

Driving to San Miguel de Allende

October 21, 2007

In our brand new Toyota Prius we drove south on 5 which would be unremarkable except that we'd managed to spend our whole lives in California without doing so. So we were surprised to find that it was not the vast boring stretch we imagined. For me as passenger the most fun was the return of a childhood travel pastime of staring down the passing diagonal rows of fruit and nut trees in perfectly spaced orchards for miles and miles. Will saw a llama farm, which I missed, but neither of us could miss the horrendous malodorous presence of a huge cattle stockyard that made us grateful to be vegetarians. We turned off to go via Bakersfield and around Wasco we saw fields and fields of cotton, and a cotton gin. We'd never heard of California cotton.

We were advised to skirt LA by going over Tahachape pass, a beautiful stretch but requiring way more gas than anticipated and we barely made it to a gas station! In a Prius! How embarrassing!

It seemed like a very long way, especially when we descended down toward San Bernardino late afternoon on a Sunday at a snail's pace with everyone returning to LA from Las Vegas and other weekend destinations. But then we were in smoky dusty stormish haze so thick it was unbelievable. It turns out that LA & San Diego were on fire! People were being evacuated. Horrible! But thank goodness we took our soon-to-be tenant Gary Oman's advice and skirted LA as we did.

When we arrived in Palm Springs it was already dark and, after checking into the Palm Court Motel, we headed downtown to scope out dinner. Who knows why I had developed an intense sinus headache and nausea on the drive. Perhaps from the Santa Ana winds that were buffeting us constantly, or from the smoke, or something else. Anyway, I was still tender when we were looking for restaurants so I didn't want a lot of music pounding and really wasn't all that hungry. As we were walking around we saw a palm tree on fire and sparks were flying everywhere right near us. The fire engine arrived to put it out. So much excitement. We still didn't know about LA, but couldn't help noticing places called the Tinder Box and the Fire Pit. We finally drove to the Desert Inn Resort & Spa that Anna had told us about and had a quiet restful delicious dinner there in the Lakeview restaurant. It was empty except for us because it was after 9 PM. I had a seared ahi salad and Will had a crab cake sandwich. Both delicious.

October 22, 2007

We rose early to drive to Tucson, and saw the rich dawn glow on the mountain right behind our motel. By the time we got the camera the glow was gone.

We had a beautiful ride on Highway 10 – landscape that makes me want to paint it. We stopped at a total rip-off gas station somewhere out in the 'middle of nowhere' and the gas was \$3.99 a gallon so we just go a few gallons to get us to some place more reasonable. But the attendant was so funny, it was worth the price. The pump was old fashioned and Will wasn't sure whether he was supposed to pay first, or what, so he asked the attendant "Do I just start pumping or...?" and the grizzly old guy says, "Well, it's not going to pump itself." Then he was telling us how he used to pronounce hybrid "high bride". As we got in the car I told him "Well, I'm the high bride." No discount for making him laugh apparently.

We turned down 85 to avoid Phoenix, and joined up to 8 then 10 again and got down to Tucson exactly at 2 PM when we had an appointment at the Toyota dealers there to

have our car receive its first service. They were as good as their word and we were out of there within 1-1/2 hours. Then we stopped by the Mexican Auto Insurance brokers to pick up a bunch of map books which have turned out to be somewhat strange and useless, but we'll see. Then we went to visit Leah, David and Madeleine and take them out to dinner. It was great to see them in their own home with their lovely desert garden out front. We really got a feel for Madeleine's personality – smart as a whip, funny, and rambunctious. Leah was gorgeous in her 7-1/2 month pregnant mode. It was a lovely moment to see them. David was great, and the three of them together make a sweet little family. Que bueno!

Then we were off to Nogales to spend the night a few minutes from the border at the Holiday Inn Express.

October 23, 2007

A beautiful ride through northern Sonora Mexico! Flying over it doesn't do it justice. This kind of landscape needs to be driven through to be appreciated. The first section with the fences all along the road was a little strange. A lone cow was wandering on the road and we couldn't figure out how she had managed to get trapped in this asphalt no man's land. The terrain was hilly and arroyos were full of some riparian trees lush and thick, maybe alders? Mountains continually rose up before us in the distance on both sides. The left side seemed particularly spectacular, so impossible for me to photograph anything. And there was no place to pull over to do so. Too bad! Everything was so beautiful.

The highway wasn't the best surface but it was two lanes in each direction separated by a wide grassy divider, so it felt very safe.

Even with all our advance reading and preparation, the whole emigracion aspect was a bit of a steep learning curve. But we arrived at the K21 checkpoint where all the business happens, and we quickly got my tourist visa (Will has his FM3), our temporary auto permit, and were green lighted through, and on our way. Phew!

Along the way there were wonderful shrines to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Small concrete structures, and mountaintop madonnas.

Coming into every small town there are speed bumps called *topes*. At each *tope* (toe-pay) there were vendors selling this and that, giving you their pitch as you slowed to cross the *tope*. All signs were in Spanish and there were a lot of words with which I wasn't familiar, so I had to begin to deduce what certain words must mean based on when they were used. Por ejemplo: rebaser must mean passing. Of course I thought the government might want to provide a sheet of signs and what they mean to all the Americans and Canadians pouring in across their borders, just for safety's sake. If only I ran the world.

About 50 minutes into Mexico the terrain flattens out into the well known Sonoran desert with cacti et al. Still very beautiful, but different. Then mountains started appearing in the distance and close up was all multi-hued yellow grasses, spotted with green tufts of other grasses and mesquite trees.

We drove through Hermosillo which just felt toxically commercial, then onto Guaymas, stopping every so often to pay a 30 – 60 peso toll called a '*cuota*'. We had our pesos ready and that was easy.

In Guaymas we stopped for lunch at Los Barcos Restaurant right on the water. It had an amazing thatched roof, more Polynesian than Mexican, and was nicely open air. We ate and were on our way again down the coast to Novajoa, where we were absolutely

accosted by windshield wiper boys at every stop light. Then we turned left on Hwy 10 to drive up to Alamos where we are spending two nights. The drive up with the late afternoon light was spectacular and the landscape is amazing. This is the edge of the Copper Canyon.

We had a hard time find out B&B, called the Puerta Roja, but once we did we were happy to be here, a beautiful friendly place full of art and charm.

We went out for drinks and quesadillas and got lost wandering around town, but it's a very small town and we found our way home eventually.

October 24, 2007

Our 38th anniversary

A very hot day so we didn't do much but we didn't intend to. Enjoyed a social breakfast with other guests who were slowly traveling to Colima where they spend their winters. Will went for a little hike up to the Mirador while I stayed here and caught this journaling up to date. Then we went out and explored the town in daylight which was much easier. We didn't bother with getting lunch as we were so full from breakfast. Later in the afternoon we sat out in the shade by the pool and nibbled on some of our own stuff we'd packed for the trip, read our books and lounged. The heat was a bit overbearing and there were little gnats that really wanted to dwell in our eyes. Annoying! But it is a very lovely place to be even so. Later Will took a nap and I visited with a neighbor who hangs out here for the WiFi internet access. She and her husband moved down here from Vancouver nine years ago. Then I talked with Teri (the owner) for awhile. She was in the kitchen baking bread. She and her husband bought this place in 1987. It had been owned by some people from Iowa who had fixed it up in a very middle America 80's style, so Teri has spent all this time making it as Mexican as possible. She said that if she hadn't fallen in love with this place, she would definitely have moved to San Miguel, had she seen it before Alamos. She talked about how in SMA we have access to talented craftspeople and are within easy range of buying whatever we need for the house. She says for her to get even the simplest thing requires a three day journey. Navajoa apparently has nothing to offer. Her husband is a retired Central Valley CA farmer, and his family still has the farm, growing cotton, almonds and much of the same things we drove through on our way down. They also have a place in a remote part of Alaska where they spend their summer months, and then they travel a lot transitioning in between. Her dog Betty is quite a feature here, and she apparently gets depressed when Teri is away even though she is well cared for by the staff.

Teri made reservations for our anniversary dinner at the fanciest place in town Hacienda de los Santos. It is a hotel and spa with incredible expansive grounds and multiple buildings. The rooms are \$250 - \$1450 per night USD. Yikes!

On our walk to dinner a gringo stopped us to ask directions, and we assured him we were the wrong people to ask. He asked a few more questions about us personally and discovered that we were eating where he and his touring group of motorcycle riders were eating. He said, "Say, would you mind when we walk in and you see me, could you call out 'Hey Bob, how ya doin'?" That would be so great."

We laughed and agreed, figuring it was unlikely we actually would run into him again, and off he went. Quite a character full of an outrageous rambunctious social energy.

At the restaurant, we sat out on the classic hacienda covered terraza on a perfect warmish evening and enjoyed margaritas. The chairs were upholstered and comfortable which I mention because that is soooo unusual in Mexico to have comfortable chairs to dine in. Teri had told us the table was ours for the night so we settled in to enjoy ourselves.

We lingered over cocktails, discovered that the set menu for the evening was salmon and only \$26 with tax and tip included. We were muy contentos!

Then Bob arrived with his entourage. This crowd hardly looked like bikers! More like bankers, except for one guy with long hair, beard and tattoos. At least he knows how to play the part.

Anyway, although we had discussed possibly calling out "Hey Frank!" or trying to avoid fulfilling this crazy guy's request, they all passed right by our table, so we felt obligated to say, "Hey Bob, how ya' doin'?" And the reaction of the group was well worth it. Apparently everybody knows Bob, the way everyone knows our friend Michael Rosenthal. Which made us wonder if Michael ever sets up shills, as Bob had done.

Bob was thrilled with our performance and, as the group was seated at a large table nearby, he came over often to thank us, get to know us better, etc. He was taking photos of his group and I felt he owed us a little something, so asked him to take our anniversary photo. He got seriously into it and did many takes.

The daughter of the owners of the hotel was hosting the evening and came around to each of the tables often, developing a high level of personal rapport. Her name, I believe was Jamie, and she was delightful, young and proud of her husband who was one of the guitar players.

