

The Travel Society

Vol. 30, No 2 February/March 2012

Magazine

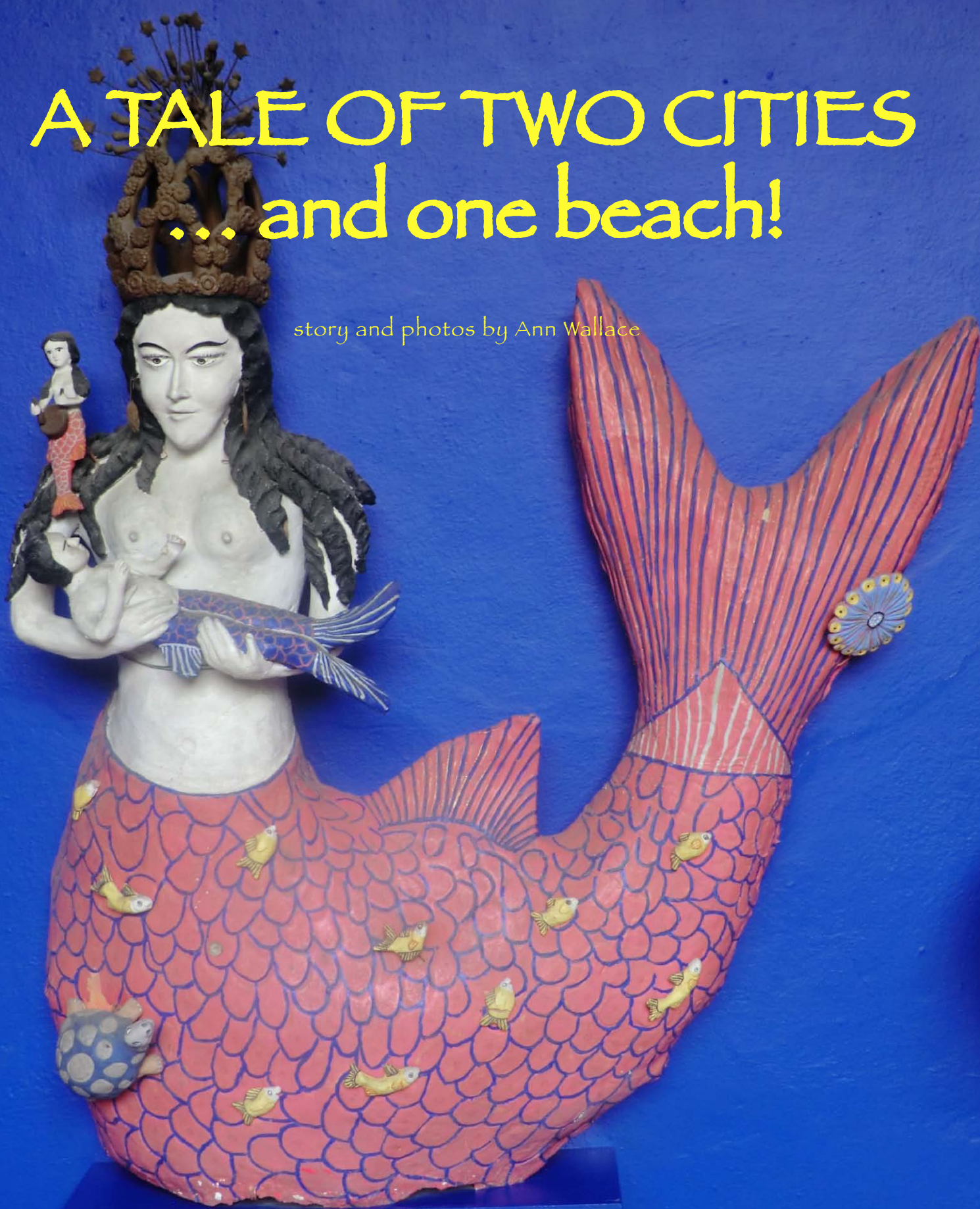


Mexico
England
The Camino

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES ... and one beach!

