

San Miguel, The Second Time Around

January 2007

Having fallen in love with San Miguel on our first visit, we decided to rent a casa for two months and see if it is a place we might consider settling, at least part time. The casa we found on the internet turned out to be owned by a couple who lives in Berkeley. She is a professor of archeology and he is a civil rights attorney. Long before we rented their casa, we went out to dinner together and found them to be quite interesting and enjoyable. Their love of their San Miguel neighborhood, Colonia San Antonio, was infectious, and we were looking forward to be a little bit at a distance from all the night noise of El Centro with the church bells, traffic, and discos. We also appreciated that the rent was considerably less if you were willing to walk further to El Jardin. That and the possibility of sleeping through the night was definitely worth a little extra walking.

The Mexicana flight from Oakland to Leon (BJX) in the middle of the night is the shortest (3-1/2 hours) and most direct route from the Bay Area to San Miguel. The first time we took it four years ago we were surrounded by seven newborns screaming in terror. This time it was blissfully quiet and we actually were able to sleep a little. We landed in the dark, taxied across the tarmac while enjoying a beautiful sunrise, and after going through customs and being greeted by our ride, were surprised when we walked out into the parking lot to find it was already a bright morning. Dawn is quicker closer to the equator!

The departure from Oakland had felt very third-world with us all wearily trundling a long way across the tarmac amidst piles of rubble to the waiting plane. In huge contrast at Leon we found the most modern and elegant small airport imaginable.

Our 1-1/2 hour ride in the shuttle was cushy, lulling us to sleep. But the scenery was so beautiful, it made me want to memorize every view, and get out my paintbrushes to capture the scrubby golden rolling hills punctuated by dark silhouettes of trees, and in the background the purple mountains.

Our first sighting of San Miguel across the lake gave my heart a little thump. It is so strange that a place we have only visited once can seem to be calling us home.

An hour and a half later we arrived at our destination: Casa Coralina, a bright blue house with a red door, right next to a *ferreteria* – hardware store – that has a sign you can see from blocks away, making it very easy to direct taxi drivers.

We had been told that the property manager would meet us on arrival, but no one was there. We peeked into the ferreteria to see if perhaps they knew anything. In the manner of many stores in San Miguel, the ferreteria is completely open in the front, the full width of the house – for it is just a house with the front part of the ground floor dedicated to the shop. The glass counter runs the width of the house – we're talking fifteen feet or so. Behind the counter was a friendly couple, Ernestine and Emelio who own the shop. Emelio placed his bulky black phone on the counter so that I could call the property

manager, whose phone number I had to retrieve from my laptop, which I set on the counter and booted up, much to Emelio's amusement. Fresh off the plane and so early in the morning, my Spanish was not yet up to speed and they don't speak English, so we were all friendly gestures and pantomime. A few minutes after I made the call a young woman came scurrying down the narrow sidewalk on the cobblestone street, pulling on her sweater as she went. It was Olga, the maid for our casa, whom the property manager had called because she lives nearby.

After thanking our new neighbors for their kindness, we followed Olga into the casa, through a narrow open air vestibule into a small brick courtyard where the coralina tree – enormous for the size of the patio – seems to dominate, having more than a few battle scars from attempts to cut it down to size, to no avail. But even so, everything is charming.

She showed us around, apologizing that the house wasn't cleaned yet, and gave us a set of seven keys – each door has its own and there are many doors! She said that she did not have a key to the master bedroom and so had not been able to change the sheets yet, but that she would run and get the key from the property management company and return later. Aagh! We had naturally been hoping for a little nap after our red-eye flight, but clearly that would have to wait. Still as we peered through the glass door of the bedroom longingly, it did look to be the most romantic *boveda* (arched brick) ceilinged room we had every seen, so our disappointment was tempered with delight.

The only real problem with our lovely little casa is the dogs on the roof next door. We knew that there would be dogs there. What we didn't know was that they are ferocious rottweillers with deep voices turning our courtyard below into an awful echo chamber. The first day they seemed to bark at every sound we made so we took to tiptoeing around, but we couldn't help crunching the coralina leaves as we crossed the little central patio that separates the two story bedroom building from the one story high ceilinged living area, and even the sound of the leaves set them off.

As we climb up the narrow circular wrought iron stairs from our second story bedroom to the little roof patio with fantastic views of the town, the more vicious of the two dogs charges across her roof, teeth bared, jowls drooling, ready to leap across the few feet of space between her roof edge and our delicate staircase, which seems precarious enough without her added attention. Ah well, she is most definitely our 'dragon at the gate' of this corner of paradise.

Noise in Mexico is just a part of a way of life. It almost seems as if the rule here is: More noise, more better. Even the Christmas ornaments dangling from the lampposts in El Jardin play tinny electronic carols. Goods are delivered up and down our relatively quiet street with vendors knocking on doors, calling out "agua" "gas" or "tierra." There's nothing quite as unsettling as the sound of our heavy knocker clanging on our metal front door!

In the Parrochia -- the incredible peach-hued gothic-inspired church said to have been built from looking at postcards of European cathedrals – the bells can be overwhelming

if something is happening as it is today, Sunday January 7, the day after El Dia de Tres Reyes. The din of the bells goes on for several minutes and then something that sounds like dynamite or canons goes off every few minutes. We are sooo happy to be away from El Jardin! From the casa we hear church bells only distantly, ditto the train whistle.

Other noises are much more charming: the children playing in the yard next door (until they cry or take up banging on some huge metal drum they have over there), roosters in the distance, not so close as to wake us up; birds twittering and cooing in the Coralina tree in our little courtyard, and the music!

There are a lot of wonderful things about San Miguel: the colonial architecture, the cobbled streets, the warmth of the people, the moderate climate, etc. but for me what makes me feel most at home and content is the traditional music that seems to be everywhere, and mostly live. Mariachis in El Jardin, guitarists in most restaurants playing delightful background music, and last night we were at Casa de los Milagros and a singer with a terrific voice sang and played his guitar. Maybe it was the 2 for 1 martinis but man he was talented! In taxis and buses also there is mostly traditional music, so everywhere you are surrounded with the festive and romantic sounds.

We can walk pretty much anywhere here and when we get tired or have our arms full of packages, we can hop on a bus that takes us within a block of our casa, or we can just hail a cab and for under \$2.00 be home in a jiffy.

The walking is an acquired skill, requiring concentration to avoid holes and serious hiking skills, or at least good walking shoes. San Miguel is a mountain town at 6200 feet. The narrow cobbled streets wend their way up and down hills. My good old Merrills shoes aren't quite sufficient for the task. The streets are cobbled, mostly with small rounded stones, so that your foot is never quite stable. The sidewalks are usually paved with flatter rocks or concrete, but they are about two feet wide. Trying to stay on them is difficult because they are constantly interrupted by posts, wires, trees or oncoming pedestrians, sending you out into the street. There are rises and falls as they meet driveways, so that you drop off or step up and are walking at a slant for a way. Also you have to watch out for little pipes and gutters. Two people can't walk together abreast, so it's either single file or one walks in the street, which, if you do have hiking boots on, as Will usually does, is probably easier in the end. Your eyes want to eat up everything around you: the colors, textures and beauty that is San Miguel, but it's best to keep your eyes pretty well focused on where you are placing your feet! Sidewalks come to abrupt ends sometimes with up to an 18 inch drop!

Our first few ventures into El Centro revealed that San Miguel has too many vehicles and thus its narrow streets can stink of fumes, something we didn't remember from four years ago. Everyone agrees traffic is an increasing problem. The drivers themselves, in general, are incredibly polite to each other and pedestrians. And the most polite drivers are the cab drivers! What a different world we live in here!

Not that we need reminding that this is a different world. Just now a little old couple banged on our front door. They had four sweet looking little burros loaded with soil from el campo. We assured them we had no need of soil as we have no garden. They said, well then how about some money for happy Christmas? Worth a try I guess.

Other animals we have met so far include the most impressive Clydesdale horse that pulls a big red metal wagon of the ice cream vendors. I haven't tried the ice cream yet but the horse has the soulful intelligence of a god deigning to walk among us.

Smaller scale dogs abound from the super-groomed lapdog yappers tucked in gringo carrying bags to the ubiquitous little scruffy white poodles wandering in front of their casas or tiendas, dressed in T-shirts on cold days. And then there are the medium size packs of perros mexicanos typicos roaming around town keeping the streets clean. Altogether they can form what our landlady has called the four part San Miguel dog chorus. The happiest dogs are the ones who have a home but aren't stuck on the roof, who roam freely as dogs used to roam freely in the States, back in the day. These dogs romp joyfully in vacant lots. They are curious at times but never unfriendly.

Dia de los Tres Reyes -- Three Kings' Day, the 12th day of Christmas is the best day to be a kid because this is when you get presents 'left by the three kings in the shoes you leave outside your door'. Well, I didn't see any shoes, but apparently there's an all night market the night before selling just toys for busy parents to buy. Sitting on a bench in El Jardin we admired all the new bikes and remote-controlled fire trucks and race cars being proudly driven around. But there were also small children still selling their chicklets and handmade dolls to those seated on the park benches. Did they get any presents this morning? Or was this just another work day as usual? Many children work here, mostly as baggers in the stores, or as helpers to their vendor parents.

One tiny boy sits by an old man, probably his abuelo (grandfather), while the old man begs with his hat held out, day after day. I keep an eye on this boy as I pass. He seems healthy and cared for. There are wonderful programs in this town to make sure that the poor are fed, housed, clothed and educated. There will always be people who somehow fall through the cracks, or prefer begging. This child is so small, I am not sure he knows that he is doing anything but having a nice sit with his grandfather in an interesting place. When he is old enough to go to school, some other child in the family will probably take his place in what has to be a prime piece of begging real estate, right outside the Instituto de Allende where norteamericanos study espanol and arte.

In Mamma Mia on Sunday morning where we went so Will could have his hotcake fix (We wouldn't trust the pan in our casa to pull off such a feat!) there was a couple with their two children at a nearby table. Together they formed such a perfect tableau. The mother with her babe in arms was an exquisite Madonna. The son, probably four or five years old, was standing by his father's chair, holding out something for him to see. The father leaned over with such complete attention in a moment of delighted sharing. I wish I had had the nerve to take a photo. I did make a sketch when I got home with the hopes of painting the little vignette.

When I later looked at the photos I had been able to take that day, I saw that in one of them, unnoticed by me at the time, was a father stooping and embracing his child. These children are loved with incredible devotion, and they seem to thrive from the attention. The father of the children next door to us is apparently off working in the US. I haven't talked with their mother Marta yet, so I don't know where he is. Naturally I think of all the men lined along Anderson Drive in our home town of San Rafael, CA. I've always been aware of the single-focused nature of their existence: working at whatever labor they can find, living in cramped quarters with many others in order to send as much as possible home to their families. Now I am seeing this side of the experience as I listen to the children next door, living without their father, and then see the fathers and children they too must see all over town, sharing such precious moments.