The musicians began to play and the music was perfect romantic Mexican. There could not have been a more perfect Mexican anniversary setting. We were beyond pleased. And then when they brought us our dessert course with lit candles, and the musicians came over to serenade us with a traditional anniversary song, and Jamie stood there the right and slightly behind her husband with her head resting on his shoulder and sang along, tears in her eyes, she was so moved by the thought of 38 years of marriage, she claimed.

There were certainly tears in my eyes as well. What a moment! We have never been so celebrated! Our anniversaries have always been very private affairs, and the most elaborate acknowledgement we have ever had before this was a lovely dessert from Lark Creek Inn with "Happy Anniversary" written on it. But this! The whole restaurant was completely involved in the moment and we were at its center, and Bob was running around taking as many photos of the whole thing as he could. So who knows? If he remembers to send them to us, we will have a documented amazing moment, that captures so much of why we love Mexico, and why we feel so lovingly embraced here.

Que bueno!

When we were ready to leave, we thanked the musicians and Jamie again. She gave us a hug goodbye and asked if we had time to take a little tour of the hotel and assigned a nice young woman to take us around the absolutely amazing grounds, courtyards, etc. It's not surprising that it is one of the world's top 250 hotels, of which there are only eight in Mexico. It was a maze of beautiful courtyards, pools, niches, big leather chairs around fireplaces, etc. etc. Wow! What a treat!

Then we wandered home and enjoyed our own little private room, which seemed really as nice as anything we'd seen, just with a little more individuality and a bit more casual.

A perfect anniversary!

October 26, 2007

After another lovely breakfast at La Puerta Roja, we headed out early for a long drive down the coast. Having been so wrong in imagining that the Sonoran desert would be boring, I wasn't that surprised that my imagined coastal drive was also inaccurate, this time in the reverse. Much of the way was flat with distant mountains in the haze. We

didn't see the coast, and even then only at a distance, until about an hour before Mazatlan. But the highway was good and we had our 'cuota' toll money ready. When we crossed from Sonora into Sinaloa the cuotas were more expensive but there were nice rest stops. We just ate our own little fruit, nuts, etc. out of our cooler, the contents of which we had stored in the Puerta Roja refrigerator.

We arrived in Mazatlan in the late afternoon and found our way down to the playas and parked out front of the Hotel Freeman on Olas Altas. We checked in and Will went to move the car around to the back of the building where the entrance to the secure parking lot was. When he didn't show up, I went out to the back gate to wave him in, in case he was lost. I saw him two blocks down just coming into an intersection. And then I heard a sound of crashing metal I will never forget. "Holy shit," I yelled, and took off running despite the fact that I was wearing sandals and sometimes have a hard time just walking, even in running shoes. When I arrived, Will and the other driver were looking things over and talking, but soon Will was feeling faint, and he broke out in a cold sweat. A combination of dehydration, heat, exhaustion from a long day's drive, and the shock of seeing our brand new little *Zuley* (named for its Azul color) smashed up was just too much for him, and he just went weak-kneed and I helped him lie down across the car seat, but he slipped down into the gutter. I tried to get him to drink some water. Meanwhile the driver of the other vehicle said he would go to call the police. A motorcycle policia came and looked over our paperwork, told me to go call our insurance agent. By this time Will was sitting up and feeling a little better, but none of us were convinced. There was talk of sending for the ambulance and Will repeatedly saying it wasn't necessary.

Meanwhile we also had a car full of our worldly goods, everything we were bringing to our house in San Miguel that we had been collecting for months all tightly packed in the rear, as well as all our suitcases in the back seat. The other driver, a 19 year old architecture student named Daniel Schobert, was very sweet about the whole thing, and fortunately he speaks English, because this was a very complicated matter and Spanish was flying and I wasn't catching it all, but he was able to interpret. I was able to hear enough to make sure nothing was being totally misrepresented. But there was no question that it was Will's fault. He had been so busy looking up to see the hotel on the left he missed a stop sign on the right and rolled slowly into an intersection that had no stop sign, and right into the side of Daniel's grandfather's 1987 Olds. Ay! He has never been at fault in an accident in all his 50 years of driving, so I think that was an incredible shock. But he was able to walk back and forth and assured me he was fine. By this time Daniel's family members started showing up. His father, also Daniel, came and took charge of the event. His brother and his fiancée and his little sister came in another car. They helped me unload our car and take at least our traveling stuff over to the hotel so I could get them into the room. We didn't know how long the car would be impounded or what the situation would be, so somehow this all seemed very important, though it doesn't seem so now. Anyway, we made quite a little grouping as I went in their car with them up the two blocks and we each grabbed some luggage and went through the hotel and up the frightful old groaning elevator to the 8th floor to find a quite beautiful room with an ocean view and balcony. All so lovely, and now all so beside the point! I called the insurance claim number for Sanborn's, and was told the adjuster would meet us at the police station in 45 minutes. What service!

When we got back to the corner Daniel Senior told us that Will, Daniel and the police were already gone, Will driving *Zuley*, following the police and Daniel in his car. Will driving? After such a shock and so tired from our long day and who knows what else, in the dark in a strange town in a foreign country?? This was crazy. Daniel's youngest sister was ordered to hop out and come home with her father, as he didn't think she was

ready for hanging out at a police station. The rest of us drove over there and found the cars being taken in the impound lot. The impound guy went around doing an inventory, counting rear view mirrors and windshield wipers (three of each), floor mats, CD player, etc. and eventually asked to open the hatchback hood. He took one look at all that was jammed in under the cover and said, "Close it! You keep the keys and I don't even want to know about it."

Then our insurance adjuster arrived and took charge of the situation. He knew everyone and he represented us very well. His English is not great, but he really knew the ropes. So we all went next door to the police station. Then they took Daniel and Will into another room, while his brother and his girl friend, and now another young woman with a neck brace who turned out to be Daniel's girl friend, and I waited outside. I offered to buy them sodas, the least I could do, but nobody seemed to need one but me. The first Coke I've had in I don't know how long.

There was a problem with the papers for Daniel's car, in that it was his grandfather's and his grandfather had them, but he is a bit deaf and couldn't understand them when they called for him to bring them to the station. So the older brother and girl friend went off to get the paperwork so that Daniel's car could be released.

Daniel's girl friend and I were left to chat. Her neck was from an accident she had only three days before! What a week for the couple! Although I would have happily distracted myself with talking Spanish, she wanted to practice her English. She said you have to have English to make it in Mexico for any career worth having, and that Daniel didn't like to practice it with her. I told her I would be happy to, and asked her all about herself so that she could have practice really talking. (We had already established that it was the talking part that made her nervous.) So she told me that she was 19, that she was going to school to become a psychologist, that she had wanted to be a psychiatrist but took a test and wasn't suited for it. We agreed that it was just as well, as psychiatrist's are becoming more and more chemists, and psychologists really do the talk therapy that interests her.

She said that she learned English in a six month immersion with a family in Victoria Canada, in the winter! From Mazatlan, where yesterday's roasting weather was considered by the locals to be a little cool. She hated it, she was lonely, she missed her mother's cooking. But she really learned English. I asked her why she hadn't waited to go until the summer and she said that when she gets an idea in her head, she has to do it right then. She had wanted to go to the US but couldn't get the Visa, so she had to go to Canada, which was much more expensive.

So this was a nice distraction. I had also been telling our story, how at this time the night before we were being serenaded by mariachis celebrating our 38th wedding anniversary, and here we were tonight in a police station. Now there's a dharma lesson in there somewhere! I wasn't just idly chatting, I admit, especially after Daniel's girl friend arrived in her neck brace telling him that he may say he feels fine now but tomorrow he might need a neck brace too. I felt it was important to let them know us and not just see us as gringos who could afford to pay more. I felt sure they were not that kind of people, but I couldn't forget the nice lady who apologized for crashing into me in the Bon Air parking lot and later told her insurance company that it was my fault. So I tried to remember that this was a very delicate business, and not to take anything for granted. Yet I am telling you now these were the nicest people it is possible to know. Here these old gringos smash into their family car, are helpless babes requiring infinite patience and translation, and yet they continued to be as warm and kind as we have come to know the Mexican people in general to be. Even in a situation like this!

After a while Will and his legal entourage came through again, this time with the ticket that we needed to pay for two charges, one for going through a stop sign, the other

for crashing into a vehicle. The total charge came to about \$70 USD which we were able to pay with a credit card. Phew! We imagined much worse. A little more running around by the adjuster, making copies and doing finishing touches, then he told us to take the car back to the hotel and the garage man would come for it in the morning. We felt very relieved that the fine was so low and that we could go get something to eat and go to bed.

But it was miserably hot and there was this little jitney going along the street below at regular intervals blaring out music, and our minds were racing with the challenges and decisions we needed to make, so we turned on the light and got out the laptop and started looking at every Mazatlan apartment rental, trying to make lemonade out of our new lemon situation. Nothing looked very inviting, especially when we have a free beautiful casa waiting for us in San Miguel where the weather is mild and we feel at home.

We felt we needed to be ready for any contingency. The big question was how long was it going to take to repair the car, something we still really don't know, although the garage man this morning said probably two weeks. If he had said much less, we would have found someplace cheaper to stay around here and waited. If he had said anything longer, we had no doubt that we would leave Zuley here and go to San Miguel and return for him later. But this was a no man's land of time. We decided to assume that two weeks could definitely mean much longer and that hanging around Mazatlan in some rental when we could be in San Miguel in our own beautiful home just was too depressing.

So then we had to decide how to get ourselves and our stuff to San Miguel. No matter what we had to drag it all upstairs in the morning, which Will woke and did by himself at the crack of dawn, using the hotels big carts. We figured we needed boxes which we would load up and either ship or bring with us on the bus. But then we realized we could rent a car and just follow our original plan. Costly! Especially since we are doing a one way trip, but doing it any other way is just too stressful to consider. We have our non-refundable reservations in Guadalajara tomorrow night. We're saving money by using them instead of staying here.

