

The Sights, Sounds, and People of Morelia, Mexico

by: David B. Wix

As the sun set on my first evening in Morelia, I found myself reflecting on the day's events and my initial impressions of this old colonial style city that would be my home for the next several months.

After arriving by air into Guadalajara, my bus trip from there to Morelia with Primera Plus, one of Mexico's first class bus systems, had taken about three or three and one-half hours over the fairly new autopista (freeway) that connects Guadalajara and Morelia with Mexico City. The ride had been a marvelous, comfortable experience when compared to riding Greyhound buses in the United States. In addition to a good meal and a new release movie, one of my fellow passengers shared many of the interesting things about Morelia that I would be able to see and do once we arrived. This helped me relax a little and feel more at ease. Even so, nothing would quite prepare me for what I would experience right after we arrived.

The trip from Morelia's central bus station to El Centro (downtown) normally takes fewer than five minutes and is less than a ten-block distance away. That is, unless you take a taxi ride with a driver that knows you are in unfamiliar territory and gives you a scenic, roundabout tour in order to capture more of a fare than he is entitled to. A trip that should have cost me 10 to 12 pesos (1 – 2 \$USD) at the most, ended up costing about 250 pesos (25 – 30 \$USD). Needless to say, one of my first purchases in Morelia was a city map. That way, I would know for sure where I was at all times and not be taken for a "ride" ever again.

My evening meal and hotel room more than made up for any disappointment and anger I may have felt initially, however. I honestly don't remember the name of the first restaurant I ate at in Morelia, but the food was wonderful. My room at the Mintzicuri hotel was only a surprising sum of \$8 a night. Now how good could that possibly be at such a low rate? Not only was it comfortably furnished and clean, it even had cable TV!

Apartment living, the neighborhoods, and the people

While I won't say that everything I experienced was pleasant, for the most part I truly enjoyed the places that I lived and the people that were my neighbors. At first, a few of the local people in the area around my apartment on Padre Lloreda were a little antagonistic toward me because I was a foreigner, an outsider. I remember on occasion being called "guero" which, near as I can tell or remember means "white boy" or "white-faced boy" or something to that effect. Now that I think back, it is kind of funny – I was very white-faced for the first few weeks I was there! Then, thankfully, my skin started to darken and my Spanish greatly improved.

Right from the start, I became well acquainted with the local people by going out on the streets around my apartment and getting to know the stores and the people that owned them or shopped in them. One such place was the local grocery store that was about a block away from where I lived. The man that ran it and his niece quickly became good friends to me. The local corner grocery store in Morelia is much more than just a place to shop - it is a gathering place for friends that want to socialize. At least, that one was. One day, one of my name callers came in and asked 'guero, why are you here? These are all my friends!' Alma, the store owner's niece quickly spoke up and said 'they are all his friends too! So, why don't you just be quiet or go away?' That was the last time I ever had a problem with anyone

in that neighborhood. Even my name caller became more pleasant and almost friendly.

In appreciation for Alma's great act of kindness, I offered to tutor her in English during my off hours from teaching and studying at CMI (Centro Mexicano Internacional). She proved to be an excellent student. Sometimes, Spanish speakers have problems with certain sounds in English. The "th" sound, as in "thank you", is one of the most difficult to learn. Alma was determined, though! One night, we sat for at least 3 hours doing word exercises to grasp the sound. I even had Alma watch my mouth carefully to imitate the way I held my teeth and lips to form the "th" sound. It would come out more like 'fank you'. Alma never did get it that night, however, one day as I turned to leave the store; she called out a resounding thank you! She had been practicing.

My next apartment was at least a couple of miles away down the side street from Padre Lloreda on Calle Vincente Santa Maria. My favorite person there was my landlady Amparo, affectionately known as "Amparito" to all of her "boys" in her apartment-rooms. She was warm and kind, but at the same time let you know the "house rules." There never was any loud music, wild parties, or any funny stuff going on, at least not in that house! Our neighbor just north of us, however, liked to get a bit sauced and sing loudly until the wee hours of the morning occasionally.

This neighborhood was very welcoming. I had 3 corner style grocery stores, a beer store, a tortilla factory, a barbershop, a restaurant, and a laundry within a four or five block radius. I wasted no time in getting to know most of the people on a first name basis, and I never experienced prejudice of any kind.

Shopping – mercado style

I did most of my shopping for clothes, food, and household things at Mercado Independencia on Avenida Lazaro Cardenas next to Vincente Santa Maria or at other stores in the immediate area. This mercado occupies a huge city block area – more like 3 or 4 blocks here in the U. S. I have never experienced anything so unique as shopping mercado style. Everything under the sun seems to be here. I could go and get fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats here, eat a restaurant style meal at one of the many food stands, buy leather goods, get my school supplies, etc. The food stands are basically a long counter with chairs and cooking facilities. The meals are simple and nourishing and generally cost around \$2, never more than \$3 or \$4.

