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THE LURE OF SAN MIQUEL DE ALLENDE

BESIDES A UNIQUE COOKING SCHOOL WHERE COAST TRAVEL WRITER STEVE BRAMUCCI LEARNED TO BAKE PAN DE LOS MUERTOS, THIS SOUTH-OF-THE-BORDER HAVEN FOR EXPATS LIVES UP TO ITS REPUTATION AS THE MOST FESTIVE CITY IN THE WORLD.

BY STEVE BRAMUCCI

As far as pink gothic churches go, La Parroquia, in the center of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico makes a pretty stunning sight.

Unfortunately, it's a little hard to appreciate at 5 a.m.

As I walk by, I manage to lift my eyes from the cobblestones and gaze up at the church's ornate granite spires. This postcard-worthy vision, set against the backdrop of dawn, helps to wake me.

I cut through El Jardín, San Miguel's main square, with a stray dog clipping at my heels. Together, we turn onto a narrow street, passing ornately carved wooden doors, most of which are still closed. I'm heading off for a morning of work at Petit Four, a bakery just a few blocks away. I've been invited to make *Pan de los*

Muertos, orange blossom-flavored buns baked each year to commemorate the Day of the Dead. The bread needs to be in the oven by 6 a.m.

When the bakery opens at 7 a.m., a crowd of loyal customers will already be gathered outside.

The fact that my short stay in San Miguel coincides with a holiday is no surprise. Actually, it's statistically probable. San Miguel holds the world record for the city with the most holidays and festivals — two per week, on average. Residents of the city will tell you that the nights punctuated by rapid, percussive fireworks definitely outnumber the silent ones.

I step inside the bakery, leaving the dog with



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A colorful mission in San Miguel de Allende; the author's finished Pan de Los Muertos; THESE PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT Preparing lunch; Chef Paco Cardenas and an assistant at Sazon Cooking School at Casa de Sierra Nevada; A night-time view of the city;

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A mural in San Miguel.



a promise of a treat the next time our paths cross. I scrub up and watch the dough tumble rhythmically through the mixer. My job will be to decorate the tops of each fist-sized bun with connected pieces of twisted dough. Then I'll paint them with a glaze made of egg whites, sugar and orange extract. It turns out to be trickier than it sounds and I feel less than dexterous at this early hour. Still, my hosts, Paco Cardenas and Norma Guerrero, patiently encourage my efforts. Paco and Norma are cousins who own and operate Petit Four. Paco and I struck up an easy friendship when I attended his cooking class a day earlier. His experience as a teacher proves invaluable as I struggle to make my *pan* look as uniform and appealing as his.

Soon, the first trays are loaded up and we slide them into shining industrial ovens. With the hard work done, Paco, Norma and I find a few minutes to sit down at a window seat with a cup of tea and a piece of coffee cake. Like many San Miguel residents, Paco and Norma are transplants. They were both born in Mexico City, but hardly knew each other when they decided to go into business together 10 years ago. Now their bakery is flourishing and they're as close as siblings. As the bakers share their impressions of San Miguel, the first sunlight trickles inside. Not long after, my rolls are under the display case and selling so fast that the minor defects in workmanship are hardly noticeable.

THE ORIGINS OF SAN MIGUEL

After my morning with Paco and Norma, I leave the bakery for a guided tour of the town center on foot and by taxi. In a city valued for its rich history, I find that everyone is happy to share their thoughts on San Miguel's origins. The establishment of the town is credited to a Franciscan monk named Juan de San Miguel in 1542, or sometime close to then — that much is sure. From there, details get a little murky. Walking downhill toward the public laundry, where women come to wash their clothes by hand, my guide explains his version of how the city was founded. According to legend, not long after arriving, Juan de San Miguel discovered that

he had chosen an uninhabitable location for his settlement due to a lack of reliable water. He responded to this realization by taking a nap under a tree. Fortunately, his dog clambered up a hill and discovered a brook bubbling up from underground. Our tour stops at the very spot before winding down toward Parque Juarez. I find myself enraptured by the tale. My taxi driver, who walks beside me, disagrees.

"A nice history," I say in Spanish as our guide steps away to chat on the cell phone.

"Very nice, but not true," he states flatly.

I arch an eyebrow. He decides to speak in English.

"There were local people, indios, living here for who knows how long before that monk came. You don't think maybe they knew where the water was? Maybe the monk asked them instead of leaving it up to his dog. Or no?"

A clever point. But in a city like San Miguel, where history is part legend, stories such as these take on an almost mythic life of their own. I hear similar versions of this "dog saves town" tale all day, each tweaked here and there. I even hear this as the explanation for why residents of San Miguel are so friendly to strays — there's a debt owed to the entire canine species. Later, as the cabbie navigates the winding streets, he shares a tale that he likes better.

"When they started to build the old town the idea was to lay it out on a grid. But the city was a stopover for people carrying silver from the mines in Zacatecas. Thieves were a big problem, so when people started to build they were afraid to be on the outer edges of the new town. They started to build between their neighbors and at strange angles. Everyone was trying to not be caught on the outside."

This story is much easier to verify. Soon we're looking down from a hill at the dense downtown area, where, sure enough, buildings are huddled tightly together, as if for protection. It was a fortunate stroke of city planning genius, however. The maze of San Miguel's streets is where half of its charm lies.

BREAKING BREAD

Whatever the facts of San Miguel's history, the modern day allure is tough to deny. The buildings are painted shades of burnt orange and rich ochre.