When and how we will retrieve Zuley, whether we will take him on back to San Miguel or give him a break from that cobblestone car hell and just head north again, who knows at this point. Having made all the decisions we needed to make for now, we managed to walk around as tourists enjoying the old town very much, finding something we could eat, and later sitting on the roof terrace napping and reading. Tonight we plan to return to the roof for cocktails and quesadillas. We are in Mazatlan after all! How sad it would be to let this episode cause us to forget to enjoy being here, especially so briefly.

For me what came so clearly in all this is that the story that will be remembered is that whenever Stef & Will go to Mexico, Stef 'dies' or Will crashes, and what are that craz pair thinking? But the real story is that whether we are dying or crashing or celebrating our anniversary we are totally held in sweet warmth by the people we meet and befriend. When we all said good night last night, we hugged, apologies brushed aside, and they offered to lead us back to the hotel so we wouldn't get lost on our way.

October 27, 2007

It is 6:30 AM and I am sitting in our room next to the balcony overlooking the Pacific with a full moon shining down. The Malecon has only a few people walking on it now. In a little while many will be enjoying walking, running, roller blading or biking on its smooth colorfully art deco style painted surface as it curves around the edge of Olas Altas.

Yesterday as I was sitting here, a group of exceptionally talented opera singers were practicing in the ballroom on the floor above us, and the tenor's beautiful voice rang down upon me as I wrote. Perfecto!

This is a town of music in a very different way than San Miguel. Here there are competing bands playing at various restaurants, outside for all to enjoy, whether they are eating at the restaurant or not. Some are more talented than others, of course, but in general their voices are really good. Perhaps this comes from Mazatlan's focus on the performing arts.

Last night we had a drink up in the Sky Room on the floor right below the roof pool. The windows were open and the ocean breezes were blowing as we drank our margaritas and both felt delicious. This refurbished 1930's Hotel Freeman is really quite cool.

Then we went on a stroll, returning to Machado Plaza in the historic district a few blocks away, where they had a stage set up and a really loud band was playing very lively dancing music. Couples were dancing in the fastest close (very close – okay humping) dancing I've ever seen. Almost a polka, it was so fast, but close and with dips. This was the last evening of a four day festival, so everyone was out and about strolling, enjoying the performances of folklorica dancers on stage, dining in one of the many restaurants that line the square.

The two story arched stucco buildings, painted a range of delicious Mexican colors, with wrought iron balconies and bowing bougainvilleas, were lit up for the evening with uplights – very dramatic and romantic. Because the Plaza is narrow, it has an intimacy that is very appealing. The streets around the square had been closed for the evening, and all the restaurants were able to extend their seating area out into the street.

We strolled around reading menus and found one that suited Will, but didn't have anything that excited me. The maitre d' who seemed like the owner asked me what I would like that I wasn't seeing, and then described a whole other meal that would be perfect for me: a piece of mahi mahi, steamed vegetables and rice. So we sat down at a table nearby and proceeded to enjoy the evening's entertainment. In front of this particular restaurant there was a set up for a small musical group. Within a few minutes a couple of guitarists and a drummer showed up and began to play. The woman of the two sang so beautifully. Unfortunately the loudspeakers from the larger stage across the square made it impossible to really hear her. It was as if each ear was offered a different performance. I'm not really programmed to receive two channels at once, but it did remind me of the dharma practice of holding two conflicting emotions at the same time. After about fifteen minutes, they decided to give up trying to compete with the larger sound.

The dinner was excellent, and afterwards we strolled around the square. We visited with a man who had an Aztec dog. I pet it and it was the strangest texture, like sandpaper.

Then we returned to the Malecon and sat on the edge facing out toward the ocean, mesmerized by the waves lapping on the rocks below us, the lacy patterns of the receding waves lit by the street lights. Across the street at two restaurants within a block of each other another set of dueling bands were playing different eras of Beatles tunes. So we were hearing "Yesterday" from one side and "Let it Be" from the other. All good advice.

October 28, 2007

Yesterday we left Mazatlan in our little red rental car, a Dodge 'Attitud' with 80,000k on it, which is no Prius in either comfort or mileage, but seemed in good enough shape to get us to San Miguel.

Immediately after leaving the city and hitting the highway, we could see the change in the terrain. Suddenly everything becomes lush after Mazatlan. On the road out of town all cars were being stopped by a line of questionnaire-giving official youths. They stopped and asked us where we had been, where we were going and what was our purpose for the trip. I suppose this will be compiled in some useful survey by Mazatlan officials. We gassed up the car to *lleno* (full) because we had been told by our neighbor Mike to be sure to do so. Sure enough there were no Pemex stations until Tepic hours down the road! The highway was not divided and the road surface quality varied a great deal, but the views were spectacular and there were no signs of human habitation besides the road itself for most of the distance. Maybe no services, but also no *topes* to slow us down. I had to wonder why such a beautiful stretch is so sparsely populated.

We pulled into Tepic just at noon and found it to be a honky town, or I guess I should say a town of honkers. No one in San Miguel honks, or only under dire circumstances, so we were a little amazed at all this aggressive action. It's also a large town and we didn't have a map, only two street names for the vegetarian restaurants that had been recommended in one of our many guidebooks. We weren't highly optimistic at finding one of the streets, nor of finding one of the restaurants if we did, as vegetarian restaurants are often very short-lived. Luckily once we reached Centro we saw one of the street names and were able to circle around and find a parking place within a block of it. We had a fabulous vegetarian buffet lunch for around \$5 USD each.

On the way out of Tepic there was a huge construction close down on the main road, but no indication as to the detour (*desviacion*). So we invented our own detour, paralleling the main street for a number of blocks, looking down each cross street until we didn't see construction anymore. It worked, but it was a little strange!

After Tepic the terrain opened out into expansive green pastoral plains with cows dotting the landscape, mountains in the background. There were cornfields and soon the agave that gives the area its reputation as the Tequila capital of the world. The agave is to this area as grapes are to wine country, and they are planted similarly in exacting lines over the rolling hills. The grey blue green color is striking.

I had thought I was leaving autumn behind and had tried to saturate myself with the fall colors before leaving home, but there were some reds and yellow leaves in the surrounding hillsides as we drove through the mountains in wonderful long roller coaster runs. It never felt like we were climbing that much, but the descent into the Guadalajara area was long and steep.

When we got into Guadalajara, still on the three-four lane freeway, the traffic really increased, and there was a military checkpoint where vehicles were being searched. We were divided into two lanes for cargo and non-cargo (We probably should have qualified as cargo with all our worldly goods inside!) but then they made us all merge together, which this aggressive driver population was seriously not wanting to do. Unbelievably difficult to get someone to let us merge into the other lane. Weird again!

Then we were driving along and suddenly were rear ended by a chain of cars crashing into each other. We didn't crash into the car in front of us, so Will pulled over to the side of the highway and we got out to check the damages. Well, this little rental car had so many scrapes and dings, there was nothing new to report. Which is good, because neither of us were ready to spend yet another evening at the police station dealing with this kind of thing. We looked at each other, said, "I don't see anything, do you?" and hopped back in the car and got out of there. A few minutes later drivers were yelling at us and pointing at the side of our car. We thought they were saying that our

license plate was falling off or something, so we pulled over again and looked, and we had a flat tire. *Llanta*. That's the word for tire. Now we know. So we had to lay out a tarp on the side of a busy freeway, pull out all our possessions yet again and put them on the tarp, so that we could dig out the spare and put it on. There was a breeze gusting and I was wearing a skirt and sandals, so besides hauling things out of the car, I had to keep my skirt down!

Once we got the tire and jack, all we had to do was change it. Will's an old hand at this from our early days, so no problem. Right? Wrong! The lug nuts wouldn't budge. The cars were driving close and fast and it was a very dangerous (and did we mention aggressive?) traffic situation, and I was terrified someone was going to mow Will down as he sat by the tire, so I stood a little way out myself, my skirt flapping. At least I was visible.

Fortunately a taxi driver pulled up and came to help. He introduced himself as Jesus, and he was our savior of that day for sure. He had something to give the turn leverage, and he took over the job from Will. Then they discovered that the little spare's bolts didn't match up to the vehicle. It wasn't that car's spare! So Jesus goes to his taxi and gets his own spare tire and puts it on. Voila! But not really, because now what? We figured we'd get the local Budget car rental office to deal with it, so we piled our stuff any old way back into the car, along with the old tire and spare, and followed Jesus to our hotel in Tlaquepaque.

The receptionist at the hotel desk was phenomenally proactive in calling Budget's various offices and the one in Mazatlan to try to get help, but Budget wasn't budging. Her name is Maria! But despite all this heavenly intervention, there was no good news: Apparently in Mexico Budget is just a name and logo you get to use, but don't have to live up to. If you are traveling outside the area you rented it from you are totally unsupported! Maria gave me the phone to talk to the Mazatlan Budget fellow and he said to hire someone to replace the tire and fax him the bills and he'd reimburse us, etc. Well, it was a Saturday evening with most of the stores closing and no mechanical services anywhere to be found. Jesus volunteered to go buy the tire and Will went with him, while I sorted out all our belongings on the tarp yet again!!!!, and had the bell boy bring our luggage into our room. Then I put everything else in the back seat because the trunk had to be empty for the tire.

As I waited for them to return I was able to wash off the highway filth and change my clothes, and to appreciate this beautiful hotel. Villa Ensuenos in Tlaquepaque is quite charming with beautiful courtyards and little pools and caged parakeets singing merrily. Our room is very nice with its own little beautiful courtyard.

Finally by 8:00 pm the guys had returned from WalMart – our first (and hopefully last) WalMart purchase! – and the new tire was on the car and Jesus was thoroughly thanked and compensated for his time away from taxi driving. We had asked him early on what he would charge for doing this and he said he was volunteering. But he had been so enraged at Budget that we were able to convince him that since Budget was paying, he shouldn't let them get off the hook, and he agreed to take the three hundred pesos we kept trying to give him. Will kept patting him on the shoulder and saying “Usted es un buen hombre.” And it's true.

After Will took his shower and rested a bit, we took a stroll around the neighborhood and ate at a nice restaurant called Vid that Maria recommended. For \$25 USD we had two glasses of much needed wine, soup and salad for me, and a shrimp salad for Will.