On the other side of us, we live with the quandary of our dear neighbors Emelio and Ernestine, who are the soul of friendliness and helpfulness, owning the vicious dogs on their roof who make our lives in the casa a misery. Rumor has it Emelio puts his dogs out to stud. The thought of a whole town full of such snarling beasts is horrifying.

Down our street either way are little shops, *tiendas*, that dot every block in town. Most are just the front room of a home, stocked with chips and sodas. Having a tienda seems to be just a pleasant pastime that may bring in some money. Some are surprisingly large once you get beyond the dark often narrow opening to the street. We have at least two of those within two blocks, in case we need anything in a hurry. Some carry specialty items and it is fun to learn where to buy various things. We are fortunate to have in our block a wonderful little papeleria that sells office supplies and other paper items. We are committed to spending as much of our money in these tiny shops. One can, and people certainly do, buy everything you can think of at the huge stores aptly named "Gigante" and the just opened "Mega." Since we have the luxury of not needing much and not needing to be rock-bottom price shoppers while here, we can shop in our little local markets and enjoy getting to know our neighbor merchants, who really appreciate the business. There is one small shop we probably won't frequent. It carries all the little American items you might crave if you were away. Although Mexicans have all sorts of chips, they don't seem to have plain old Fritos, something Will has become fond lately. In that shop they have a good size bag of them... for \$7.50!! I don't think so! We also have a tortilleria nearby so we get a bunch of hot tortillas for 20 cents. Now that's more like it!

We were fortunate that when we were here four years ago we made friends with an ex-pat named Don, who bought a house here ten years ago on his very first visit, a really crazy thing to do. Crazy like a fox. San Miguel property has skyrocketed over the past decade with no sign of slowing down. But also he feels completely at home here, and is always happy to return here from his travels. Like many transplants to San Miguel he has volunteered a good deal. In his case he is quite a skilled English language tutor. We originally met Don at Mamma Mia where, since we were staying in a hotel, we ate breakfast almost every morning. And that was his morning ritual as well: to take a walk into town from his casa in Guadiana, get the newspaper and sit at Mamma Mia's, drinking coffee and shaking his head at the news from the States during the lead up to the

Iraq War. At adjoining tables we got into political discussions several times before he suggested we join him for a nice brunch on Sunday at another restaurant up on the hill above town. He gave us his card which simply said "Donald" and his local phone number. When we called to confirm our date, he said the reservations would be under the name "Patrick". We wondered what was up? Why the mystery and subterfuge? Later, once he felt he knew us better, he gave us his full-scale card with his last name and full contact information. It turns out he wasn't wanted by any government organization. He just was being careful the way ex-pats learn to be careful of each other, lest they be overburdened with wannabe friends. Cognizant of this potential problem as we planned our long term return, we made ourselves calling cards with our casa phone number. As for the 'Patrick' he later explained to us that it is his middle name and easier for reservations than 'Don' which is an honorary title for any hombre, or his last name which is difficult even for English speakers. So much for mystery!

Last night we got together with Don and his neighbor Paula who invited us up to her house. She doesn't live in San Miguel, but her parents built this big stone casa which she and her brother inherited and she has been managing as a rental. Last time we were here, she and her friend Laurel joined Don and us for that Sunday brunch. Then they invited us to join them the following day for a trip to Dolores Hidalgo, the tile town nearby, and on our return a restful swim at La Gruta, the hot spring pools. It was just lucky that this time she happened to be in town for another week and we got to see her again. We sat out on a patio on her front lawn under the ubiquitous mesquite trees drinking Don's champagne and eating the cheeses she brought from Sonoma. We made plans for them both to pop down the hill to our neighborhood, check out our casa, have some wine and appetizers, and then we'll go out to one of our neighborhood eateries.

Our nearest restaurant is El Rinconcito, which in spite of being in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood serves an almost totally American clientele. We went in there for dinner the other night and found ourselves surrounded by three American couples, and as will happen when people are from elsewhere, we all got into conversation. One couple was from Berkeley, and the woman had taught for 30 years at College of Marin, so we talked about Chester Arnold. She couldn't believe it when I told her he was taken a sabbatical. Another couple was from Cambridge, and they were able to talk extensively about traveling in Asia with the ones from Berkeley. The third couple was from Denver, and turned out to be our neighbors two doors down. They own a very large home here and spend from November to April every year. They invited us home for a drink, but we were tired and took a rain check, giving them our card. Now we wonder if we missed our chance to see the inside of their handsome looking casa!

The night before last we went to an art gallery opening out at Aurora, a converted fabric factory on the edge of town. It's an amazing space that made us envious. It's sort of a combination of the Industrial Center Building in Sausalito and the Design Center in SF. Artists have studios, but there are also large gallery spaces, and design ateliers -- a good combination, if a little commercial. And probably the studios are very pricy. We enjoyed seeing the art, drinking wine and nibbling cheese and crackers, but we didn't meet

anyone there as we had when we would go to gallery openings in Puerto Vallarta. It made us a little homesick for our art gang at home in Marin County.

But as we strolled back into town we ran into a couple, totally unrelated to the Aurora art event, and just got talking for no reason I can remember. Barbara and Dan from Boston seemed like very nice people, our kind of people, as we say when they have the good sense to agree with us politically and are of a certain generation and situation in life. And somehow we ended up having dinner with them at an excellent restaurant we hadn't tried before called Bugombelia. We really got along well, and were so sorry that Dan will be shortly returning to Boston, as it is so rare that we find couples where we enjoy both equally. But Barbara is remaining in town for the two months we will be here, so we hope to see more of her.

Yesterday we started taking Spanish classes at a little school nearby. It teaches English to Spanish speakers and vice versa. The teachers are delightful and we are learning mucho. But now there is a real structure to our day, and homework. What a difference! Because Will's class is two hours and mine only one, I spend my solo hour poking around shops he would hate. Not that I plan to buy anything, but I like to see what there is. Today I also did some grocery shopping on the way home, as we are trying to eat as many meals as possible at home.

Our neighbors who invited us for a drink the other night happened to be walking by when Will opened the front door to go to the panaderia. He gave them a tour of the newer part of our casa, and then they invited both of us over to see their house. Even though we were starving, we weren't going to turn them down again! It is a huge house on multiple levels. The higher you go up the better it gets. The covered rooftop veranda is to die for. Ours has the same view but it's just not the same experience. Maybe it's the funky white plastic chairs instead of their super loungers, I don't know. We also wouldn't mind hanging out in their media room with the big TV and the jigsaw puzzle table with great lighting.

However, we love our living area, but we have no cable so no TV viewing, for which I'm actually most of the time very grateful. How weird to come all this way to sit around watching television! We can play DVDs and Blockbuster has a 15 peso movie night on Tuesdays, so that night is dedicated to a movie and popcorn. We play the movie in English with Spanish subtitles, then if I have time, I review it the next day dubbed in Spanish with English subtitles. It's good exercise. Other than that we are out and about, or in, reading and studying our Spanish. We have a comfy couch and I have my library card, so when we want to just stay in and relax after a busy day, we can read, sketch, think about what it would be like to buy property here, and listen to music on our laptop. One thing we cannot do is go to bed early, as the children next door and the traffic in the street don't settle down until quite late. We haven't managed to stay up beyond 10:30, which is still earlier than the locals.

I did bring down my paints and have had three painting sessions in the patio when the day is warm enough. Will has set up his watercolor studio on the roof patio and swears

he's going to produce one painting a day! Well, maybe, but so far he's managed one in two days, which is amazing for him.

We had our first opportunity to entertain the other night when Don and Paula came over for drinks and appetizers before we all went to El Rinconcito for dinner. What fun to shop at the little tiendas for little goodies to serve. And it's fun to entertain in a house that isn't really your own. Very relaxing!

1/12/07

We completed our first week of school. Will is stopping, either permanently or just until he can absorb all he learned. I am enjoying my daily hour conversations with Gloria, my delightful tutor, and we will continue together for at least another week. I feel I am improving in my comprehension, and this is a real opportunity for me that I wouldn't otherwise have. It's a challenge to become more fluent. I enjoy it, it's good for my brain, and if we intend to spend time in this country, I'd like to be able to speak the language better.

We went to a couple of art gallery openings this evening. We ran into Margo from our Spanish school, met a couple of women from Pt. Arena, CA, another guy from SF who stays down here every other winter (the other winter he stays in his place in Greece!), and a few other interesting people. We had one person take a photo of us toasting with wine. Then we went up to El Jardin where we listened to mariachis and watched fireworks over the Parrochia. Cool. It isn't a holiday or anything, just maybe some personal celebration and everyone else gets to enjoy it. I sent the toasting and fireworks photos to Donna Seager back in San Rafael, congratulating her on her gallery's first anniversary and saying we were sorry we couldn't make the party tomorrow night.

1/13/07

Today we took a cab up to the Botanical Gardens up in the hills above town. We walked all over the place, taking lots of photos of the various cacti, some so amazingly beautiful. I'm not a big prickly pear person and there was a lot of it all over. Maybe it will grow on me...but not too close, thank you! There was a reservoir lake and a huge canyon below the dam. Sensational if the water was coursing through it I imagine. We had a nice little picnic up there, then walked back down to town, stopping to talk to a guy walking his dog in the Balcones neighborhood. Of course he just happened to be from Coldwell Banker in Greenbrae, CA, 1.5 miles from our home. He and his wife bought their house two years ago and have moved down pretty completely, and love it. We seem to meet nothing but Bay Area people and transplanted Bay Area people here.

1/22/07

Tomorrow we will have been here for three weeks. We have settled in quite nicely, creating a domestic routine that seems to work, and keeping ourselves entertained with various outings.

I am still enjoying my daily hour long conversations in Spanish with Gloria. I am definitely feeling my Spanish improve, especially my comprehension. My speaking would probably improve if I wasn't in such a hurry to speak as rapidly as I do in English.

Today we talked about Allende's birthday celebration yesterday. We had both attended the parade (desfiles) Of course, she got to see it from her mother's rooftop right along the parade route. Every school age child was marching with their various escuelas, playing drums and trumpets. The other main representation was military. Gloria says there are three parades a year in San Miguel, and that this one is the only military oriented one. The most beautiful she says is on the weekend closest to September 29th, the saints day of San Miguel. Dancers from all over come in their beautiful costumes parade up Canal into El Jardin with a cart full of bread, wine, fruit, etc. as an offering to San Miguel. Then each dance group is stationed around the jardin and performs for the crowds.

She says that as wonderful as that weekend is, the weekend before it is just awful. Traditionally it had always been a kind of Pamplona-ish running of the bulls. But recently it has become a drunken nightmare of kids coming from all over the country to debauch in the streets of the usually sleepy San Miguel. They rent sleeping space in patios, but hardly sleep since they are up all night drinking and vomiting, and being rude and obnoxious. Sounds dreadful!

