night. Within a week of arriving in Morelia my school's housing director, Charly (a dear, sweet lady), took me to look at local apartments. I found one at the Posada de Villa located at Padre Lloreda No. 176 for about \$150 a month. Then, after a few weeks I decided to see what was available in the local paper. I found a rooming house that offered a room for about \$50 a month at Vincente Santa Maria No. 1925. When I went to check it out, I found a large, comfortable room with a bath shared by 3 other roomers. We also had access to cooking facilities as well as a mini refrigerator in each room.

Day-to-day life in Morelia

I lived a basic, simple life. I would stop at a local bakery and buy rolls, bolillos (small loaves of bread), and/or galletas (large cookies) for breakfast on my way to school. Then, I ate sandwiches and fruit at my school's snack bar for lunch. For supper, I would either eat at a local café or buy groceries and fix something in my room. My favorite item at the cafés was milanesa, a thinly sliced beefsteak, chopped up and mixed with fresh avocado and eaten with tortillas. Or, I would have milanesa sandwiches and other local dishes. Usually, if I cooked at home, I would eat spaghetti type meals or fruit and vegetables.

Routinely, Monday through Friday, I took Spanish classes and taught English between the hours of 8:00 AM through 2:00 PM. 2:00 to 4:00 PM was siesta (break) time. Afterwards, I taught and worked in my school's computer lab from 4:00 to around 9:00 PM. After 9 was suppertime. Saturdays, I taught classes half-day. I devoted the rest of the weekend to either resting or other personal activities.

When I wasn't busy working or studying, I oftentimes walked around town or took a combi (Morelia's VW Van Mini-Bus system) or taxi to various cultural sites such as the city library, the government buildings, other buildings of historical interest (ex: Mexican Patriot José Morelos' birthplace and house), or mercados (open markets either outside or housed in large buildings) and did a little exploring.

I almost always felt safe in Morelia, not because of the visible presence of gun toting policemen, but because of the very low crime rate. El Centro (downtown) was generally always crowded and busy. Many of the side streets off of Avenida Francisco Madero (Morelia's main downtown street) had shopping bazaars and mercados with every imaginable item from food to clothes to leather goods to electronic items and much more. The one area I did not care much for was right around the bus depot (long distance buses). There are x-rated theatres and other nefarious activities close to that location.

One thing I came to really appreciate in a hurry, was that I did not have to wash my own clothes. There are no self-service laundries that I am aware of in Morelia. I usually took my clothes to the laundry service in the block just down the street from my room. The two young ladies that ran it were efficient, prompt, and always welcomed me with smiles.

The people of Morelia

Generally, the people of Morelia were very friendly, warm, and caring. Two of my friends at a local Internet cyber café were especially helpful to me. When I first went to Morelia, my spoken Spanish consisted of only being able to speak in the present tense. I had never really learned how to properly conjugate verbs. Even though I could read and understand Spanish very well, I was very limited in my ability to converse. At first, I carried 2 very helpful books – Practical Conjugation of Verbs and a Spanish dictionary, both published by Larousse. For 2 months I carried these books everywhere I went and referred to them almost constantly. One day, my friends Genaro and Marcos took me aside and told me to put the books away, try to think and talk as best I could in Spanish and let them help me to correct errors in my grammar. That was the very best thing I could have done. It worked! It was not long at all before I was able to converse fairly freely. The key is immersion in a language – thinking, speaking, and living it.

Other people and families also befriended and “adopted” me. Two of my students took to me like an older brother and included me in their family activities and meals and recreation and also acted as my personal guides around Morelia. One of their favorite activities was gathering around a big-screen TV and watching fútbol (soccer). Sometimes, we would go to a local park or concert. Another of my students took me to events like the local fair and flea market.

Places of interest for tourists

Places I would recommend for visitors to Morelia to see: The sidewalk cafes and food stands, the shopping bazaars and mercados, Morelia’s Zoo, the annual Feria in April-May (the local fair), the cyber cafés, local book stores, church and government buildings, museums and art galleries, the parks and fountains (ex: Bosque Cuauhtémoc and the Three Sisters fountain in El Centro), the local universities, movie theatres (generally \$2 or \$3 for an adult ticket), musical entertainment – one place that comes immediately to my mind is El Colibri restaurant (located in El Centro just off of Francisco Madero). El Colibri has a live band that plays both local music and soft rock as well as a show called El Baile de los Viejitos (The Dance of the Little Old Men), a delightful presentation and musical score.

The shopping bazaars and mercados have all kinds of clothes, leather goods, electronic gadgets, and food items. They even sell birds – big birds! There are shopping areas or mercados all over Morelia. Some that I frequented are: 1). on the way towards the central bus station – several shops selling food items and leather goods; 2). Mercado Revolucion – between Francisco Madero and Plan de Ayala in El Centro; 3) Mercado Independencia – on Avenida Lazaro Cardenas just off of Vincente Santa Maria. One word of caution – when eating at the local food stands, make sure the food is fresh and has not been sitting out for an extended period of time. And, always, always ask for agua purificada (purified water). One more word of caution, this time to women, Mexican, American, or any other nationality – always take along a companion or stay in a group.

Morelia's weather

I was not there during winter months; however, I have heard that the winters are fairly mild. The summers can be very hot at times, but, for the most part, I found them moderately warm to hot. I have heard that it is wise during late summer, fall, and winter months to carry an umbrella, though.

Do your homework before you go

If you are really serious about visiting Morelia – do your homework before you go. Many excellent hotel deals, information about sites to see, historical background, information about language schools, etc. can be found by looking on the Internet. Other great sources of information are travel guides you can either purchase or find at your local library.

My experiences in Morelia were generally positive mainly for the following reason – I went there expecting to live like a native, not a foreigner and I kept a good attitude and sense of humor.

If you are looking for a place to start a new life or to seek a little culture and adventure then, this little hidden gem, Morelia, could be your ticket.

About The Author

The author, David Wix, lived, worked, and traveled extensively in Mexico during 1997 and has degrees in history and languages. Currently he is working as an insurance producer in Arizona. He has had articles published in his areas of expertise and is currently working on a couple of books to be published in the near future. Author's website: <http://www.dave-wix.com> and <http://www.travelwriters.com/davewix>.

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