Then we went to the main plaza and walked around some more until 10 pm when we headed back to the hotel and bed.

October 30, 2007

The drive to San Miguel was short and sweet: about four hours. A little confusion in signage, but no major problems. The change in terrain is significant after leaving Guadalajara. It becomes the semi-arid highlands we are familiar with here: dried grasses, mesquite trees, not much real greenery. When we passed the Leon Airport we were on familiar ground again, and when we spotted San Miguel in the distance across the lake, it felt like a parallel journey to past arrivals, especially that first time five years ago, arriving at dawn and bursting into tears at the beauty of it and the dream of it so long denied. Now here we are arriving again, but this time with our very own home to return to. Que bueno!

After stopping at Mega to stock up with a few basics, we arrived at our door around 1:30 and found it in good shape, intact and beautiful, with very few exceptions. We made ourselves some lunch and unpacked. Then called loved ones to let them know we were alive. We played at opening all these worldly goods we had dragged in and out of cars and cursed along the way, feeling like it was Christmas as we found homes for them within the casa. All the art we brought looks just right here, thank goodness! The books flush out the tiny one shelf library. The organizers, waffle iron, griddle and extra utensils were a good addition to the kitchen. The new placemats and tablecloth were perfect colors. Very satisfying. The house was chilly and got chillier in the evening. We didn't want to turn on the gas heater in the fireplace because it looked like it had never been used and it said that the first time it would smoke so ventilate the area, which we didn't want to do because it was windy and cold outside. So we snuggled under the thoughtfully provided blankets stored away by the couch and watched some TV – 'Be Cool' with John Travolta -- in English with Spanish subtitles. Very educational.

Yesterday we did every errand we could think of with the rental car before we had to return it. We went to the nursery and bought a bunch of plants which were delivered this morning, so the whole place is looking much friendlier. We also went to the framers and ordered all the frames for the artwork we brought down. They deliver too, so really, who needs a car?

When we were home making some lunch, our architect Gabor showed up at the door. He has another project on the corner of our street and we told his workers to let him know we were back in town. He came in and it was a fun reunion with promises to get together socially sometime soon.

Then, after much weirdness trying to use the phones and dealing with Budget about whether they were even going to honor what the Budget man had told me about reimbursing us for the tire, etc., and where exactly did they want us to return the car (at one point telling us to return it to Queretero, but when we called that office for directions they said they were no longer a Budget office! Good thing we called.) Anyway, we returned it to the Leon Airport and took the bus home from Guanajuato. What a relief it was to leave the driving to the bus driver! We shut our eyes in the darkened bus and tried to let all the tension of the past few days fall away, with varying degrees of success. I also took the opportunity to figure out just how much difference there is between taking the airport van service *Viajes San Miguel* from the airport and taking a cab to Guanajuato and a bus to SMA. The bus is much more expensive for one person, the same cost but much more hassle for two, and starts to be a savings at three or more, but who wants to be bothered?

When we got into SMA we took a cab to Ten Ten Pie to have a little dinner, then walked across the very empty El Jardin in a frigid wind and caught another cab home. We slept very well last night, but I'm feeling a little sore throaty and sniffly. I think the chilly drafts and the sudden change in climate from being so hot in Mazatlan to freezing

here might have affected me. And the stress. Oh yes, the stress. Did I mention that? But we are here. Yay! And we are taking our time rediscovering places we love and the various changes that have happened since we've been gone.

But mostly everything is as we remembered it, or even better.

Que bueno!

IN SAN MIGUEL

November 4, 2007

A week after our arrival we are feeling both rested and accomplished. We have managed to get quite a bit done while still relaxing and enjoying ourselves. I have made a point of spending some time every day in El Jardin as my meditative practice, and have been writing up little vignettes from each experience.

Elba, our house cleaner who replaced her sister Elizabeth whom we hired when we were last here, is wonderful. Delightful, smiling with a ready laugh, thorough and honest. Javier just gave her a raise and she accepted it. We tried to pay Elizabeth more when we hired her but she was resolute. I think Elba recognizes that she has earned her raise.

We have eaten out about a quarter of the time and have found our kitchen quite sufficient for our needs. I brought our yogurt maker as the yogurt here is always either sweetened or artificially sweetened, and I like plain nonfat. I have also made a batch of lentils, and I've got ingredients to make a sweet potato soup. Other than that it's salads, eggs, etc. – easy stuff.

We are enjoying having Gabor on the corner most days as we go by, as he oversees the construction of his next house. We are getting to know the neighborhood a little better. We say hello to all the neighbors and have formally met a few. Javier came over on Tuesday afternoon and we went over all the projects we wanted to do. He took us to the end of our street where the stone carver Jose Juan works out in the open under a blue tarp, shaping pieces of our rocky hill. We discovered a family of pigs between his set up and the back of the tienda on the corner.

We also met Manuel who lives at the corner of San Gabriel and works for the Whynmans. He is working on another construction project for the Vandivers.

The neighborhood looks even better than before, with some nice architectural changes and trees having grown more on our street.

I feel good about our choice of neighborhood, especially for the quiet! Walking home from El Jardin the other night, it was so pleasant to enter into the fresh country air and calm of Obraje after the almost frantic pace of El Centro, as fun as it is.

And hanging around here in the day time is pleasant, so different from our rental in San Antonio, where the noises were constant and not at all restful.

Last night we went out with Linda & Saul Whynman and Liz Powell to Fabrica Aurora, where all the galleries were open and it was more crowded than we have ever seen it. The cars in the parking lot could neither get in nor out, it was such a jam. How nice that we live within a five minute walk!

We toured the various galleries, including the one shared by our neighbors Linda and (her son) Kelly Vandiver, and the new one of Gabor's folks (Gabor's father is the artist Jaime Goded and his mother has shops of beautiful Central American imported fabrics). Then we had a lovely dinner at the Factory, an upscale restaurant within the Fabrica. Saul and Linda know absolutely everyone, and kept introducing us to people. As we left the Fabrica around 10 PM, there were fireworks in the sky. Ah San Miguel.

This morning we went over to Saul and Linda's again, and they led us on a hike up the hill to the Presa with Liz and Martha. Liz is renting the house with the blue door a few doors down from us. She was our first renter when we bought the casa because she

needed it for a guest house when her relatives came to town last year when she was renting the casa across the street. She lives in Washington D.C. but spends as much time as possible in San Miguel, and always in Obraje, which she loves.

Martha also lived across the street (That casa has three rentals within it.) when we first moved in, and was part of our welcoming committee. She and her husband would have bought our house, they say, had they known they would be living in San Miguel full time. But because they thought they just wanted a little place for visits, they bought an apartment closer in and aren't all that happy there.

With my walking sticks I did just fine. In fact I have been doing a lot of walking since we have been here. With stable shoes and my Feldenkreis exercises and attention, I'm doing quite well, even with our little hill.

We got more art supplies and have been painting down in the basement. It makes a great studio except for the sink being upstairs. Good exercise I suppose.

Will is revising the big painting in the dining room, and I am doing two vertical paintings for the sides of the master bed. After that, we'll each do whatever art we feel like.

I am enjoying the ease of talking with friends and family on the Vonage line. It is nice and clear. It isn't very good for Mexican long distance, maybe not even local. But we have a cell phone for that.

November 11, 2007

We have had a very busy week trying to get all things accomplished so that we can relax and enjoy the rest of our stay and our upcoming visit and trip to Michoacan with Mike and Ellen. A bus trip to Queretaro resulted in just a few things from Home Depot, like weatherstripping and a couple of plastic storage chests for the towels and sheets. We visited a cramped showroom on Ancha to order curtains from Jose, someone Javier had recommended (though it turned out he didn't actually know him, he just was fed up with his current curtain man. His assistant, as it turns out, is a neighbor of ours on Calle Principal in Obraje. After we placed our order and received a handwritten note on a white sheet of paper that served as our receipt for the deposit, we asked him if he could recommend where we could buy upholstered comfy chairs for the master bedroom, and he said that he makes them, so we conferred using photos he had culled from a Pottery Barn catalog, and holding our arms just so to indicate size, and choosing a very nice fabric that just happened to be hanging on the wall, and hearing that it would cost about \$1100 for 2 chairs and an ottoman, and that he could have them made within two weeks, we pulled out more cash, and he turned the white sheet over and wrote another receipt!

So many workmen coming and going, the casa feels like grand central. We have an iron worker who is a master artist. Javier had hired him to make a gate for the top of the basement stairs. We had sent Javier some Googled images of gates we liked, and he had Armando Silva create what turned out to be a masterpiece. So now he is working on a little balcony for the guest bedroom window to hold potted plants, a railing so wobbly people won't, including myself at times, won't fall down the stairs, a curtain rod for the master bedroom, and a wall-hung coat rack in the shape of leaves which Will and I designed for the front hall.

We have a woodworker named Juan who is doing little shelving jobs. And Javier's brother and his crew were here installing stone shelves in the tall narrow niches on the terraza so that the Virgin of Guadalupe and Kwan Yin can sit above potted plants. They arrived in the early evening and worked virtually in the dark using a power grinder to cut little ledges to support the stone shelves we had made by Jose Juan, the stonemason down the street. We felt bad for the neighbors, but I doubt they thought much of it, as

noise just is a normal part of life here. Even in this quiet neighborhood occasional extreme noise would be tolerated. But still...

So things are getting done, or at least ordered and soon will be installed, and at some point it will all come together and we can take some photos for the website and say 'done!'. But not yet.

I had a long talk with Nancy in London yesterday – for free! The delights of Vonage! Elba was here cleaning so I perched on the desk to keep my feet off the floor so she could sweep and mop. I was feeling quite decadent, la senora de la casa laughing away with her girlfriend while someone else cleaned. I've never had someone else clean my home before. But here it would be selfish not to, and anyway, we aren't here most of the time and it's a service we provide to renters. It was fun to be present, in the background, as Javier dropped by to pay her and gave her a raise. Still meager, if standard for the area, but a raise is a raise and she was delighted.