As we begin to discuss more seriously the possibility of buying property down here to live in part of the year, Will asked me to ask Gloria how the local Mexicans feel about the gringos in their midst. She says that their relationship with the norteamericanos here has been going on for over 50 years, and is a symbiotic relationship. Estranjero-owned businesses employ Mexicans, and that is much appreciated. And I am aware of all the good the various extranjero-run charities and volunteers help the community. She says what they appreciate too is how most extranjeros come here and learn the customs and the language as best as they are able, and appreciate what is already here and don't want to change things. She says the only problem is when an extranjero business owner insists on hiring only English-speaking employees. This makes it difficult for most of the locals. She feels that they *should* be learning English, because it is useful in the world economically, but they can't help but resent anyone who says they have to in order to work in their own town.

Saturday we went to Guanajuato, invited by Miriam, a good friend of my cousin Beth's. She is a delightful woman and we had a good visit. However, I feel more strongly than ever that Guanajuato is not a place I would want to spend any more time. The difference is just as striking as it was last time we went from SMA to Guanajuato. The energy is so different, so much less friendly, much more rushed and almost rude. But Miram loves it and has attitude about SMA, as many people do, because it does have a large ex-pat community (though probably no more than 5% of the population, that's still a lot of people.) She says that Guanajuato only has 150 ex-pats. She is half mexicana and half estadounidense herself, so she doesn't count herself among the ex-pats, even though she spent much of her adult life in the states.

The ride on the bus to and from Guanajuato was quite beautiful. A few years ago I would have been hard pressed to call the countryside here beautiful. But I think my newfound enjoyment of marshes at home has now extended to these rolling fields of scrubby grasses and mesquite trees against the bufas (bluff- shaped hills and mountains.) This is the dry season. We'll have to come back sometime in the summer when all of it is green.

The television on the bus was playing some dubbed movie about high school football. Although I was trying to just look out the window and enjoy the view, I couldn't help noticing that I really understood everything of the Spanish in the movie!

I went to school this morning with a little trepidation. I had heard that Sra Josefina, the delightful older woman who runs the school, had just lost her husband to a long death by cancer, and I had bought a card and written our sympathies in Spanish to her. My trepidation had to do with how many ways I might have erred in my translation of my sentiments, and how it might come across as absurd or even offensive. I slid the envelope across the counter to her as I came in the office, saying "Algo pequeno para usted," and proceeded to pay my weekly tuition. A little while later she came into the courtyard where Gloria and I were conversing, and excused her interruption, which I assumed was some business with Gloria, but turned out to be her extending her open arms to me in a big hug with muchisimas gracias! Phew! The Spanish might not have been perfect, perhaps, but she got the intended message.

After school I went to a few tiendas to pick up some things for this evening when our nearest gringo neighbors, Tom and Linda, who had given us the great tour of their impressive casa, are coming for drinks. I have always loved this kind of shopping, buying a little bit here, a little bit there, sampling the cheese, saying 'un poco mas, un poco menos' (When we had our apt in Tuscany for a week, I could say it in Italian!) There is something so satisfying in this universally domestic activity, and such a different experience than shopping in a big market.

When I was walking down our street, I could see Will outside our house having a conversation with Emelio. I said in Spanish, "I can see you are talking together, but how?" Emelio held up his Spanish-English dictionary and laughed. I know that even though Will has a difficult time retaining vocabulary, he is remarkable at communicating and understanding people whose language he doesn't know. Some people just have that gift. Part of it is a fearlessness about looking foolish. Emelio and Ernestine's daughter had certainly found him very funny when he came into their ferreteria desperately seeking a toilet plunger one morning last week, stumbling through what little Spanish he had to use but pantomiming to great effect. He arrived back home with plunger in hand, quite elated, not the least bit abashed by a teenager's laughter.

After we said hasta luego to Emelio and had brought my purchases into the house, Will told me that he had also met another neighbor named David. He and his wife Meg are both artists who have been coming to SMA for years, but who just two weeks ago completed and moved into their house across the street and down a few doors. They previously lived in Maui, and have a place between Nice and Canne on the French

Riviera. He says he will invite us over soon. So that is very nice, getting to know our little community.

I spoke earlier of the various noises in San Miguel, but it takes time to learn the neighborhood sounds that are key to the smooth operation of a household. The most important one is the clanging of the basura (garbage) truck. A man runs along the street clanging a piece of metal and yelling 'basura' three times a week. The first week we didn't recognize the sound, or even know that we should be listening for it, so our garbage piled up, and since there is no garbage disposal, a week's worth was somewhat pungent! Olga, the maid, and the various neighbors told us different things about when the garbage was collected. When we rented a casa in Puerto Vallarta a year ago, garbage was collected every night from various street corners. Piles of garbage would accumulate and it was rather unsightly. And after pick up, it seemed there were always some plastic bags left lying around or garbage that had fallen out, or been routed out by neighborhood dogs. But here you don't leave your garbage out. You are expected to be home, ready and waiting. Then you are to make sure you can hear the clanging and differentiate it from all the other banging of metal doors, hammering at various construction sites, etc. Then, once you have been fortunate enough to hear it, you must drop what you are doing and rush out with your basura bags, stand in line at the garbage truck and hand over your trash. What a triumph it was for us when we began to be able to hear the clanging. But what a challenge it is to be ready and able to rush out at a moment's notice. Tuesday we were here and able to take out all our trash. Today, Thursday, we heard the clanging when we were still in bed after a bad night's sleep, in part due to other noises. We knew we should probably get up and take care of it, but we hadn't even put the garbage together. Today is the day Olga comes, and on this day she handles the trash and we get a break from it. Sometimes the basura truck comes by twice in one day. Hopefully that will happen today while she is here and we are out!

The other trucks that come through the neighborhood making noise are the gas truck with an amplified musical back up to their cries of 'gas', and the 'agua' truck with a fellow who runs along banging on all the doors yelling 'agua'. We have purchased water from them twice, as these big bottles are heavy and it makes sense to have the man come in and haul it up to the bedroom or back to the kitchen. But the first time we didn't have the Santorini brand of trade-in empty, and he was the Santorini man, so he had to take the bottle that was upside down on the ceramic water dispenser, pouring off the remaining water into a big pot so he could take the empty. We don't know what we are supposed to do with the empty Ciel water bottle that we still have. No Ciel delivery truck has yelled 'agua' on our street as far as we know. But perhaps that one takes longer to recognize.

Another sound that we have learned is the one that sends messages to heaven. This is basically a sky rocket. It sounds more like a canon. Yesterday was the beginning of the nine day long pilgrimage to El Lago de San Juan de Dios, and these pilgrims were sent on their way with a good long round of explosive prayers propelled aloft. Naturally they wanted to get an early start, which meant that everyone else in the town did as well, much to our dismay.

We are so grateful that in the middle of the night all the busy sounds come to a halt and the locals sleep like the dead, even the dogs. Unfortunately that is when, perversely, we are most likely to be lying awake. Sometimes we talk and I imagine our neighbors thinking bad thoughts about us making so much noise.

January 26, 2007

Today was my second appointment with my dentist, Doctora Guillermina Franco Galicia. She is creating a gold crown for me, one my dentist at home said I needed. Although the exact price will be determined by the weight in gold of the crown, it will be at least less than half of what I would have paid my regular dentist in the States, sufficient to cover my airfare round trip. I am happy to report that she is a highly skilled truly pain-free practitioner. And she is a delightful woman who speaks sufficient English for her American patients to understand when we need to open wide, rinse, etc. and to give a complete explanation of what she is doing. Her equipment is comparable to that of other dentists in the States, but the office itself is a typically funky mid-century Mexican *mélange*. The dental chair sits shining and pristine, only serving to draw attention to the less than pristine aspects of the room in which it sits. The first thing you notice when you lie back in the chair is the bare bulb dangling over your head, haphazardly wired from the old central light. Since the room is now divided in two by a flimsy wooden screen, the central light is no longer useful. However, they might have covered it with something rather than leaving a naked hole with the wiring coming out. Probably the same handyman that bungled that job also put in the plumbing to the dental chair. PVC and copper pipes run around the edge of the room, wires entwining in places. These are things you come to expect in Mexico where new technologies are sometimes cobbled into old structures without aesthetic or safety concerns, and usually it would only amuse me. But sitting in a dentist chair, with my mouth open, the contrast between this and my lifetime of ultra-hygienic medical surroundings became much more apparent. I have no idea what the truly necessary hygiene is, and what is just germoephobic hype. The doctora wore the mask and gloves that all dentists wear these days. Of course these are more for her protection than mine!

I know as women we are able to multi-task, but I tend to think that in general, except for the care of children and making dinner at the same time, it really is not to our advantage to use this particular skill that often, that somehow something is sacrificed. So I was a little concerned about the Doctora's ability to drill in my mouth at the same time she carried on a full blown in depth conversation with her assistant. This was not just 'hand me this' or 'make up some of that' sort of dentist professional talk. This was two women talking about people they knew, things they were up to, who they knew that had terminal cancer, what color they were painting their homes, and where to find the best stuff! It was the kind of conversation we women are used to having in the hair salon, not the dentist's office! However, the doctor never slipped with the drill and I am happy to report at the end of both appointments I felt very well and professionally cared for.

This appointment felt more professional than the last, partly because it was in the daytime. This is Mexico and businesses close down in the afternoon and then open again in the evening. So my first appointment was for 7 PM. It was dark out and I was sitting in

a dentist's chair in a foreign country staring up at a bare light bulb. Yet I stayed. That is how cheap I am, how very much I wanted to not spend \$1000 on a crown. So far my penny wisdom has not proven pound foolish, but we're not quite done yet! Still the doctora was highly recommended by Paula, and in general Mexican dentistry is highly regarded and extensively used by ex-pats. So, bare light bulb aside, I am feeling exonerated. Still...the doctora's 12 year old son, having finished his homework, aided by the doctor's assistant, hung around behind my chair quietly observing his mother's labors in my mouth. This was also a first for me! During that appointment la doctora was also interrupted by a phone call from her mother in Mexico City. I heard her say, 'Don't worry mama, of course it's okay to call me at work. Family comes first.' And that is right, and I am fine with it. It is one of the nicest things about Mexico!

January 29, 2007

We have been here almost a month now, longer than we have been away from home in 36 years! Time has flown by, but I have struggled with missing the faces and voices of those nearest and dearest who I am used to being in regular communication. We have talked on the phone twice to Josh who is handling our affairs, and once to Katie who was able to call us from our home phone with the good discount long distance rates, when she was visiting Marin. For the rest we've had to make do with email, and it just doesn't feel quite sufficient.

Still, we are not homesick. And in fact we are thinking seriously of spending our winters here, of buying a place and making this our second home. Why not? So we now have a realtor, a delightful woman named Dora, a painter/writer like me. We have seen a house that we would very much like to own and are seriously exploring the possibility. Tomorrow we meet with the builder (it is a new house almost completed) about the possibility of adding a studio on the roof terrace. I won't talk about the house now, because if we don't get it, it will be painful to read about it here in my journal. We believe that if a house is meant for us we will have it. If not, we won't. So either way, and yet...the more we wander around the prospective neighborhood and discover new things about it, the more excited we become at the possibility.