Bougainvillea climbs the walls and explodes from second story window sills. Even a short-term visitor can't help but notice the fresh, clean air and the perennially mild temperatures. The town's residents are equally vibrant and enjoy a pace of life that's busy yet not overbearing. It's the sort of place to which a doctor in a Victorian novel might send his rheumatic patients to regain their health. As I meander alone through the zigzagging alleys in the late afternoon, I realize how quickly the city has defied my expectations.

San Miguel de Allende is usually described by guidebooks and travel writers as a favored haunt of expats. This is often listed as a strike against it. Having read these reports, I'd anticipated a gentrified, gringoified tourist destination that was out of sorts with the Mexico I love. But by the light of the late afternoon sun, I just don't see it. The city is quaint and picturesque and the popularity with expats is legitimate. But these aren't the type of "I need-o a Coke-o with my burger-o" foreigners that crowd Mexico's coastal resorts. The American- and Canadian-born residents of San Miguel (of which there are many) seem to have a very particular love for the place and its culture. When my morning tour brought me to a luxury housing development called Artesana, even a quick glance at the property showed that no one is trying to change San Miguel. The architecture and style of the new structures are built to blend with the traditions of

FLY, STAY, EAT, PLAY

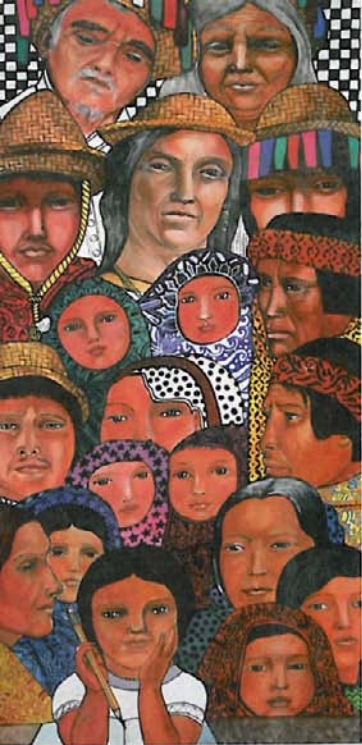
■ **GO THERE** :: Flights are currently hovering in the \$425-\$475 range from LAX to Leon/Guanajuato, the nearest airport to San Miguel. From there, van services and busses are easy to find from the airport and cost another \$70 or so. Certain hotels also help to arrange transfers.

■ **STAY HERE** :: Casa de Sierra Nevada – this hotel, built into a series of five colonial mansions, exemplifies the trend in San Miguel of properties that strive to fit with the city, rather than imposing their will upon it. It is extremely comfortable and centrally located. Rooms start at around \$225 a night. The hotel also runs a spa and cooking school. The town center has a wide variety of mid-range options.
:: casadesierranevada.com

■ **EAT HERE** :: San Miguel has a wealth of delicious restaurants featuring both international and regional cuisine. Bugambilla serves authentic Mexican food with creative touches. La Capilla is on the pricier side, but is certainly worth it. For lighter fare and coffee, I am incredibly partial to Petit Four.

■ **PLAY HERE** :: Shop, walk, study. Quaint boutiques and local markets are two of San Miguel specialties and are best found on foot, working outward from El Jardín. The Fabrica La Aurora, converted from a textile factory, hosts 30 art galleries and shops in one space and is definitely worth an afternoon. Art classes are available at the various institutes throughout town, even for short-term visitors. Bellas Artes offers instruction in a variety of media and painter Edina Sagert often teaches drop-in watercolor workshops. Sazon cooking school, part of Casa de Sierra Nevada, has chefs from around town come in and teach classes of their own design.

:: sazon.com



the heritage-listed downtown sector. Besides aesthetics, the non-locals that I met also hold affection for the Spanish language, still clearly the *lingua franca* in San Miguel. This gives me a great chance to practice my own Spanish skills, asking for directions from strangers after finding myself lost at the outer edges of town.

After strolling for most of the afternoon, much of it while drifting off in thought about San Miguel's past and present, I find myself at the art institute, *Bellas Artes*. Across the back wall of the institute is a mural covering the history of not just San Miguel but the entire country. This connection between art and history speaks to the very nature of the town.

Finally I work my way back to La Parroquia. From there it's easy to navigate to Petit Four to check in on my *pan*. Paco reports happily that it has long since sold out. He even had to scramble to save me a few pieces to bring home, one of which I tear into right away alongside a cup of hot chocolate.

Paco sits across from me. I proudly show off the clay cooking pots I bought at the outdoor market. He reminds me to season them by rubbing raw garlic on their unfinished surfaces before putting them over heat for the first time. I pay rapt attention. Under Paco's

instruction, 24 hours prior I learned four authentic dishes, three salsa recipes and also pressed out my own corn tortillas. Classes like these are another of San Miguel's calling cards. Many visitors will study cooking, art or the Spanish language during their stay. The creative, academic environment adds to the cultural mix in San Miguel and gives the town a certain buzz. People are there to try new things, explore ideas and sharpen skills. In this sense, the expat influence can be seen as a good thing – more a convergence of cultures than the Americanizing of a tourist hotspot.

Night is falling as I sit alone in El Jardín. A bottle rocket whistles overhead, an early start to the next day's festivities. Stray dogs thread between locals and tourists alike under the brightly lit arches of La Parroquia. I glance among them for my companion from the morning as old men with weathered faces lean heavily on their canes, watching children light off firecrackers. A woman with her hair wrapped in a silk scarf opens a drawing pad and begins to sketch the church and the bustling scene unfolding at its feet. On my lap rests my last piece of *Pan de Los Muertos*. I decide to eat it now instead of saving it for the next day. I'm sure I can get more. And San Miguel has left me feeling festive.