Yesterday we had lunch at the circus tent by La Aurora. We always wondered what went on in there. It turns out it is an Italian restaurant! Very pleasant to sit outside in the dappled light of trees and look over La Aurora up at our casa. So there are three restaurants in La Aurora, not just two. Que bueno! We ordered a salad and pizza to share. The pizza was too much, we could only eat half, so we took it to go and as we walked up to El Jardin we came upon a little boy and old man I assume was his grandfather sitting on the sidewalk with their hands out. This is a not an atypical combination – the very old and very young who's only way to contribute to the support of the family is their ability to sit and look very sad. The little boy was looking pretty glum when we saw him, but the word pizza perked him right up and he gobbled it down. Nothing's every wasted here!

It is so odd that we are basically tourists who happen to own a house here. It will be a long time before we can claim anything more than that. We realize we are way too picky to be tenants ourselves, so here we are saddled with a casa to care for. But at least it's becoming more and more our very own perfect place. Of course, the better we make it the more it will be rented and the less opportunity there will be for us to stay ourselves. But that's okay. A problem I can live with at this point, as I would like to begin to recoup some of the money we have been pouring into it. I am still concerned about whether this is really going to work out financially. If not, it's the most expensive vacation travel ever.

November 16, 2007

We are waiting for Mike & Ellen to arrive so I may stop mid-point during this entry. Last night we went to Bella Italia with Linda & Saul. They came over here first to see the house, which they had seen only during construction. Linda is a local interior designer so we really appreciated her praise. She feels we could sell the Charco Cacti photo blow up prints on canvas, either through Charco or through Evos.

We made reservations last week for Bella Italia, not knowing who we would invite to go with us, but we weren't able to make reservations for two, so we figured we would find somebody no problem, and Linda was the first person I mentioned it to. They were able to point all the local notables. Doc Severensen most notable among them. He lives in SMA and often plays with the group that was playing Gil & Martes. They were quite sensational! And the fresh fish was very tasty. A much pricier place than we ever frequent, but a necessary once in a lifetime (or at least in a while) kind of experience.

With the arrival of Mike & Ellen we plan to just relax and enjoy ourselves and stop compulsively fixing up the casa. We have our art and most of our other furnishings in,

including the black out curtains that make night time nice and dark and should help to block out the sun in the summer. We await delivery on a full length mirror and two easy chairs and an ottoman we are having made, and the outdoor blinds for the downstairs windows. Javier's brother will come over tomorrow and touch up paint where he installed the shelves in the niches. Marco should come by someday and do touchup paint all over. And we plan to buy more plants, and we'll be making another trip to Dolores Hidalgo for more plates, etc. with Mike & El. But really, truly the lion's share is done. And the main thing is, I don't think anyone else is going to come in here and make a mess of concrete dust. So we will just forget about it for awhile and enjoy. I need to take a lot of photos for the website, but that will be fun.

November 19, 2007

Yesterday was Sunday and the four of us went for brunch at Antigua Santa Monica, known to be the best breakfast in town. A lovely courtyard and a nice buffet set the stage for a long leisurely meal with lots of good conversation. We shared stories from our childhoods, discussed the effects of divorce on children, etc. etc. It was lovely and relaxing and rich.

Then we strolled through Parque Juarez, watched a men's and a women's basketball game for a little while before heading down to Ancha, up Zacateras, through El Jardin and on the market to get things for dinner. It was great to go to the all day market, choosing vegetables for dinner, buying tomatoes from one vendor, chayote from another, on through the market. Everyone was very nice and friendly. Sometimes I get intimidated by markets because of aggressive sellers, but there was none of that. We were welcomed, took our time, given extra helpings, etc. It was delightful.

At home we watched as a storm gathered. A deep grey cloud paved a sky road from the north, then circled around overhead. Lightning flashed in the distance and we set up the terrace chairs under the eaves to prepare to watch the show. However when the raindrops started falling they slanted so much they were hitting the chairs and even the doors, well under the overhang. And then it began to hail! The skylights took such a beating we thought they might break. The west-facing doors all started having water coming in underneath and we were rushing around with mops trying to keep the water away from rugs and furniture. The kitchen door flooded as well, and the main skylight leaked and water was coming down the stairs into the living room. What a mess! Que lio!

Thank goodness there were four of us running around.

After about twenty minutes it subsided. We mopped up the remains, tossed the towels we'd used into the washer and poured ourselves glasses of wine, relieved that we had bought food and were planning to be in for the night.

Ellen made a fabulous pasta dish with angel hair pasta, cilantro pesto, chayote, garlic, onion, tomato and zucchini, and parmesan cheese. Yum. We also had a salad but it was totally unnecessary. Again we sat around the table and talked for hours. This time about religion, culture, public speaking and many other topics. How delicious to have dear friends to really spend time with talking at this luxurious length! But they say if I say que bueno one more time they will bop me over the head.

Later we sat in the living room, Ellen knitting, me reading out of her guidebook about the cities of Morelia and Patzcuaro, where we will be in a couple of days.

November 26, 2007

We returned from Michoacan yesterday, having spent a really lovely four nights in that absolutely gorgeous state. The bus ride there was direct to Morelia and took about 3-1/2 hours. The Primera Plus bus is not as nice as ETN, because even though they both have movies, on ETN you get to choose whether to hear it or not with earphones,

whereas on Primera Plus it blasts you whether you like it or not. But sometimes PP is the best choice for the trip, and that was so in this case.

We rode through familiar territory until Celaya, where we have shopped at the Home Depot and Costco. Traveling through the sprawling flat city took half an hour, but off in the distance we could see an enticing collection of domes that we have promised ourselves to visit the next time we have to go there.

Most of the way we saw the trees that have white flowers before leafing blooming all along the road and out in the fields. (We have a small version at home that Katie gave us, but we forgot the name, so we kept asking. Our tour guide in Patzcuaro said that they call it la rosa blanca de Michoacan. Our taxi driver said it is a palo blanco. We'll ask Katie when we get home because she will know.) We also saw white birds roosting in other trees, so many that they looked like white flowers blooming.

From there to Morelia we saw two lakes. We were enchanted by the first lake and the town of Yuriria on its southern shore. Perhaps we will visit there someday. The second lake we actually crossed over, the highway just a narrow strip with vast water in both directions. We saw many shore birds, including a great blue heron, and there were little fishing boats casting nets, and white shorebirds were 'helping', lining up around the edges of the nets to get the first pickings. From a distance it did look like a collaborative effort. The clumps of reeds, the softness of the moist air and the elegant egrets, all made it feel very magical.

We arrived in Morelia, took the taxi to our hotel Solidaridad, just a block off the main square, and were just in time to go out and enjoy some lunch, a big buffet with all manner of local specialties, most of which Will and I couldn't eat, but we got enough beans, rice and salad, and I made a feast of their delicious rice pudding.

We spent our 24 hours in Morelia visiting all the main sites and museums. We felt it was a grand city with beautiful buildings, the most well kept central plaza I've ever seen, and lots of outdoor dining under covered portales. Two clever things we have only ever seen in Morelia: the city is full of VW and other kinds of vans that are called Colectivos, a cross between a taxi and a bus. The seating inside is all around the edge of the vehicle, their routes are marked, and to get in one you hail it like a cab. We didn't try it as we were well within walking distance of everything we wanted to see. As pedestrians we appreciated the animated running figure on the crosswalk lights. When the light turns green he springs into action, walking at a leisurely pace, but as the countdown gets into lower figures, he starts to run, and you better as well! It's a big city and people don't wait for you! However, all the people we met were very nice. The city was exceptionally clean and there was very little begging. I had our ham sandwiches from the bus trip to give away and I couldn't find anyone to give it to!

Strolling musicians played for us as we ate in one of the outdoor restaurants. One old fellow played particularly soulful renditions of familiar tunes.

We dodged the rain quite a bit in both Morelia and Patzcuaro, but they were only brief downpours and easy to sit out.

The Hotel Solidaridad was a good choice. Convenient and quiet, as we asked for rooms in the quieter section. Our rooms were small with huge king size beds, an odd decorating choice, but we all slept well.

At noon the next day we checked out and grabbed a cab to go to the bus depot to catch a bus to Patzcuaro. The driver asked if we wouldn't just rather be driven to Patzcuaro, and he gave us a price of \$20 USD that we could hardly refuse, as that was almost the same as the four of us taking the bus, and certainly less of a hassle. His name was Norberto and we had not only a nice ride but a guided tour along the way. So, when we arrived we tipped him well, and he offered to return on Sunday to pick us up. We agreed, though we were a little concerned how we would fit one more thing in the

cab, as we did plan on doing some shopping in Patzcuaro. He assured us he would make room for whatever we bought, so we said, why not? It turns out to have been a very good deal, as we saw the van prices listed in the hotel office.

We stayed at La Casa Encantada, again just a block off the main square. What a beautiful bed and breakfast! Both our rooms were absolutely lovely, and huge, with enough bed space for us to have shared one room. But glad we didn't. Instead we traded off hosting happy hour with the two bottles of wine we purchased the first day. The breakfasts were delicious and the people lovely.

We had read that Patzcuaro restaurants offered 'decent' food, which wasn't very comforting when we planned to spend three nights there, but we were pleasantly surprised for the most part. Our first lunch was actually exceptional. We went to Asadero, a place recommended to us by the ex-pat who owns the restaurant Cha Cha Cha, which was closed for lunch as they were preparing a Thanksgiving feast for the ex-pat community. At Asadero, marked by a plastic horse you can ride for a peso at the door, we were given a delicious comida for \$5 USD. We were very thankful!

Our first full day we had a guided tour led by a local Hurepecha woman Arminda Flores whose husband is from Missouri. She spoke excellent English but we ended up speaking a lot in Spanish since everyone knew some. We shared the van and guide with a couple of men from San Francisco: Larry and Adrian. Adrian was born and raised in Amatlan near Ixtlan which we had driven through on our ride to Guadalajara. They have homes in SF, Sonoma, Guadalajara and are looking to buy in SMA.