One of the funniest experiences I had in Morelia was at this mercado one afternoon during a break in my classes. I had decided to purchase a couple of ears of corn to go along with my spaghetti dinner that evening. Now, I had always learned the Spanish word for corn to be maiz (my-eece). When I first asked for some maiz, one of the vendors went and got me a can of cut corn from a neighboring vendor. Then, I tried drawing ears of corn and explaining what they were by means of gestures and other descriptive words – to no avail. Finally, one of the young children looked up at me with big eyes and said – "elote, elote!" Si! Elote! I really was not sure what elote was; however, I figured it was worth a try. So, the little girl brought me back, yes – thankfully, an ear of corn. I have never forgotten the Spanish word elote.

Another time, when I was doing my shopping at the mercado, I got another lesson in Spanish that I will more than likely remember for the rest of my life as well. I had said something to one of the young women in the shop that I thought for some reason had embarrassed her from the response she gave me. I had no idea what I might have said, but I tried to ask what it was and apologize. So, I tried to think of what the Spanish word for embarrass could be. Now, a lot of Spanish words are similar to their English counterparts. To make a word end in ed (embarrass – embarrassed) you add ado. So, I added ado to

embarrass and asked the lady if I made her embarazado, to which she adamantly said – “No, no señor!” Her face said differently, or, so I thought. I asked again – “No, no señor!” came her immediate reply. Now, I was really confused. I dug through my backpack and found my pocket dictionary. Imagine my horror – I had been asking if I had made her pregnant. Thankfully, she realized I was stumbling over my words and we both had a good laugh. Incidentally, the Spanish word for embarrassed is averganzado. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that word either.

One of my favorite stores in Morelia, Milano’s Men’s Clothing, was right across the street from Mercado Independencia on Avenida Lazaro Cardenas. I never paid more than \$10 for any of the shirts and pants I purchased there. Within a couple of months of moving to Morelia, I lost over 40 pounds from all the exercise I got every day in walking back and forth to my school and around the city. So, I bought a new wardrobe. The quality of clothes at Milano’s was wonderful and at prices I could easily afford. I even had my own personal clothes-shopping assistant that would meet me and help me to match colors on my outfits.

The sounds of Morelia

One of the other things I came to appreciate about Morelia was its sounds. From the roosters crowing all over town at the crack of dawn heralding the beginning of a new day to the vendors and various service providers on the streets, each would have their own sound. For instance, the garbage man had a unique sounding whistle that he would blow as he wound through the neighborhood streets. Generally, when you heard the first hint of the whistle, there would be about 5 minutes or less to make sure any unwanted trash was at curbside for pickup. Trucks loaded with bottles of gas for cooking and heating had a special horn sound. And, on most weekdays, the streets teemed with sounds of traffic and people as they hustled about busily involved in their day’s activities. Weekends would bring the music of fiestas (parties) as people would get together and socialize. When Morelia’s futbol (soccer) team played a neighboring city’s team and won, sounds of jubilation could be heard as people drove up and down the street blowing whistles or making other noises and shouting “Morelia, Morelia” at the top of their lungs.

Making Morelia my home

I never wanted Morelia to be just a place to visit, study, and work. Right from the beginning, it became my home. I knew I had to learn to communicate effectively to fit in and do well. The teachers at my school, CMI, played a big part in helping me to learn to conjugate Spanish verbs, but it was the people I came into contact with on a daily basis, however, that helped me to build my vocabulary of words and learn to communicate well. Very few of them knew English. So, to eat, do my shopping and other day-to-day activities, I had to speak Spanish well enough to be understood. It took me between one and two months of trial and error to learn to converse freely.

My students were another part of what made me feel at home in Morelia. I have never seen people so eager to learn. English opens up a whole new world to many of them. For many, traveling to, living and working in the United States was a dream or goal. I tried to remember this while teaching practical language usages that would make it easier for them to adapt to a new culture and land. A lot of my students loved to read books and magazines, surf the Internet, and listen to American music. So, I would use each of these avenues to make learning enjoyable for them. Learning is a two-way street. My students could always sense that I really cared. To this day, though, I feel that they taught and helped me more than I ever did them.

Learn the language, make mistakes, but keep your sense of humor

So, you want to live in Morelia, eh? The best encouragement I can give you, then, is learn the language to the best of your ability, surround yourself with good friends, keep a strong positive attitude, and try not to lose your sense of humor when you make mistakes. And, though you do not want to be tied to your dictionary or other language aids - keep them handy just in case you encounter a word or words you are unsure of.

If you enjoy history, culture, adventure, and people, by all means – go to Morelia!

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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