Meanwhile the other evening Tom and Linda, came over and we had a nice visit. They are being very helpful in giving us advice on places to stay in Morelia and Patzcuaro, where we are determined to go before returning to the US. Yesterday we went over to Don's house to pick mandarin oranges and lemons off his trees. During our visit we talked both about prospective home ownership, getting his much appreciated input and encouragement, and about our proposed trip, which he suggested we do together, taking his car instead of the bus. So we are busy coming up with places to stay and emailing tentative dates, etc.

Our neighbors Meg and David had invited us over for drinks last Saturday but then Meg came down with a cold and that date has been postponed.

Today Gloria and I had a long talk in Spanish about teaching methods in schools here in Mexico and in the states. We were in total agreement about how children should be taught and the problems in the schools. We got started on the conversation because she brought a little book for me to read from, a collection of stories written by children in SMA schools. The three stories we read were very dear. But she said that kind of creative writing project is very rare in the schools, where the focus is more on discipline and just learning the basics by rote.

Yesterday, after picking the fruit off Don's trees, Will and I trekked to El Jardin and the restaurant there that has good hotcakes for his Sunday fix. We were surrounded by tables full of adolescents! We were the only adults in the place. These kids were clean cut and clearly well off, with the latest styles, cell phones, MP3 players, etc. They were chowing down on pizza, freaking out about some wasps, and watching the action in the plaza where hoards of other teens were roaming. One gang of cheerleading girls came into the restaurant (an open air terrace overlooking El Jardin) and peppered the waiter with questions before deciding it wasn't for them and heading out across the plaza again.

Later, walking down Calle Reloj, we saw maybe 50 or 75 kids in a long line waiting to get on buses to return to wherever they came from. I'm guessing they were from Mexico City, because they had just that little bit extra polish. San Miguel teens are very cool. They wear their jeans the right way, and are as trendy in their fashions and interests as anyone, but there's always a difference between small town and big city.

The main event in the evenings in San Miguel for most people who want to be out and about is to circumambulate the Jardin. We have sat on a bench and watched the same groupings of girls or boys passing by three or four times. Well it's a small square. We ourselves have tried the circumambulation but find that we do so much walking the rest of the day, we'd rather sit and just observe. The other evening, waiting for fireworks to begin, we watched a father with his two young children. He managed to swing them both at the same time so that the older one got a big swing and the little one got a gentle swing. It was quite a sensitively executed feat. I have mentioned before about the fathers here. They are quite something and I am continually impressed.

We have been less impressed on this visit with the mariachis in El Jardin. There seem to be fewer groups, and one group has a violinist who can't seem to stay on key. But if they aren't musically adept, they are forever charming and entertaining. We have noticed that the people most likely to hire them at 100 pesos or \$10 USD per song, are mexicanos who want to sing along, or just have back up to their own vocalizations, or who want to dance with their lovers encircled by attentive musicians. The rest of us just kind of 'happen to be close by' when the people with money pay for the music. I have never passed a street musician without tossing something in the hat or guitar case because I want to encourage music in public places, but it is very hard for me to think of paying the price of a meal for one song! Still I am grateful for those who do, and for the mariachis who are such a vital part of the whole *experiencia mexicana*.

But the real experiencia is in the brief greetings and exchanges in the street of buenos dias, tardes or noches. There is such a quality of life here that seems to be what meditators try to achieve. Being in the moment is just easier here. Taxi drivers, working on flat fee fares, could make so much more money if they would rush, but they are the most patient and courteous of drivers. They know they would have to sacrifice something much more important than money were they to chase it in the norteamericano way.

February 4, 2007

Well, we did it. We bought the casa! This has been an extraordinary week of both euphoria and trepidation. At my lowest moments I questioned our sanity, and mourned the simple existence of just being here in the moment enjoying this lovely place. Why add on the weight of home ownership? But in truth we are just that kind of people. We try to be otherwise, but it doesn't work. We need to make a place our own. We are nesting creatures. That is just the way it is.

We did a lot of asking around about the sanity of our decision to buy and couldn't find any ex-pat to warn us away from it. All who have done so seem very happy with their choices. And although we didn't tell any family until after the fact, all were excited and not very surprised.

We met with the architect, Gabor Goded, a muy amable mexicano who is highly regarded by the community for the quality of his work. He built two houses side by side in the small old neighborhood called El Obraje, slightly up a hill behind the Aurora Fabrica which is a mecca for artists and art collectors. Because the neighborhood is on a slight hill, the houses have tremendous views. Our casa has terraces off the living room, master bedroom and the whole roof. Having views from indoor living spaces was one of our highest priorities. (Staying in this rental casa in San Antonio, the only way we see anything of the outer world is by climbing the narrow metal stairs up to the tiny roof patio. And just recently a structure was built on a roof a block away that neat blocks out the view of the Parrochia from the roof.)

After being satisfied by all Gabor's answers to our many questions about the house, we decided to make an offer. The other house had already sold the instant it was put on the market, and we knew there was interest in this one as well. We had taken walks around the neighborhood, discovering that we would be only five minutes away from the Aurora by foot along a lovely tree-lined dirt path along the river. Going the opposite way on the river, Gabor tells us we can hike all the way up to the Botanical Gardens. We timed the walk from the casa to El Jardin (the way distance is measured here) and it was 15 minutes at a reasonable pace. That's 15 minutes closer than we are here. And it is more downhill than uphill on the way to town, so the inevitable cab ride home with packages in hand is used on the uphill way home.

So we told agent Dora we wanted to make an offer. This was the beginning of how different things are in Mexico! Without one signature or any money passing hands, we were being congratulated and hugged for our purchase. All that had happened at that point was that through the two realtors phone calls, an agreement between seller and

buyer was made. Admittedly we made it simple by offering the asking price. (We knew that Gabor had decided to list this house for more, given how quickly the first one sold, but had agreed in advance, because we had seen it before, to sell it to us for the \$285,000.)

The next day we had to get a wire transfer of 10% for the down payment and sit with Gabor in the real estate office to make a preliminary agreement to make sure the house would stay off the market. My request for a wire transfer from Charles Schwab hadn't come through and the realty office (Coldwell Banker) asked me to call and check on it, which I did from their office. It seems that the fax I sent containing all the information for the transfer that the realtor gave was insufficient or confusing. In the process of clarifying it, the Schwab representative, said "Well, if you are comfortable with this..." since he felt that somehow the way it was being handled was irregular. I re-clarified with the realtor: Yes, the money was to be sent to an American bank, where a Mexican bank had an account, with the directions that it as for the owner of the Coldwell Banker office. Sitting there on the phone with the Schwab guy, I imagined him thinking I was in some thatched roofed outpost drinking margaritas and directing him casually to give some local my \$28,500. This image wasn't helped when I conveyed the reps concerned to the realtors and the office manager said, "Tell him it's different in Mexico, more colorful." After I passed along this message, the heretofore friendly rep got very cool. Clearly he was trying to telepathically send me some common sense. But I knew I had had no margaritas (later yes, but not then) and that I was sitting in a well-respected Coldwell Banker office, and that this might seem a little odd to him and me, but it wasn't irregular by local standards. Still, he reined me in a little. The words of our friend when we asked for advice on home buying here came back to me. He said to use the common sense you would use if you were in the States. "If you wouldn't do it there, don't do it here." But it seems impossible to apply that completely, since in Mexico they don't even have escrow! There is no title company holding all the funds and disbursing them at closing. Instead you pay directly to the seller at closing, and other costs along the way. Our first cost was to the Republic of Mexico for permission to own land in their country. We don't have to do that at home!

The biggest challenge we have had to deal with was deciding whether to get a mortgage on the casa, on our home in Marin, or simply cash out the major portion of my stock inheritance and pay outright. Getting a mortgage on the casa turned out to be very expensive – 9% interest when at home it's around 6%, and there are all sorts of points and penalties for early payback, etc. Also somehow we had to come up with an incredible pile of copies of bank statements going back two years, etc., etc. that would be challenging for me to do were we at home, but impossible from here. Josh agreed to do it if necessary, but we really didn't want to put him through that when he barely has a minute off from working. So we decided to explore financing the Marin house, and I emailed my mortgage broker brother John in Hawaii to see what could be done. He responded with his best friend realtor Frank's number in California, and after leaving a message for Frank, requesting a referral, I quickly received an email from his daughter, Ashley, now a mortgage broker, who, after asking a few questions, wrote that given our high credit scores and the low amount requested she wouldn't need any papers, just the

appraisal of our house, and that Josh could sign with our power of attorney, and all at nice low rate. Wow! What a relief!

But after going over the figures every which way, and with input from both brothers Steve and John, we finally decided it made most financial sense to cash out the stock and pay outright. Given that the casa closing is on my father's birthday, perhaps it's an additional seal of approval that he would feel his inheritance well placed. And as Steve said, you can enjoy a house in a way you can't enjoy a Schwab account.

The next step we took was a much more formal meeting with the lawyer, the seller and buyer, the realtors, and a translator who read the whole contract to us in English before we signed. She was an American woman fluent in Spanish whom I liked and appreciated having at my side. The meeting went very well all our little conditions for the completion of the casa were agreed to, since we had met with Gabor about them before this meeting. There will be a final meeting on the closing day, February 27, 2007.

So now our main focus is on furnishing the casa, which I am determined will be a fun experience. It does have a little bit of a feel of a marathon, because we will be returning home at the end of February, one day after closing, or, if we extend our stay, a week or two later. Either way, it's not much time to make an entire house totally inhabitable with every creature comfort! So we, who rarely enter shops, are now the whirlwind shoppers of the universe! When a couple of weeks ago everything was about faces, food and fun, and last week it was all about houses, from here on in it is all about furniture, plates and small appliances! We already purchased two area rugs, one from Oaxaca, directly from the weaver who drives up for fairs at the Instituto since no tourists will come to troubled Oaxaca right now, and the other an Afghani Sumak. Both very beautiful.

When we were looking at property, it seemed as if there were really very few houses and none of them what we wanted except the house we eventually bought. Now suddenly it seems as if everywhere you look there is a 'se venda' sign, a veritable glut of homes for sale! And a veritable glut of rentals too! I just have to remind myself that I forget which magazine designated SMA as the second most desirable place to retire, and baby boomers are turning 60.

Because we are going to be running around everywhere, I had to tell my tutor Gloria that I wouldn't be coming to school this week, and didn't know when I would return. I gave her my card in case she wanted to get in touch with me. Having had deep conversations for an hour every day for almost a month, I feel very close to her.

On the social scene, Meg and David had us over for drinks on the very day we signed the preliminary papers. They also invited their new friends Gary and Ruth. The six of us managed to talk non-stop in various groupings and all together for five straight hours! Meg is a wonderful potter who had tremendous success for twenty years in Maui creating Hawaiian quilt patterns on plates and bowls. Just beautiful. But she has sold that business and agreed not to create any more of those patterns. So now she is in a fallow period, having just finished building this casa and moving from Hawaii, etc. David is a painter

who was an anthropologist and all his paintings are based on the relationship diagrams of that profession, emphasizing the complexity of relationships, and creating quite beautiful abstract works.