The best moment was when Arminda sang us a traditional Hurepecha song. But the whole six hours was lovely, traveling around the beautiful countryside which goes from verdant to dry in a matter of a few miles. The mountains are all volcanic and very steep, so the clouds are continuously forming and changing. The stretch along the lake was absolutely spectacular, and in parts reminded us more of tropical Hawaii.

We visited two artists' studios, one on an amazing estate, the other in a typical in town humble setting, with the old fashioned round washing machine working away on the family's clothing.

We also visited a couple different markets and bought a few things for the casa. We all agreed beforehand that we were primarily interested in seeing the landscape and getting a sense of the culture rather than buying stuff. But of course we want to help the local economy too, so.....

We had lunch in Quiroga sitting under a portal by the pretty plazuela. A bank of little video games was nearby and kept piping out their awful little tunes to lure us to play. But we managed to ignore them, and I practiced my expanded listening techniques. But I did want to hear everything our guide was saying at the end of the table, and that wasn't always easy.

That night we were finally able to get access to the internet on the hotel computer. I was horrified to learn from our neighbor that water was pouring out of our house!!! Fortunately she contacted Gabor and he sent someone over to turn it off. I called Sylvia, Javier's wife, since he is out of the country, and she went over to look things over and make sure everything was okay. The garage was wet, but the house was fine. We assumed it was our purification system doing its messy backwash. That business taken care of, I read some of the other emails. Among them was the sad news that my nephew Todd has a melanoma on his shoulder. Sometimes you just shouldn't go online when you are on vacation! So of course I'm worried about him, and I didn't have access to call while there, but will this evening.

The next morning Will, Michael & Ellen hiked to the view point at the top of a very steep hill before breakfast. Later we went exploring in town, did a little more shopping

and ate lunch. Tarascan soup became quite a regular choice, a local specialty, it's a bean soup.

On Sunday we went for a last quick walk around town before checking out. Norberto arrived punctually and off we went to the Morelia bus depot, where we said our goodbyes to Mike & Ellen – we were sad to see our fun time together end! They went off on a bus to Leon and to the airport to fly to Oakland. We looked around for a more interesting way to go back to SMA, but eventually decided the ETN to Queretaro and then a local bus to SMA made the most sense. We didn't have to wait anywhere, buses are just so frequent and efficient. We were home by 5:30, to discover that our water was turned off and if we tried to turn it on, it was a big leak. So we called Gabor and he said he'd send someone in the morning, which he did, and it's all fixed now.

We had a nice basura visit with Liz & Linda and met some of the other neighbors as well. We talked for a long time about a local maid who they both like who has been terribly abused by the Mexican family she worked for 16 years. So many cultural adjustments to make, and when it comes to cruelty to animals or extreme class-ism, it's very challenging.

November 28, 2007

I talked to Lesa on the phone this morning. She and Matt are in town for the week and we hope to see them and their house under construction in San Antonio. I said I hoped she was enjoying her stay and she said that it just felt like one big to do list that never gets done. I recognized us in her words. Certainly we have our to do list!! And trying to get things done on foot, bus and taxi is challenging. If we were home using a car, we would organize a list of errands, storing bought items in the car while we did the rest of our list. But here without a car it's much more challenging to do more than one thing at a time. Yesterday afternoon around 4 pm we set out to the nursery near the bus depot. We decided to walk because we hadn't had any exercise that day and also so we could look in at the various wood furniture manufacturers along the way. A bad time of day to be walking west with the sun shining harshly in our eyes, but we forged ahead. We were looking for side tables for our new bedroom easy chairs and each shop had ones that were too low, too big, or too weird. Finally we found a pair of unfinished tables in a shop that is a bright yellow tent a few blocks before the bus depot. We purchased the pair for \$60 USD, but told them we would stop back in about 45 minutes, right before their closing time, to pick them up. We headed down to the nursery, hoping we would find all the pots and plants we needed there because it is much cheaper than others we have visited, mainly because they don't deliver. Since we were shopping for small plants, we figured a taxi could handle it. We only found three plants to buy and no pots, hailed a taxi, had him stop at the furniture store, piled everything into the trunk except one plant in hand, and drove home. Every time you make a stop with a taxi, it is a new fare, so running errands that way can get expensive. But in this case it was worth it.

This morning Will walked to the local hardware and paint stores to get patching cement, stain for the tables, silicone to patch any leaks in the skylight, and spent under twelve dollars. So satisfying to give business to local shops instead of Home Depot!

Meanwhile I have been calling the insurance people about the status on the car repair, and writing up a list for Elba for whenever a tenant leaves. Now I have to translate it into Spanish and take some photos of how we want the house to look. The only way we can possibly manage a rental from 2300 miles away! Javier is a great

property manager and Elba is a terrific house cleaner, but neither of them are mind readers, and I know how American tenants want to find a house.

December 3, 2007

The house is almost absolutely complete for this visit. The blinds for the living room are installed. All that's left are a couple of extra geraniums for the balcony and another plant for the niche, and a small fan for the guest bedroom. We are absolutely broke, so it's good that we're done spending! Of course it will cost \$ to go home, but we are hoping we can charge most of it.

We have been enjoying getting together with various friends:

We went and visited the Knapps in their casa on San Jorge one late afternoon, then went around the corner and visit Lesa & Matt and got a tour of their casa under construction. In our discussion, they mentioned they were having a Mexican will made up and that they needed witnesses, so we said we'd be fine with that. The next evening we met at 6 pm at the abogado's office in town. A jumble of little rooms and squeaky stairs, with the retired father sitting on the landing watching the scene. The son is a very personable and apparently capable lawyer who speaks excellent English, making the translator superfluous. But she was a really neat woman who had lots of interesting tales to tell about San Miguel and especially land deals, like the property behind our house which seems to be irretrievably muddled in title issues. She had a lot of time to relay the stories because I didn't know we needed passports etc, so I took a cab back home and retrieved them. The elderly driver had his wife along, not the first time we've experienced this cozy phenomenon, and we chatted as we made the round trip (well more than round because I also didn't have my keys on me and had to circle the block right after we set out and get Will's (!!!). Anyway, they live in San Antonio on Privada San Felipe, so I told them that I was on an errand in service of some new neighbors of theirs, etc.

When we were finally out of the abogado's office, Matt & Lesa strolled home with us to take the tour of our casa, with appropriate oohs and aahhs. Then we walked down together to Bugumbelia for dinner, which they insisted on paying for as we had done them the favor of witnessing their will making. They wouldn't take no for an answer.

So in effect we had two evenings getting to know them better, and it was lots of fun. Perhaps we'll see them in the Bay Area as well.

Then on Friday night Don came over for drinks and we walked down to the Food Factory in La Aurora for dinner. It was fun to catch up with him.

Then on Saturday we met a fellow from Pittsburg in El Jardin who told us about a free Mozart concert at the Teatro, so we decided to attend. He and his partner sat behind us and afterwards we went out for a bite to eat. The concert was really a Mozart – Solieri play of sorts. All in Spanish so I was the only one of the four who understood anything, but they knew the story, so it wasn't hard to follow. And the chamber orchestra played beautiful and the operatic parts were great. Us! Culture! Who knew?

Sunday we were so exhausted from all our mountains of casa-based errands and endeavors over the past weeks, that we literally stayed horizontal most of the day, with bouts of photo taking of the prettied up casa for the website.

Then in the evening the Knapps came over for drinks and then we drove up in their car to the Villa Real with its gorgeous sunset views out over the town and lake, drank

margaritas and had a nice dinner, the only customers in the whole place. Tom and Linda say it's almost always like that, and we couldn't figure out how they stay in business.

Today we made yet another list of final finals, and one of those was for me to really evaluate our financial situation to figure out how we'll manage to get home. Yikes!!

First thing I did was bill my clients so at least checks will be waiting for us when we get home, but really, we have never since we were very young been so cash-free. We don't like it, so now we are walking around all glum, giving up totally the various ideas we had about how to entertain ourselves while we wait and wait for the car to be ready (They are again saying two weeks!) We had thought to take tours and field trips. We had thought to visit Mexico City on our way to fly to Mazatlan. But now that's seeming unrealistic and we are digging around in the cupboards to use up foodstuff and plan to eat at home from here on in. Gruel!

Perferio who made the full length mirror stand came by today to show his portfolio. We had expected him last Monday, and last Monday we might have ordered something else. So it's good he came today, after our cruel-gruel evaluation. We told him we couldn't order anything this time, but made notes of things we liked in his portfolio and will keep it on file for future possible ordering.

Although we are down about our financial situation, we are very pleased to have accomplished what we set out to do with the casa and at all very good prices, considering what we did. So we can only hope that it was a good investment, that once people see the new photos the casa will be all the more irresistible, and that tenants will feel so at home here they will always want to return.

I am also feeling great that I have physically survived all this time in San Miguel. My leg has been under control thanks to Feldenkreis, good shoes, etc. My skin has not been as miserable as it was last time. And I haven't felt ill, other than an occasional queasy stomach, which is just par for the course for everyone I think. So yay! I can spend time here! This is really big news!

I am getting homesick for family and friends, but I do love it here and enjoy almost every minute. But feeling strapped makes it less fun, not that it's an expensive place to hang out, but just worrying limits the possibilities. So it's definitely time to head home. If only we could!!

December 8, 2007

Saturday morning. We woke this morning at 6AM to the most spectacular set of booms and bell banging ever. It sounded more like fireworks than sky rockets, because they went off so many at a time. They went on for a good 15 – 20 minutes. Then when one bell stopped banging, another church started up with its bells. Big day! This week is all about the Virgin of Guadalupe, all leading up to her birthday on the 12th.

On Thursday we were walking up Calzada de Aurora with Brian and Toi, after they had visited with us, and on our way to see their casa rental in Centro, and suddenly a little parade was coming down the street, using up only one lane, with drummers all in blue leading the way, and the Virgin being carried in a glass box that looked as if it would topple any time, and then a small band of devotional followers. We were in Colonia Guadalupe, and all week they are doing things for the Virgin, but it's impossible for us to really know exactly what or when, so how wonderful to have just happened upon this little event.

We had a nice visit with Brian and Toi before they left the next day. Then on Friday we visited with Elenita and Howard in their casa rental in Ojo de Agua. We sat up on their rooftop terrace under the shade of an umbrella and shared stories of trips and classes. Elenita is taking a jewelry making course while Howard is studying Spanish many hours a day. Her first attempts are quite beautiful and she is discovering that even though she has never done any art or craft, she is able to do this. People do find new parts of themselves here!

They have just signed a year long lease for a casa on San Jorge in San Antonio, just a few blocks closer to El Centro than where we lived last January and February. They are very excited about the neighborhood and I am sure they will know everyone there in no time, as Elenita is particularly community oriented and is fluent in Spanish, being a Cuban-American herself.

We feel very ensconced and embraced in our little neighborhood of Obraje. When we walk out or back to Centro we have a number of people to say hi to along the way: the construction workers on both Gabor's house and Kelly's, the stoneworkers, the tienda people and all the children, and of course the dogs.

The children play in the street to all hours of the night, so they are generally about when we walk home in the evening. They have developed the art of playing futbol on a steep street. Of course, they have the energy to chase the ball down the hill, if needed, but it's a great exciting challenge to beat gravity, I imagine!

The adolescents hang around in groups or couples in the evening, often playing video games provided by both the tiendas. They'll never know what role Will played in the creation of those video games, but he would have quite a little following if they did! As it is, they have come to accept us and even say 'hola, buenas dias/tardes/noches' before we do. Yay!

The neighborhood dogs have accepted us too, and they are a motley crew. The one we know best we have named Lion, as he looks just like the lion in the Wizard of Oz. He is asthmatic and originally tried to make feeble attempts at defending his territory when we were introduced to the 'shortcut' which accesses Calle Principal, a misnamed street if ever there was one, as it only recently got paved and is still only one lane. When we walked there with Brian and Toi, Brian wanted to take a photo of Lion because he looked 'just like Bert Lahr.'

There is another mangy white dog owned by the people who own the card store in town. The gringos, especially the gringas, are particularly offended by the casual-at-best care Mexicans give their pets. These owners are well-off but it never crosses their mind to have their dogs groomed. Just not the done thing. Then there are a couple of terrace yappers who we try to appease, but it's difficult at a distance. There is one soft brown pit bull who we were concerned about when we first bought the house because he was a puppy and the little boy in charge of him seemed abusive. You really want to make sure pit bulls get sufficient love and care and don't grow up with grudges! But he seems okay. It's just the Mexican way.

The corner tienda senora gave me permission to feed her pigs, who live in a pen between the back of her store and the stonecutters' area. I hated throwing away our

organic garbage when I knew those pigs were there. So we took the bag of organic basura over one day on our way out, only to discover the pigs were all curled up together so sweetly in the morning sunshine. How they slept on the pile of rocks that fill half their pen, the other half being a concrete slab, I do not know, but they seemed quite content. The parents were on each side of the two little piglets, creating a cozy little haven for them. Aw! I couldn't bear to wake them up, so I took the bag back home. The next day I went again, and they were awake, so I dumped the contents of the bag into their pen. They were so fast that before I was done pouring they were scarfing it up, and I was trying not to drop it on their heads. Not that they would have noticed! Good grief! I truly understand now why pigs are called pigs!! I watched from above as they gobbled up the peelings and leftovers of our vegetarian life. All four moved constantly, circling around in search of the best bits. I could see their preferences by what they ate first. The things they liked least remained until the bitter end: egg shells and onions. Well, ugh, really. I won't give them those again! But while watching, all sweet notions of cute piggyness left me. What a sight! Then when they started getting to the last of it, the father got aggressive in his greediness, grunting and pushing aside the piglets so they squealed painfully, then doing the same to the sow! Nice! Where was sweet Wilbur? Ah well. So I'm helping fatten up my neighbor's future supper. It's still a better use of the basura, and a little treat for fellow creatures.

December 10, 2007

Monday morning of the week we are supposed to leave, if all goes well with poor Zuley. We had a very social weekend. Saturday we wandered into El Jardin, camera in hand, to try to capture some of the details that we will miss when we're gone. Impossible, but a worthy goal. We were standing in a long line at the ATM when I heard a marching band, so we abandoned the line and headed off down Canal to see what we could see. As it turned out the band was playing in the courtyard of the Temple of the Immaculate Conception. We listened for a while, my eyes welling up for all this wondrous rich living we will miss in our little cocoon of a home in Marin, isolated, planned and at least for the coming weeks, devoid of much warmth from the sun.

There were men building a castillo fireworks construction. I asked when it would be going off and they said 9:30 that night. So after a restful afternoon at home, we prepared for a long evening out, starting with a lecture on the Virgin of Guadalupe at the Warren Hardy Spanish School. Among other things I learned the name of the Aztec goddess on whose hilltop the Virgin appeared: (phonetically) koo-aht-lee-kway. The speaker suggested it is perfectly possibly that to Spanish ears, it might sound like the more familiar Spanish river name Guadalupe.

We were talking to a couple from Mendocino who own a house in San Antonio named Larry & Harriet. Afterwards we agreed to go for a drink with them to the Terraza and subsequently to the fireworks at the church. Very fun.

On Sunday Meg & David Graves, fresh in from their apartment in Nice, came over for brunch. I served everything I could think of that I will most miss and they may have missed when they were gone: chayote, juicy jicama, etc. I made a frittata with a Mexican feel to it, served it up with avocado slices, salsa and cilantro on top, a jicama salad, papaya slices, and the muffins from the panandaria that Will went and got that morning. He also went to the juice stand, where he had a nice conversation with the juice man while he squeezed to order the juice.

We were having such a nice visit, but then the conversation turned to their support of nuclear energy and it became a long but contained disagreement. They have invested in uranium so need to believe that nuclear energy has the brightest hope to save the world, and they were determined to convince us with lame arguments that this is true. Which

they didn't, but the process was exhausting. Especially since, as hostess, I felt compelled to be incredibly nice, instead of calling them on some of their precariously built constructs. Since they were striking a nerve, I sometimes lost my perfect grace under fire, but we ended with hugs and kisses, agreeing to disagree.

They told us they are selling their house they built in San Antonio and moving to Southern California. They need to make a living! So do we!

Too tired to go out after that, and because I'm out of reading matter, we hunkered down in front of the TV and the movie we found to watch was about energy, and specifically the possibility of nuclear fission (or is it fusion, anyway, the one that hasn't been done.) Weird.

December 14, 2007

Still here! We were supposed to start our trip home yesterday, but the car is not quite ready to be picked up. It is apparently being painted. We have made reservations for a flight to Mazatlan for Monday evening, and will pick up Zulie on Tuesday morning, then spend a day relaxing on the beach before heading out early Wednesday. That's the plan!

So we are still here. We wanted to be here for the Virgin's birthday, but I think in the future if we have the option we will leave on December 11th. There are plenty of festivities leading up to the big day, and the day itself is just one big boom after another. They set off more skyrockets than I have ever heard. At midnight they did a bunch for a long time, then sporadically through the night, then at 5 AM they started in earnest and went on solidly for 3 straight hours, then sporadically throughout the day and into the evening. Then that night was absolutely silence, even the roosters were too exhausted to crow! Just seems like a really strange and sort of violent way to celebrate the day of a peace loving goddess!

Last night we were home watching a DVD and smelled smoke. We looked out and one of the fields in front of the house was ablaze! Boy, if that happened at home, we would be evacuating! Here we just went up on the roof and watched in wonder. Above us the sky was absolutely clear with brilliant stars, but right in front of us was a wall of fire and smoke. Creepy. There were people pushing around the fire in the field. And this morning the whole field wasn't black, just parts. Strange country!

I had a challenging but ultimately fun time with Elba on Tuesday, telling her how we want the house prepared for people, etc. Javier was supposed to come help translate, but he didn't show and so she and I just did it ourselves, laughing hysterically at times. She loved my Leona Helmsley imitation. I think she's totally on the bandwagon with making guests feel like nobody else has ever dirtied the place before them. I had to go into a whole explanation of the weird estadounidense mindset of 'other people's cooties' etc. She was totally fine with clearing out the refrigerator and cupboard of opened packages and taking them home to her family. I am sure she'll be disappointed we are still here when she arrives tomorrow because she'll be planning to clear the kitchen out. Ah well. We did our hugs and emotional goodbyes and now here we still are. How awkward!

I took photos of both her and Javier, but they each stood there as stiff as boards and none of their wonderful warm smiling personalities came out.

THE TRIP HOME

December 18, 2007

We are in Mazatlan at the Las Flores Beach Resort in the Zona Dorada. We thought we'd experience the other side of Mazatlan, the one with no bad associations! But also a little beach time sounded very nice and we are spending two nights. We flew in last night and leave first thing tomorrow morning for our drive home.

We are leaving later than we had originally planned. They couldn't guarantee the car would be ready on Friday, so we didn't fly out Thursday because we couldn't afford to stay here waiting for the car to be ready. Then it was ready Friday, but we couldn't fly over the weekend because it cost twice as much, so Monday it was.

I appreciated having a few more days in San Miguel to fine tune the Welcome Book, upgrade the website and the VRBO and Vacation Rentals listings, and do some online Christmas shopping so that there will be packages waiting for us when we get home.

We bought some Mexican wrapping paper for them, and if we can't find a little tree in time we will put up our papeles picados and hope the kids enjoy the theme. Christmas will be so different anyway because our traditional breakfast is not something Katie can eat, not that she's discovered she is gluten intolerant, so why not just change the whole thing!

I also appreciated not ending with a bang but a choral send off. Wednesday was the Virgin's birthday and we thought it would be the most spectacular of days, with fireworks etc. But for the most part it was just one endless boom! From midnight into the following evening. From 5 AM to 8AM they went off in endless succession.

A few days later the Virgin is, well not forgotten surely but it is now Christmas that takes the forefront. And it's not just preparations for the 25th the way it is at home (Commercially that has been happening since before Day of the Dead, just as at home.)