As neighbors will, we ran into them yesterday as we were all rushing to the basura truck, green bags in hand. Neighbor Tom was also out on the calle, so we introduced these two homeowners who live directly across the street from each other to each other. Then, because a conversation commenced, I went into Tom and Linda's to get Linda out to join in. The basura truck is the great social uniter here!

February 15, 2007

At odd moments we sit and think what we would be doing if we hadn't bought a house. We would probably be visiting Morelia and Patzcuaro about now. But we did buy a house and it has taken us on quite another journey. We have met people we never would have met, mostly mexicano, with whom we have had good times and involved conversations while going about the necessary errands to get the house furnished. Dora, our realtor, took us to Querretaro. We have always wanted to go there, having heard about its wide streets and elegant old architecture. We didn't see any of that this time! Instead the beautiful countryside between here and there gave way to freeways much like home, and the insides of Sears, Costco, Sam's Club and a department store called Liverpool. Sears and Liverpool were interesting because the products were just more Mexican, more brightly colored with a stronger design sense. We bought mattresses and things for the kitchen, etc. We took Dora out to lunch, filled up her gas tank and she dropped us off at our little rental casa with all our booty.

Then yesterday, because she said the Costco in Celaya might have what was missing at the one in Querretaro, she and I drove over there, leaving Will at home to rest up from his cold. Again beautiful countryside gave way to Home Depot as well as Costco, and we got another \$1000 USD worth of stuff. Along the way we stopped in a furniture store in Comonfort that our sofa makers told us about, and I found a dining room buffet that at home would probably cost several thousand for \$350 USD. Not to say that everything is cheaper here. Some things are way more expensive.

Anyway, Dora and I are the same age, and both write and paint. Yesterday we were shared out experiences about growing up in the 50's, and what different experiences they were! Hers here in Mexico idyllic, mine in the US terrified of being nuked! Of course I wasn't terrified every minute and much of what she described as her childhood was very similar to mine.

Dora and I talk in English with Spanish mixed in, and email almost entirely in Spanish, which is good practice for me.

We also have gotten to know our house painters a bit as we traveled around in their truck to other houses they have worked on (also designed by our architect Gabor Goded). Marcos and I sit in the cab and talk in Spanish about politics, and Will and Alfredo sit in the back of the truck talking in English about ghostly experiences Alfredo has had, and

the spirits of San Miguel. Choosing colors was still a challenge, even with the help of the house tour. But we feel like we are almost 100% there. Only the master bedroom and living room are still in the testing stages.

We are definitely launched into the more fun part of this process. I wouldn't want to relive with too much detail the torment I put myself through over the decision to sell most of my stocks inherited from my grandmother. I hadn't any idea how painful it would be to part with, even for something as lovely as our new house. Strange. I sat at this computer punching sell orders and crying.

What added to my stress was the renewed concerns over the deal going through in a reasonable manner and us not losing a good part of our little nest egg. So stressed was I in fact that I got very sick with a cold, chills and fever, etc. This followed an episode of carbon monoxide poisoning that came from a chilly rainy Sunday when we decided to stay in the casa and make lists and get organized. We kept the LP gas heater going because it was cold. Eventually I had such a headache and nausea that I went up to bed, vomiting (I never vomit) a couple of times before settling down to sleep in the cold room. I didn't want to turn the heater on up there, and I was nestled under the covers, but I was still freezing. I hoped Will would come up and I could ask for another cover. He apparently peeked in on me at some point and I appeared to be asleep so he left me alone and went back down to the living area. Turns out we both could have died! The next morning I Googled carbon monoxide poisoning and it is quite fatal. I should have gone immediately to the emergency room with my symptoms. Will by staying in the room even longer, and alone, could also have succumbed, and I wouldn't have known!! Creepy!

It took me a couple days to get back to any sense of normal, and then I came down with a cold, very rare for me. I felt worst on Friday and we stayed home and the weather was nice enough to eat lunch out in the courtyard. Will made us scrambled egg sandwiches and I took one bite and passed out! Will says that my eyes rolled back in my head, I went rigid and ceased breathing. I woke with him pounding my chest, Emelio on the phone ordering the ambulancia and Meg who happened to be passing by with her niece Caitlin who is staying with them, coming in like an angel of mercy and applying cold compresses on my forehead until the ambulancia men arrived. They took all my vitals and said I was okay, but suggested I get to the doctor and gave us the name of one to call. After everyone left Will just broke down. He had such a scare! He thought I died.

Now it seems to me I would know if I had stopped breathing, so I am reluctant to believe that part of his story. But I did pass out and I think it was because when he was cooking I got a whiff of some of that LP gas and got faint. It seems I have developed a real sensitivity to the stuff. And here we are buying a house in a town that relies heavily on the stuff. Fortunately one floor of our new house has radiant floor heating. I don't know why, if there was only going to be one, why it wouldn't be the main living area instead of the bedroom floor where you can hop under the covers, but hey! And we are thinking to install solar panels so that we can afford to have electric heaters instead of LP gas.

Anyway, I recovered, Will caught my cold and hopefully we haven't given it to anyone else! Both of us are almost fully well now with just the occasional cough.

Meanwhile, no time to rest! Shop shop shop! Weird! Just not our normal life. And of course I start panicking about how much we are spending and whether we will be able to rent the house out enough to cover expenses, etc.

At home in California our deck has been torn off the front of our house, so we have, in effect, two, count them two, money pits!

Still, these are problems that fortunate people have.

And the daily life in San Miguel still manages to fascinate us. It is a place where dogs and children run free. Kids pile up into the back of their dad's pick up truck, climbing up on things as they ride, or playing at climbing out the back. We often observe the neighborhood kids while we wait for the bus at the end of our street. A father drove by in his car with his baby in his lap, having the baby hold the wheel. It makes me wonder about accident statistics: are children more likely to be in car accidents here? Or is it the same as in the States where no child rides in the back of a truck or in a car without a seat belt or baby safety seat. And very small children walk around neighborhoods independently, fearlessly, the way Dora and I did when we were small in the fifties.

It's easy to feel the kids in the US are getting the lesser life, the over protected cocoon of an existence. Still a beggar child chased after us today after we had passed where she and her abuelita and sibling were sitting on the sidewalk, and asked for the water bottle we were drinking from. It only had a couple of inches of water left and if she really wanted it, of course she could have it. The reality of a child begging for used water hit me hard. After she was gone we realized we were just on the mend from colds and hoped that she wouldn't get our cooties! Ugh!

Dogs also run free, if they aren't stuck on rooftops, in a way US dogs could only hear about in legend passed down from dogs in generations passed, like our dog Cinders who had the run of all San Francisco and used to go cross-town to Chinatown to visit a certain butcher daily. But today we also saw a little poodle get hit by a truck and squeal across the street in frantic heart-wrenching pain. The truck paused briefly, then headed off. I hope the poor little dog is okay. The cost of freedom?

February 17, 2007

We were up at El Jardin enjoying the 90th anniversary of some school that put on quite a show with students doing ballet folklorica dancing, a chorus of teenagers singing medleys of 'Jailhouse Rock', 'Shake it Up Baby' and other great hits that sounded even better in Spanish, and they were really cute in their choreography too.

If ever I am wondering if we are crazy to have bought a house here, all I have to do is spend some time in El Jardin of an evening – Friday evening especially – and it all is so clear. I love it here. I truly do. My eyes well up with the happiness of just being here.

We were also celebrating having found a mesquite dining room table that we like for \$480USD by having margaritas up on the roof above Pueblo Viejo, our favorite drink spot because we can watch the sunset and generally avoid smoke. The 2-for-1 margaritas are very tasty as well. Also it's just a few doors down from the El Jardin action, so we can go right back over to see what's happening now.

A busy day that began with a garage sale and the purchase of some beautiful Guatemalan fabric to hang in the new house, then a trip to Mega to buy all the little necessities (cleaning supplies, glasses, etc.) for the new house. Our second bedroom has become quite the store room! Then I took the bus into El Centro to pick up the cojines (throw pillows) we had chosen and paid for the night before while Will cleaned house for our evening entertaining. Then we headed over to Obraje to meet the delivery people who had called earlier. We are expecting 3 deliveries, all on Wednesday, so we were surprised to get a call to be ready for a delivery today. We took a cab to Obraje and hung out at the house for an hour or more waiting, expecting our dining table to arrive, but it turned out to be the mattresses from Sears in Querretero, and it turned out (after the poor guys had hauled them upstairs) that they were too short – Mexican Queens instead of American Queens, as requested. So we sent them back and will deal with the ramifications of that on Monday. Meanwhile we walked down to Aurora and caught a cab back. The cabby recognized us and told us our address! Obviously we take too many cabs! But it was comforting as well. My leg was absolutely killing me and to find not just a cab but a cab that knew us was extra nice.

We arrived home to find Alfredo waiting with info about going to Dolores Hidalgo and how much it would cost. Too much! Especially considering we would be making the trip to save money on Talavera pottery, etc. Now we think we will take the bus there and check things out.

Will ran over to David & Meg's to let them know we were back now and ready for them to come over, so they arrived and we had the nicest evening talking with them about all manner of things. And now it is 9:30 and time for bed, or at least to go up and read in bed.

The wind has picked up and I am not a big fan of wind. Over at the Obraje house it howled through the cracks in the unsealed doors and I had a terrible feeling, but Will assured me it wouldn't be like that, and hearing the wind here now, I can see there is just a lot of wind, not just at that house. Really sitting around waiting for the delivery was incredibly relaxing and pleasant. I think it is a very restful house. I really got a chance to listen to all the sounds there, which are similar to hear but at a little more distance. The dog culture is certainly there, but all the dogs are friendly and free, so it's a different scene than ferocious roof dogs.

February 19, 2007

Yesterday we took the bus to Dolores Hidalgo to look for dishes. We had the names of several stores considered good quality and reasonable, so when we arrived in Dolores, little map in hand, we headed straight for Calle Puebla where several of the shops were located. Being Sunday, some of them were closing early. We found one that seemed to have a good selection, but there was another one further away that we thought we should check out before making a final decision. We took a cab there, but it was closed and the cab driver was long gone, so we trudged back into town and returned to the store we had liked. We had the option of buying a complete set of dishes for 2750 pesos, but the set contained things we would never use and was missing things we would like. Besides a whole set all the same seemed so boring with so many beautiful patterns available! To Will's dismay I opted for going through all the open stock and choosing individual pieces. He felt this was an awful lot of work. But the young boy who had followed us around to make sure we didn't steal anything (a common use for young people here!) now became my ally and we had a good time as I would hand him my choices and he would carry them to the check out table. Soon he was helping me decide between this and that. I suggested Will go choose the decorative plates for the wall and he enjoyed doing that and chose two very beautiful ones that we also bought. In the end we spent almost to the peso what the set would have cost, but we got exactly what we wanted in a much more interesting variety that really captures all aspects of the Talavera experience, and we got beautiful serving bowls and the decorative plates as well!