Here it is all about Posadas, which starts on December 16th. There was a tree lighting ceremony, fireworks and a chorale singing in El Jardin that night, the night before we left. So that was a very sweet send off.

After a three part trip yesterday (local bus to Queretaro, 3 hr direct bus to Mexico City airport, 1-1/2 hour flight to Mazatlan), we arrived at our hotel to discover that there was a huge loud raucous fiesta for the employees going on to celebrate Posada. What they are also celebrating is receiving the state mandated two week pay sized bonus that is given in mid December. The employees rotated the reception shift while the rest partied on into the night until 2 AM, so that every time we went by the reception desk there was a different person there. We took a stroll on the beach and got a drink next door at Pancho's, a bar restaurant that had a real warm intimate appeal. There we watched people at the other table being made a Spanish coffee, a quite elaborate and flaming process that at one point had flaming alcohol poured at three levels!

Our room has an ocean view and Deer Island is right smack in front of us. Las Flores is not a luxury resort, as the rooms are underwhelming to say the least, but the location is spectacular and concrete bedsteads, tiny ants everywhere, and a purified water spigot down the hall dripping its last drops into our pitcher don't diminish the pleasure of that view and the sound of the ocean.

December 20, 2007

Sitting at the Nogales border crossing for almost 1-1/2 hours now with no end in sight, I decided to get out my laptop.

We left Mazatlan yesterday morning at 8 AM. The Toyota dealer checked out Zulie and said that although it needs a new water pump and fan, it should make it to California. No water pumps or fans are available in Mexico for it.

The drive up to Ciudad Obregon was blissfully uneventful. We arrived about 4 PM. We spent the night in a room facing traffic and with a high pitched noisy neighbor chattering away on her cell phone until early in the morning. Couldn't quite hear her well enough for it to be a Spanish lesson, just noise. We had margaritas, then dinner at the hotel (Holiday Inn) and went straight to bed. I remember weird dreams from all the sounds in the hallway and street, but I was too exhausted to care.

This morning we left at 7:30, the earliest we could leave and get breakfast at the hotel. Today went well also, and here we are, waiting in line in the middle of a multi-lane highway with huge trucks going up and down the hill on either side of us, vendors standing at our windows trying to lure us with one last Mexican souvenir. We are moving about 2 car lengths every 5 minutes, which means they are doing pretty thorough inspections, I would think. Maybe because it's right before Christmas and they freak out about terrorists more during holidays. But what a drag!

We did our Lola Lago (Spanish detective story) reading. I read a paragraph, Will translates it, I read the whole chapter, Will reads the whole chapter. It works out pretty well as a learning device.

We have been trying to compose the various things we have seen on this trip to the tune of 12 Days of Christmas, but it's not working, because everything we see we see so many of. We actually did go through 12 cuotas (toll booths). But we also saw two Virgins of Guadalupe painted on the mountainsides, many roadside altars to her, many more roadside crosses in memory of someone who died there, loads of cows, goats, burros and horses grazing; a wondrous flock of cranes taking off from a pond; countless Pemex gas station, six military checkpoints, one of which had trucks lined up for miles (kind of like this one we're in!), and only two that actually looked in our trunk and sorted through our stuff; many beautiful mountains in interesting shapes unlike what we see at home; countless cacti, and about a gazillion topes (speed bumps), and at every tope there are vendors selling something, but never anything you want!

December 21, 2007

Well we waited a total of three hours to cross into the US. Men were leaving their cars and running across dangerous lanes to climb around fences and behind hills to pee. We women just had to wait and develop bladder infections. Hope everyone had enough water! Glad we didn't have any children in the car begging for every trinket of every vendor passing by or sometimes knocking on the windows!

Anyway, we finally got through, and as we drove north to Tucson, I sang "This is MY Country" until Will begged me to stop. The sun was down and the purple mountains looked pretty spectacular against the pink sky, all soft and rich and delicious.

We arrived at David & Leah's house, Ellen and Madeleine peeping out the window at us. We got to meet Gabriel who was four days old, and were fed delicious pizza and salad. The family was so very cute and in love with their new addition, while being sure Madeleine still felt like the star of the show.

We helped tidy up before leaving the parents and children to their beds, and drove to the house being loaned to Mike and Ellen. It happens to be in Winterhaven, a neighborhood in Tucson that was actually constructed to be Christmas decoration center, with a Christmas Lane, etc. So here are our dear Jewish friends stuck in a house in the middle of a Christmas mecca! The only way to drive into the neighborhood after 5:30 pm is with the resident passes that each of our cars sported. But unfortunately this

happened to be the one night that was set aside for drive through viewing of all the lights on all the houses in the whole community. The line waiting to enter the neighborhood was several blocks long. Another line! We couldn't believe it. But we did find a back way in and worked our way through the crowded streets and eventually found their house with the single string of chili peppers on it. The friends they borrowed the house from are also Jewish, visiting Israel while all this goes on at home. After we unloaded our luggage, we went out to walk around the neighborhood. I goaded Ellen into singing *Walkin' in a Winter Wonderland* with me. There were no overtly Christian themes, so it really was just a big light show. And Christians don't have the corner on lights!

Then we came back and had some hot chocolate before toddling off to a nice night's sleep in a deliciously quiet bedroom.

This morning the four of us went for breakfast at a breakfast mecca David and Leah recommended. We were a little put off by the gift store entry room, but were seated in a covered area outside under a heat lamp. It started to rain and we were concerned that we would be driving in wet conditions, but it cleared up once we were underway. Unfortunately as we headed west we experienced endless desert sandstorms and high winds. Ugh! It felt like a much longer ride than coming the other way. But we are here in San Bernardino at a cheapy little hotel and tomorrow we drive home. Yay!

December 23, 2007

We are home safe and sound and happy to be here. Our night in the cheapy little hotel was an experiment in deep thrift gone awry. Clues were there that might have told us we would not be sleeping well: the reception office had a glass wall between guests and staff with a little hole to pass papers through; a heavy duty security monitor system was set up in there as well; creepy guys hung out on the motel balcony corners, endlessly waiting for something; hardcore porn channel on the TV set; no coffeemaker (because no one ever hangs around that long?); no extra pillows or blanket (because regular guests don't need to sit up to watch TV and are too overheated to need a blanket?) Ah well, it was a noisy night that reminded me of my stay in the Hotel du Commerce in Paris when I was 20. A lot of negotiations going on outside. We had a traveling rule now to not get back in the car once we've stopped for the day. So for dinner we set out to walk to what looked like a nearby 'hospitality row' where the restaurants were. The area was much further away than the map suggested, but it was good to be walking in the clear night air, and we found a Souplantation, which is just like Fresh Choice, that satisfied all our daily requirements for vegetables, if only we had left it at that and hadn't indulged in all the baked goodies.

Back at the motel, we naturally had to check out this porn channel, but it was pretty lame, so naturally I fantasize on how they could improve their movie making techniques, rather than what they should have been inspiring me to. Ah well. Then HBO had Blood Diamond on and we hadn't see that so instead of going to sleep early we actually ended up going to sleep later than usual, which is just as well because it was too noisy outside to sleep really.

At 4AM we were both awake and Will said "Let's go." So we packed up quick and escaped into the night. And what a night! Winter solstice, and a fullish moon sinking into the northwestern sky. We followed it down a virtually empty Highway 10 right into downtown Los Angeles, Hollywood, all lit up – just breezing through in the dark and onto Highway 101 into Ventura County, the ocean starting to reflect the morning light revealing the Channel Islands and oil rigs, arriving in Santa Barbara at dawn where we had coffee at Ubiqui-Bucks. Then we drove on over the warm-lit hills and through the still

dark valleys covered with frost. As we descended into San Luis Obispo there was a huge plume of the thickest blackest smoke we had ever seen. As we came around a turn we could see its source: a big rig on fire in the lane next to ours. Rescue workers were there and we hoped that the driver was safe. We could feel the heat of the fire as we drove by.

In San Luis Obispo we stopped for breakfast at a place called Louisa's. A big bowl of good hearty oatmeal and we were back on the road, heading north, taking turns at the wheel and sleeping.

In San Jose we stopped off at sister Rose's house and had a visit with her and our great niece Elana, now 13. As we had an hour's drive left, and just barely that much left in us before we needed to hit the sack, we couldn't stay long.

When we first sighted our mountain from a distance, cresting a hill on 880 in Oakland, it looked so small and round and dear compared to the craggy notched peaks we had come from. Home.

As we paused at the bottom of our driveway to check the mailbox, Jason and Katie pulled up behind us. When we got up to the top of the hill, Katie scolded us for getting home too early for her surprise. But it was a better surprise for getting to see her deliver it: all our basic groceries so we don't have to shop right away, and a beautiful little Christmas tree.

She looks well, they seem well, and the house is in good shape thanks to her care. She has also been buying plants for the garden!

I will deal with all that pile of mail in a few mananas. For now it is enough to be home, a funny kind of home so filled with wood! Pale wood floors and counters, fir trim, wooden doors. It's just so very different!

We took a nap and when we woke, we had some soup and then I went off to go Christmas caroling, a tradition I haven't missed once in over 30 years, and I am so grateful I was home just in time to do it. Our neighborhood of Gerstle Park is not quite Winterhaven, but many houses have gussied themselves up quite beautifully, and it is a pleasure to sing outside their doors and be able to thank them for adding to the spirit of the season.

This morning we got to the grocery store and Trader Joe's before 9 AM and the crowds. We managed to spend \$250 just like that! The grocery dollar doesn't stretch like it does in San Miguel, that's for sure! As we filled the cupboards and I made plans for cooking for Christmas and for this cold weather (soups! stews! – no more salads for awhile!) I felt like our wondrous Mexico journey is truly over. There will be a next time, but it will never be a driving trip! As for Zuley, what a champ to make such a journey with missing parts and strange sounds. Having traveled in a foreign land with no other Priuses, he is hailed as returning wounded by all the many Priuses of Marin, and especially the blue ones. They call out cheers and say not to worry. There's plenty of parts here and soon Zuley will be as good as the new car it is.

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