They packaged all the dishes up in three large boxes and helped us load them into a passing taxi. We knew there were two bus stations and we thought maybe the other one that we hadn't come into had the bus line that was more express. We told the driver we were going to San Miguel and wanted the fastest bus. He suggested his taxi was the best choice but we laughed and said we'd spent all our money on dishes. But because he knew where we were going he spotted a San Miguel bus that had just left the station. It was stuck in traffic so he made a gesture to get the driver to open his doors for us. Will hopped out and told the bus driver we had cajas that needed to be loaded under the bus. Suddenly both the taxi driver and the bus driver were outside helping us stash the dish boxes away. We paid the cab driver, thanking him for his extra attention, and clambered on the bus, feeling quite exhilarated and relieved that we would not have to hang around a bus station but were already on our way home.

It is amazing how much you can accomplish here without a car! When we arrived at the station in San Miguel, I waved to a woman who had a dolly and she raced over and helped us load up our boxes which she pushed through the station and out to a waiting taxi. She and the driver helped us load the boxes into the trunk, and he helped us unload them at the casa. Mission accomplished!

Our little stockpile of house wares in our 'store room' grows and grows. On moving day we will hire a taxi-truck to cart it all over to the other house. I cannot imagine being able to do any of this in San Rafael!

February 21, 2007

Yesterday we took the bus to Queretero because in order to receive credit for the mattresses we rejected, we had to actually go back to Sears and let them swipe the card

again! So a three hour round trip bus trip! But we made the most of the occasion, taking lots of photos for painting scrap from the bus and visiting the historic district of Queretaro which is very beautiful. We also did more shopping for utensils which we discovered are very hard to come by anywhere down here. I was much less snooty in my selection this time, just grateful for being able to get anything at all.

Today we spent the morning at the Obraje house awaiting the two deliveries, but only receiving the one for the dining room buffet. They had to come all the way from Commonfort and had to rely on the wild map Dora drew them, but they arrived on time. The other table delivery never showed, and they are in town. I called them twice, but haven't connected yet. I guess we'll have to go back to the store.

While we were at the house, the woodworker was putting finishing touches on the new shelves in the kitchen, the painters were working on the master bedroom which is a wonderful color called Baked Clay, and the plumbers were installing the washer/dryer, water filtration system, submersible (quiet) pump in the cistern, and the thermostat for the radiant heating. We tried hooking up the DSL wireless router but didn't succeed. Next time! We saw our next door neighbor Judith, and met a renter-neighbor who is returning to the states soon named Kate. She told us the basura pick-up times, Mon/Weds/Fri early. She also told us that the house she is in (across the street), which has two apartments and a casita, is going to be up for sale soon. I'll be curious to see who buys it and if they keep it separate spaces or turn it into a big residence.

After giving up on the second delivery, we walked into town, ordered our beds at Camas La Cruz, met an American woman from Berkeley who has lived here 40 years. She had a few things to tell us! But she was very enthusiastic about our house buying, saying we couldn't have done anything better with our money. Hope she's right! She told us all about hospitals here, since she is a chaplain working in the hospitals. She says the local La Fe is good for what ails you, but not for surgery. For that, go back to the states, or at least to Queretaro or Mexico City.

She also told us that the do-gooder Americans are way off base who see life in the campo as severe poverty when it's just a different lifestyle. I had heard of the poverty from two different mexicanos, so I take what she says with a grain of salt. It's not just cushy beds they lack, but sometimes water! That's not a different lifestyle choice! Of course extranjeros shouldn't come down here and see what's different and try to make it the same as the US, but human misery knows no boundaries, and I don't fault anyone who makes an effort to alleviate it. Naturally it should be done with an open and informed mind, asking what is wanted instead of making assumptions.

After our mattress purchases, we had nummy sandwiches at Pegaso, a place I have really mixed feelings about. The clientele is all English speaking, the menu has lots of American comfort food, and the waiters almost always answer in English even if you talk in Spanish. I find this disconcerting, and generally not the case in most restaurants around town. But they are very nice in spite of not being willing to play along with lousy Spanish!

Because my leg is going through a particularly painful patch these days, and has me hobbled even with ibuprofen fixes, Will popped me into a taxi with the computer and purchases and I came home. He went on foot to Independencia to the furniture store that had a pretty carving for over the master bed and should return shortly.

The weather has really warmed up. We keep the windows open at night and in the day seek the shady side of the street and just wear t-shirts. Quite a difference from a month ago!

February 22, 2007

The house is really shaping up now. Even the cleaning people have arrived! The plumber is done with all the systems, the woodworker is just adding shelves in cabinets. The painters are madly adding color. And several pieces of furniture are beginning to arrive. Moving day in five days! Oh boy!

We headed over early today to meet with Marcos about the living room paint color. It is coppery and goes better with the ivory of the hall than the previous two choices! We were so lucky to have chosen the right color right off for the hallways and bathrooms. The main bedroom we are happy with after only two samples. The guest bedroom we stuck with the original color we chose, but I wasn't sold on it and just went along with Will, which now I know better than to do, but it is too late. It's growing on me and hopefully it will be fine. But the living area has gone through several different color swatches from a deep hot rust to the color of the bedroom to the current coppery and we're having it done in the last. Hopefully it won't be a mistake! Scary!

While waiting for a sample paint color to dry, Will and I hung out on the terrace leaning on the high railing. Below us a mexicana was washing dishes in her outdoor sink. I have noticed how rinsing is done here – whether while washing dishes at home or washing bus windows at the station – by scooping water with a small bowl from a bucket or sink. We have watched work going on down below – a man is often mixing concrete (no wheelbarrows needed here, you just mix it on the ground!) and we have watched the resident cat, or the rooster and chicken paired in a small cage. The cat always notices us but no one else usually does, until today. The senora was looking up at us so we said “Hola, Buenos dias, senora. Somos sus vecinos nuevos. Compramos la casa.” She was delighted and we introduced ourselves. I believe her name was Avila. One of her names was Bustamante. But we will likely always call her Senora, since it is doubtful we will ever be at any closer distance as she is in a different street altogether.

Then we headed to various stores to make various decisions, ending up in the Biblioteca to have coffee and toast so I could pop the pills I forgot to take with breakfast and remake our ongoing shopping list. Nikkos stopped by our table and we asked him to join us, telling him about our adventure to Queretero. He then told us some pretty funny bus ride stories. On one first class bus he paid full fare but didn't get a seat and had to spend hours sitting on a box next to the driver holding on for dear life while listening to Shelley Winters scream as everyone else was watching *The Poseidon Adventure* in cushy

comfort. Another time his bus broke down and they had to wait for the next bus which was the legendary chickens and other farm animals on board that you always hear about but never get to experience. Nikkos did! And what a stench! Since he doesn't drive, I told him he needs better bus karma and he needs to drop 5 pesos into the offering tin to the bus saint at the entrada to the terminals. I forget what saint it is, but he definitely needs to get in good with her or him. Nikkos is a photographer/digital artist from SF who is working on a series on art openings. He told us about a couple tonight, so we will try to get by after the big technical run through at the house with realtors present.

We had a nice lunch in the lovely courtyard of La Finestra on Ancha, after yet more furniture shopping. We also found some good books for our casa library, including "On Mexican Time" which no SMA library should be without, and Mary Morris' "Nothing to Declare" which I've never read, so have just started. Written about SMA of 20 or so years ago, it is already fascinating as she lived in San Antonio, our neighborhood for the past two months. At that time it was considered the absolute slum where no American would ever go. That was true as little as four years ago when our neighbors here bought. How things change! She describes the entry road to San Antonio with its high walls, which means it must be Orizaba, but says it was unpaved. How different it must have been, like coming into the country!

Later that night...

We took a cab over to the new house to meet up with everyone for the run through. The painters were still there looking pretty exhausted but still applying second coat to the living room, and the coppery color seems to work, thank goodness.

We heard a big sound outside and went down to the end of the street where it meets vacant lots to look out and see a dumpster being dropped in a distant building. Our neighbor Judith saw us out the window and came to the door to invite us in. Her home is modest but wonderfully inviting, and she has a huge window to the view. Unfortunately she has four cats, all of whom are exquisitely beautiful and healthy. I didn't react immediately – probably because Mexican homes are full of tile instead of carpeting. Her paintings were on the wall, and on the wall that faces our home were three paintings of a black man and white woman in intimate embraces. I asked her how she knew in 1992 that we were coming, or was she just a powerful conjurer. She said that at the time the paintings represented her own inner exploration of coming to know her nurturing masculine side, but that later she met a man who looked just like the one in the paintings, and they had a relationship for five years! As we left, concerned about everyone arriving and our not being around, she told us how happy she was we were here, and we said the same. How wonderful to have a painter/massage therapist/ flamenco dancer next door who is a full time resident and has offered to keep an eye on our casa!

Dora showed up just as we came outside, and we greeted her with concern because she had been sick with the same kind of cold we'd had. We had a chance to talk for a while waiting for Gabor and Illiana to show. When we told her about the neighbor and the paintings, she said that she too had painted an interracial couple, only the woman was dark and the man was light.

After the run through where only a couple things need to be fixed up or reexamined, Will and Gabor went over Will's plans for the studio which Gabor will study. We are feeling we want to get the studio done before the house across the street goes on the market and a new neighbor takes offense. We dearly hope Judith won't mind looking at our studio from her studio!

Afterwards Dora drove us into town and we tried to find one of the gallery openings Nikkos told us about, but couldn't, and then happened into a little upstairs rug shop with a delightful old man who happily pulled out every little Oaxacan rug he had and laid it before us with a flourish. We bought two, and a runner for the dining room buffet. As often happens the items were put into a green garbage bag, so Will looked like he was carrying around our basura. And when a basura truck drove by, one of the guys gave him a look.

We stopped in at a restaurant across from El Jardin and had soup and margaritas. We got talking to a couple from San Francisco, then some women from Evanston and a couple from Michigan, and it was all very nice. We have fun telling people to be very careful or they might end up buying a place like we did.

Then we strolled around the Jardin because the mariachis were playing. We wish they would pass a hat and everyone would certainly pitch in enough to keep them playing all night, but they go from person to person hoping for someone to put out \$10 USD for one song. That's the price of a meal! Hello? But we do enjoy them and won't leave the Jardin if any are playing anywhere. When we did leave we walked down Zacateros to see if we could find the other gallery, which we did, but the show was small and only slightly interesting. When we came out we ran into our neighbor Caitlin (niece of Meg & David). We had run into her earlier in the day when she was off to purchase a bus ticket to begin a southern Mexico adventure. Very exciting.

Well, Will is upstairs reading and I will join him. We have to be up early tomorrow to go to a garage sale. Who knows what we might find?

February 23, 2007

We did get up early to be at the garage sale at opening time on the first day. For some reason we were out of coffee and fruit so we decided to have a light breakfast at a restaurant by the ATM where we hoped to make a withdrawal to be prepared for the wonderful things we might find at this garage sale. From the restaurant we hopped into a cab which on our instructions wove its way up the increasingly narrow cobbled streets up behind Juarez Park. Soon we noticed that there were not one but three and then four little green and white taxis in a row wending their way up to the same location! Boy, this was going to be some sale. My fingernails were not long enough for the clawing required! But when we all reached the address, we were told that the garage sale was over before it began, no details given except that all had been sold!!

The contrast between the San Miguel I am reading about in Mary Morris' book, a world of unbelievable poverty, and this morning's horde of gringo knickknack shoppers in a stream of taxis ascending to the heights of exclusive homes like one of those old scavenger hunt parties, only to discover that probably some design firm had offered a good price for the whole shebang...

Ah me. Not to say that poverty is gone here! I keep thinking about what the woman who'd been here 40 years said about 'do gooder gringos' misplaced efforts. I can't help feeling she is just making excuses, and that she feels guilty for having so much among so many who have so little. She is probably right that the need is misdiagnosed by narrow vision, but I would rather have a gringo with a good heart who just needs some fine tuning as to how best provide help, than a one with a hardened heart who romanticizes poverty, who has fond memories perhaps of garret rooms a way upstairs, etc. My question is whether people are warm enough? Are they going to sleep hungry? Are they suffering ill health as a result of their environment and unable to afford medical treatment? Are they in pain? Are they suffering? Are they forced to make painful choices in order to feed themselves? She says they have no problem sleeping on mats on the floor, and that they don't need fancy mattresses like the ones we were both buying that day. I guess people can sleep on mats...but what about the rats?

Because my leg seems to improve with rest, I spent most of the day at home while Will went about town running errands and checking out more woodworking shops, looking at the catalogs of the carpinterias. He enjoys being out and about, walking at a normal pace, but he feels limited in what he can accomplish, since ultimately it all looks fine to him! We always thought he was the picky one, but I think he is way past his shopping quota!

I spent the day on the phone and computer, changing our flights and other transport arrangements back to the US, extending our stay by almost three weeks. That should give us enough time to settle in and get things sufficiently nice for potential renters. We hope it is enough time for Will and Gabor to design and build the studio on the roof!

I am getting excited about our move, especially about leaving behind these casa noises and exchanging them for whatever we find there. (Hello croaking rooster!) This is like living in a daycare center from early morning to late at night, with the sometimes delightful, sometimes whiney, sometimes screaming noises at full volume of the lives lived almost completely out of doors in the yard next door. Now that the weather is better and our doors are wide open as well, it is even more intense. Also the sound of children's voices sends my libido level into the negative zone. Hopefully I will feel more inspired in our new beautiful bedroom. Not that this bedroom lacks for beauty or charm. It just lacks for privacy as our neighbors are so ever present.

February 24, 2007

Last night we invited Don and Meg & David to stop by to see the new house while we waited for our mattress and patio couch deliveries, scheduled for 6 – 8 pm. We plan to have a proper house warming party when the place is furnished, but this was just an

impromptu little invitation. We had no chairs for anyone to sit on. We brought a bottle of wine, wine opener and a box of new wine glasses we'd bought at Costco. Don drove over and had a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, three glasses, cheese and French bread. Meg and David at almost the same moment arrived on foot, carrying a bottle of red wine. Introductions were made, the tour given, and champagne opened and enjoyed. Meg and I went to the local tienda to get a bottle of water because, though the filtration system is now installed she was uncomfortable with being the guinea pig to try it first!

The sun set and the sky turned a rich purple. The stars and the sliver of a moon shone so bright, and our little casa showed it all off to its best advantage with its three terraces for viewing. The wall colors at night are even better than in the day, and we were both so delighted with our new home. Once there is some fabric and furniture to absorb the noise it will be better. The whole neighborhood was alive with the newness of our noisy presence and the local dogs, generally a quiet lot, were barking up a storm, and Will said the rooster below was pacing madly!

When we first arrived our soon to be neighbors across the way invited us to a party on Monday night. A goodbye party for Kate who was going back to the states which they are graciously expanding to a hello party for us! So nice to be so welcomed!

The patio couch never did show up, but the beds arrived around 7:30 and it took all of us participating one way or another to get them into ropes and up across the balcony into the master bedroom. We had purchased rope (cuerda) at Emelio & Ernestine's just in case it had to be done that way, but the movers also had rope. It was quite an achievement!

Now we have two American queen beds in the master bedroom, one waiting to go to the guest bedroom, not yet finished being painted. So the master, previously so elegant, looks like a kinky dormitory! Since it's the only furniture we have, we're guessing we'll be lolling around on it quite a bit until the sofa and other furniture arrives.

Our evening ended with Don giving us all a ride back to San Antonio. Meg and David seemed to get along well with Don, and we made plans to all go over to his house to pick more of his delicious mandarin oranges.

On a day when we accomplished a lot (engaged a property manager, received the guest bedroom dresser, consulted with the painters, ordered 2 more terrace chairs, found the upholsterer on the slimmest of directions ('Don Carlitos en Calle 16 de Septiembre—no sign, no address number, no telephone -- don't worry it's a short street!'), chose a naugahyde and ordered cushions for all outdoor furniture, did laundry, ordered a 4 x 6' stretched canvas, rescheduled a delivery date for one that didn't happen, emailed thank you notes, clarifications with architect and information about changes in arrival dates, etc.) -- deep breath -- we also managed to hang out in the jardin for an hour or so enjoying the mariachis. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon around 3 pm, and the store we needed to visit was closed at least until four, so we sat on a bench and took in the scene: pigeons flocking and flying, children running or nestling in mothers' laps, a tour group being led into the Parocchia, vendors manning their stands. A Canadian couple sat next to

us and when the woman left the man talked to us a bit. Then Nikkos showed up and sat next to Will and they talked while I continued to talk to the man from Victoria, who told me tales of his bad luck whenever they visited San Francisco. There were two mariachi groups strolling about the Jardin in search of anyone who would pay \$100 pesos for a song. At various times they were dueling songs on different sides of the park. Since the Jardin is so small – just a block square – the resulting sound was a festive cacophony. But eventually three men and two women, all in their twenties I would guess, hired one of the bands to create an instant dance party in a sunny section of the square. They played at least ten songs and for each one the five of young people danced, together, separately, with the mariachis, encircling one mariachi, grabbing a white haired gringa and getting her involved for a while, standing on the benches and rocking to the rhythms, laughing at the bawdy lyrics of one of the songs. A crowd gathered around at a distance to enjoy the music and watch the party. The whole Jardin, in an unusual single focus seemed tuned to that one point, really enjoying the spectacle. The other band had given up for awhile and was just relaxing on the benches at the far end of the square. Eventually the impromptu party was over, the crowd dispersed, and we continued on with our errands. Later, as we were walking home, we followed along a huge boda (wedding) party parade with mariachis, a flower festooned burro, two giant figures of the bride and groom, and probably a hundred guests, as they ambled their way down Ancha. What a Saturday! And it's only 6:30! If the painters come by soon enough to pick up their next payment, we can get out into the evening and have some margaritas. If not, we'll just have a glass of wine and figure we're in for the night. Either way is good.

February 27, 2007

Dad's 91st birthday, if he were still alive. Today was the closing of our house and all went smoothly. I can't help but think that Dad (and Mom) would heartily approve of our decision. And as if in great confirmation, on this very day the stock market had its worst day since 9/11/2001. Making me feel like having pulled out over 3/4s of the stock I inherited from Dad's side of the family, I have been somewhat exonerated. Certainly San Miguel de Allende feels like a good investment. And now we are in fact, at least in the eyes of the law within our casa, Mexican! That's what the contract says. Which just means we cannot go to the American embassy and complain. In this matter we are as Mexicans.

Last night we went to a goodbye-hello party in our new neighborhood. Very nice people, many of whom are headed back to the states today or soon. But the ones that are left, the more permanent ones, seem delightful and we are certainly feeling very welcomed. We were a little surprised that the little neighborhood has that many gringos, but that's okay. There is definitely a strong Mexican community as well.

Emelio, saying that we are now his best clients with our purchases of a ladder, sink, hammer, tape measure, and much more, agreed to deliver our goods and ourselves to our casa yesterday afternoon, in exchange for a house tour. We showed him around and he told us all sorts of wonderful stories about the area, as he grew up on Calle Animas nearby, roaming the hills where our new house is built. All in Spanish, of course!

I have definitely been finding that I understand much more of what is spoken in Spanish. I communicate well on the telephone with people as long as it doesn't go into any specific jargon, and listen to complicated multi-person conversations and follow it pretty well. I am feeling like people are speaking more slowly or distinctly, but Will says no. So I just must be understanding better! Yay!

Tomorrow is moving day and I should get some rest. Our neighbor/friend David has offered to use his truck to get us over there, and we have pretty much packed all our stuff up. But there will always be something.

Tonight when we returned home there was a call from the plumber's wife who said that the check we gave him was not accepted because it didn't include his third name, which was never given to me. So now I have an email into Monex to see if they can reissue the check with the third name included. Yevay! These Mexican names are tricky! For example our architect's name on his website and for all intents and purposes is Gabor Goded, son of Jaime Goded the artist. But for the purposes of receiving a check, we had to be sure it included his third name (from his mother) Dealbert. We don't get this kind of problem much in the States!

We are moving in tomorrow and some of our furniture is there and some will be delivered shortly, but we have no dining room chairs or any chairs of any kind. The couch will be delivered on Thursday and Friday in two parts. So we will be able to sit on Thursday. Until then we will have to lounge around on our two beds which we purchased at the local Camas Cruz where it was no problem to order American length queens.

But we have bought a lot of pretty things, and I think that it will not take too much to get the house in shape. The most important thing is fabric to soften the echo!

Sunday, March 04, 2007

I am sitting at our dining room table. We still don't have chairs but Will brought in one of the wrought iron chairs from our very well furnished main terraza. It has a wrought iron couch and two chairs with a tile coffee table for the outdoor living room, and a square tile table and four chairs for our outdoor dining room. All the chairs and the couch have custom made cushions of a terra cotta naugahyde, sewn by Don Carlos. Excellent job and sooner than expected! Yay!

Inside we still don't have our sofa, which is now due to arrive tomorrow and Tuesday, but we do have an incredible custom made armoire for the electronics, with TV doors that hide and a TV platform that pulls out and swivels! Jose made it and installed it the other day, and it is very impressive. I asked if he was sure that the whole thing wouldn't topple over when the TV was pulled out, and he said he tested it by sitting on it!

Being Sunday we had pancakes, this time in our own kitchen, with an iron griddle on the central long burner of the stove. Tasted just like home.

Our moving in was helped to an incredible degree by David. He and Will drove over in his truck with all our stuff we'd been purchasing and storing in the rental's second bedroom. I followed in a taxi, stopping along the way to drop off the rental casa keys to the management office. When I arrived at our new house, they had already piled all the boxes and bags into the entry courtyard. We spent the day unpacking and placing things in their right spots. Unpacking the Talavera pottery was fun, placing it on the open shelves and the dining table and buffet. But now I understand why Dora was against open shelving. Everything gets dusty so fast! Should have gotten glass cabinets instead! Oh well.

We are still making sure that our labors are balanced by the pleasures of San Miguel. We never want to forget why we wanted to buy a house here in the first place! Part of the reason is the impromptu nature of socializing. Our new neighbors Linda and Saul are people we were sure we would enjoy getting to know better since the welcome party. She is a watercolor artist/teacher/graphic designer/interior designer and he is a retired college English teacher who spends a lot of time volunteering with the organization here that builds homes out in the campo for hovel dwellers. Together they hold English lessons every Tuesday night for anyone in the neighborhood interested in attending. She works with the children, he with the adults, and they average around 12 – 15 students a night. They are also affectionately called the land barons of El Obraje, as they keep buying up property as it becomes available and expanding their originally modest home with beautiful gardens Linda designs. They have also bought the lot across the street to protect their own view, and with the idea that someday they'll build a house that they can live in. They always have their feelers out for any property for sale within eye view of their home. Smart! They've only been here two years, but in that time the value of property has gone way up. They assure us we are still well within the 'smart to buy' period! Hope so!

The reason we know so much about them now is that we ran into them in town the other night when we were out running errands, and they invited us to meet them later at Tao, the Korean-Japanese restaurant we had yet to try. We did join them, had a nice meal, and took the cab home together to their house and stayed for a tour and a glass of wine on their upper terrace with the incredible straight on view of the Parrochia.

Our first night in our new home was pretty sleepless. We were both in pain, as my leg was killing me and Will's stomach was sour, so that probably kept us awake. We left the doors open in the bedroom, not anticipating any great level of noise. But, lo and behold we are in Mexico, no matter where we stay. Below us are three roosters! The dog further below who always seemed delightfully mild mannered in the day suddenly has a nervous barking fit at odd hours of the night. The next night we closed the room up and found that helped quite a bit, but I also think the dog has calmed down. Today we were noticing that we also have a pig squealing two houses away! And on our walk out this morning we saw a sheep being pulled reluctantly into a house, followed by a very willing lamb! All this within 10 minutes walk to El Centro!

Our communications systems have been thoroughly down during this transition period. What a fiasco. The DSL didn't work and we called to see why and the fellow said we need a filter on every outlet, so Will went to Telmex to get more, and they said they didn't have anymore for eight days, but that beyond four outlets, DSL no longer works! They might have asked us how many outlets we had before they sold us the system. Will said well then, how do I cancel, and they said "That'll cost you 700 pesos."

Then through the miracles of modern technology, with the help of painter Alfredo's message phone, we discover that the phone number that is on our bill is not the phone number that rings in our house!!!! Possibly the other one works over at the house next door, but we don't know. Anyway, that could be another reason that the DSL doesn't work. Who knows! But that just added to our feeling that TelMex is not a great resource, and we went over to TeleCable and signed up for both cable and internet. They are due to come out tomorrow to hook up the cable, so we went out and bought a television at Mega this morning. The taxi camionetta driver helped Will carry it in the house, unpackage it and put it in the armoire, which was great. Once we're satisfied the cable internet is working, we'll get the DSL disconnected. And we are considering not having local phone at all, but just pay as you go cell phone(s) here that we and tenants can use. That way they could get their deposits back quickly as there would be no phone bill to wait for. We are waiting to get input on that from Javier and others.

We had our first new neighborhood basura (trash) day on Friday – quite the social event, even more so than on San Jorge. An awful lot of chitchat before even getting my morning coffee! We met Kelly's mother, Linda Vandiver who is also a painter, and two young mexicanas, Monica and Laura.

Friday night we enjoyed all the Chichimeca conchero dancers here in San Miguel from Patzcuaro for the Fesitivdad del Senor de la Conquista. Each dancer had an incredible feather headdress that made me hope they were long inherited and not recently plucked tailfeathers of magnificent birds. They marched and danced during the day, and we saw them briefly off and on during our errand running. We could hear the drumming from the house! Then in the evening we really got to see them close up in El Jardin as different groups danced at various points around the square. A full moon trance dance! The day is supposed to be about the acceptance of Jesus by Mexican natives, but it felt quite its own spiritual tradition, going back way beyond the 16th century. It felt like a deep lunar ceremonial dance – not Christian at all.

I finished Mary Morris' *Nothing to Declare*. From the euphoria of reading about the very streets on which we were living, I found myself feeling that the author was simply a restless spirit uncomfortable anywhere with anyone. But she does tap into the spiritual depths of the people she meets, and I am glad to have read it, even as I feel sorry for her troubled existence. I wonder about her now, since the book was written over twenty years ago.

Last night my friend from Marin, Barbara, and two traveling companions were supposed to come over to see the house, have drinks, and then join us as we planned to go to an art

opening at Aurora we were invited to by our new neighbor Kelly. Barbara and company never showed up! I still haven't found out why. I left a call in to her this morning at the hotel and I hope she calls back, but I'm surprised she didn't call me this morning to explain. As a result we spent a lot of time hanging out near the door because the buzzer doesn't work and we didn't think we would hear them knocking from out on the terraza. We did keep checking the sunset: lovely; the afterglow: glorious, and then the lovely warm evening – all so inviting and perfect for our first party since we've been actually living here. Will even went down to the corner and stood around watching for taxis, as it was possible that the driver didn't know where San Jacinto is, and Barbara certainly didn't. All to no avail. After giving up almost all hope, we went up on the roof with our wine and appetizers and watched the moon come up from behind the hill behind us. This gave us a view out on our little street, so we would have spotted any taxis. None came, but we enjoyed watching the various comings and goings of neighbors and the roaming band of three dogs who saw the cat across the street walking stealthily (she thought) along her high wall, and subsequently went wild. At one point we thought about just heading down to Aurora and leaving a note on the door, but the taxi would have already pulled away and they wouldn't have known how to get there or had the means to do so. We couldn't very well do that, so we just stayed home and missed the first opening at Aurora that we were actually personally invited to! Barbara has a lot of explaining to do!

It turns out Barbara's tour was out of town and she had no way of contacting me to let me know they would not be returning in time. She tried!

Our neighbor Judith had a pile of soil delivered on Tuesday and had workers running a wheelbarrow right through her living room on Thursday, out onto her deck and dumping it into her garden below. She said that it took her all day Friday to clean the inside of the house. Then Friday night, after such a perfect evening, the wind picked up to a furious pitch and kept it up all night. The doors and windows rattled and banged like crazy! We stuck cardboard and pieces of foam in various spots to quiet it down. The house itself, a mass of concrete, didn't notice a thing. And we fell fast to sleep in spite of the howling noise outside. But I did think about all that loose dirt of Judith's and whether it was all landing in our courtyard and terraces!

April 11, 2007

The journaling in San Miguel stopped with the last entry, partly because life became too busy with having to meet our flight deadline, and partly because I became very ill and was flat on my back for eight days with some unidentifiable malady that had me fainting in public places and unable to sit up in bed. After a couple of days of this, Will decided to call a doctor that he had found in our guidebook. I didn't want this doctor, nicknamed "Dr Handsome" by the gringos, because I had heard that he was quite willing to give a patient antibiotics on a regular basis. With my medical history, I didn't want to receive antibiotics unless absolutely necessary. Dr Handsome, having looked at my bloodwork, determined that I had a staph infection (where I wondered?) and said I had to have two injections of penicillin. Ugh! But he also said that these injections would probably not make me feel any better, as he didn't think it was the infection that was causing my

symptoms. Well, just dandy. And indeed there was no change, but a few days later I just sort of started to feel better, and soon I was back to normal. Weird!!!

As I was lying there in that beautiful room that was one of the reasons we bought that house, I came to hate it. It was my prison cell. And I really came to hate the roosters, especially the one with a speech defect, whose sad croak I can imitate perfectly, having had so much time to perfect it.

Meanwhile, Will told me that the basura buzz was that I had typhus! The doctor assured me that I did not, but the buzz is more believed, so I am sure there are people in the neighborhood who still think that's what happened to me.

Until then the communal feeling of going out to meet the basura truck three mornings a week when the clanging of a piece of metal announces its arrival, had been one of the many charming and fun aspects of life in San Miguel. Now I could see how easily it could become something problematic. Still it was nice to know that our new friends were concerned about me, and when I got well I was greeted warmly, as if back from the dead.

With me out of commission, Will hit his stride in taking charge of all the furnishing shopping we needed done. Please understand that Will hates shopping! But, with very little Spanish to work with, he managed to buy Oaxacan carpets, wine glasses, and other necessities, as well as hire an ironworker to make curtain rods and have his watercolors framed. And of course he nursed me and did the grocery shopping. For some reason he bought corn flakes cereal. We hadn't had corn flakes in decades, but suddenly they became the mainstay of my diet. I loved them! And I got well on the 'corn flakes cure,' or in spite of it. We'll never know!

Flat on my back I was so sad to be missing San Miguel. I had a beautiful view of the countryside that made me feel better, but I missed sitting in El Jardín and strolling around town. When I became well, we only had a few more days before our flight out, and the house still wasn't completely furnished. Will had a list of shops that he had visited and seen various dining chairs, chaise lounges, easy chairs, etc. that he wanted me to see, so we raced around to see them, and I rarely got to spend any of my time just being in San Miguel. But then I realized, we have a home here, and on none of our future visits will we be this harried. I have years to enjoy being in San Miguel. And that gave me comfort as we finished the house, packed up our bags (leaving most of our clothing and art supplies stored in the house), and headed back to Marin.

Now we have been home for almost a month, and it has been a wonderful homecoming. As I write I am looking out at beautiful Mt. Tam, freshly rained on and swathed in clouds, over our newly built deck that sets the mountain off like a Japanese style frame, and I know it would be too much to expect us to give this up. We will probably never be full time residents of San Miguel. A heart truly can live in more than one place. The art is to make sure that it is fully in the place it is, not always hankering for the place it's not! And I was not homesick when I was in San Miguel, and I am not wishing I were in San Miguel now. Perfect!

Except that we now own this home there, and have a responsibility to make it pay off as an investment as well as a heart space. The moment I got home I created a listing for the various online vacation rental sites, and creating a website for the house to link to. And once that was fully launched, I had to educate myself to how to do vacation rentals, and I'm still learning. We have had a number of inquiries and two reservations. We are hopeful we will be able to have the house rented out for a lot of the time. We are delighted with our property manager Javier, recommended by our friends Tom & Linda, who makes us feel that everything is being well taken care of. And our cleaning person Elizabeth, who we met on the doorstep of a neighborhood house she was cleaning, brings her adorable little boy Jorge with her to work, seems very thorough, trustworthy, and extremely nice. We are very fortunate! May our good fortune continue, and may all who made our creation of a new home possible be healthy and happy as well.

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