story and photos by Ann Wallace



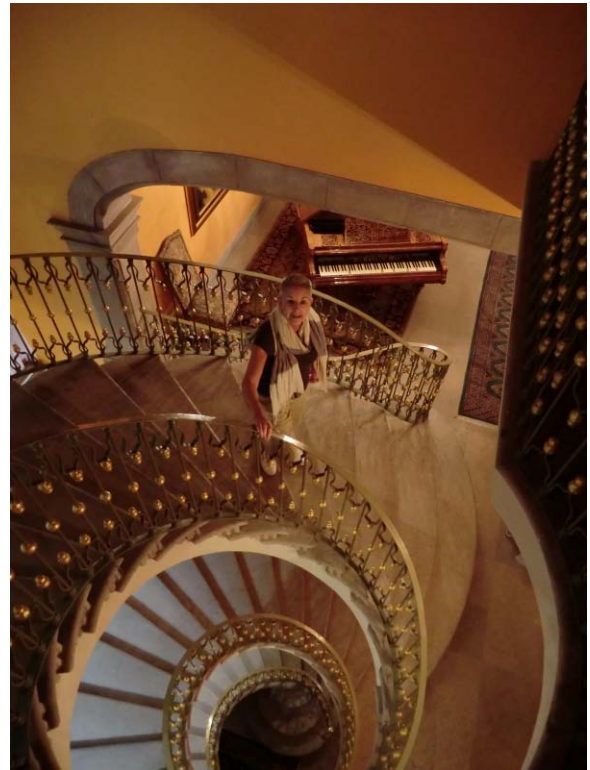
A wall decoration in the Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico City

To say I was excited would be an understatement! I was returning to one of my favourite countries – Mexico – after an absence of several years. And my family was coming too! It had all started with an invitation

from old Canadian friends to the wedding of their son on the Riviera Maya. It was the first time my family was destined to be in Mexico together and so a great opportunity to show them around Mexico City and also to take up another invitation ... a long-standing one from Mexican friends whom we met in Toronto several years ago. After a few years here they had returned to their extended family in San Luis Potosi, but we had kept in touch over the years.

Invitations were acknowledged, messages were exchanged, flights were booked, hotel rooms were reserved and on a chilly Toronto morning late in November last year we were off! Air Canada took us smoothly to Mexico City where we transferred to the vast new domestic terminal for our one hour flight with Aeromar to San Luis Potosi.

Our first few days were spent with our Mexican friends and their extended family at their dairy ranch on the outskirts of San Luis (we were soon told that the 'Potosi' bit is usually omitted!). It was a wonderful time reminiscing, meeting the family, touring the



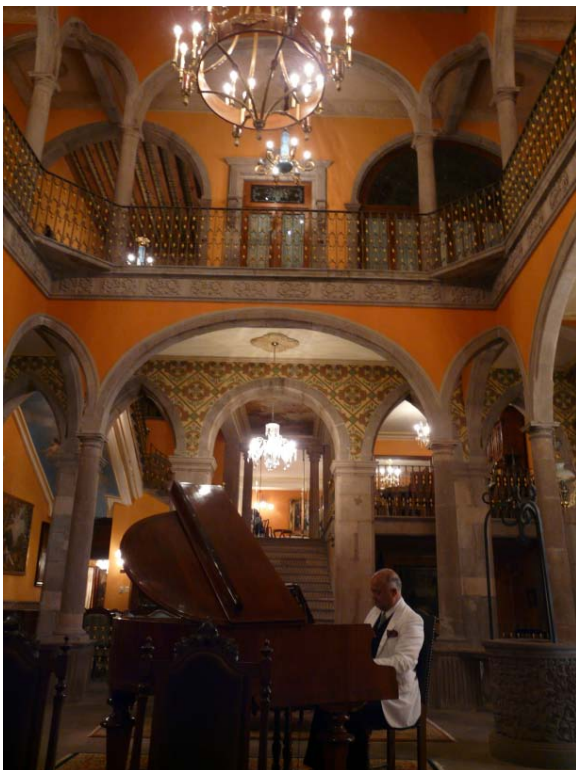
*That's Editor Ann posing on the stairs
in the San Agustin hotel*

property and its facilities, riding and enjoying delicious home-cooked Mexican food. We are fortunate to have such delightful friends!

But we couldn't leave without seeing something of San Luis itself. We had left hotel arrangements for a couple of nights to our friends. "We hope you like," they said with a smile as they accompanied us into the foyer. 'Like' is definitely an understatement! We were 'wow-ed' by the Hotel Museo Palacio de San Agustin with its elegant staircases and stone columns, fine French furniture and dazzling chandeliers, stained glass ceilings, beautiful rugs and tapestries, circular stairs with wrought-iron banisters, a private chapel, elegant antique-filled bedrooms and roof terraces overlooking the city. Enormous vases hold white lilies in many corners (including our rooms) and elegantly attired Jorge Contreras played the grand piano, brought from Austria, in the entrance hall at all hours.

Old this property may be, but all the rooms – each different – have fine bathrooms with modern showers and efficient plumbing. The dining room menu offers a wide variety of traditional and modern dishes embracing many cuisines in addition to Mexican. There's a tiny elevator and an intimate spa.

This mansion has a long history, first as the home of



In the lobby of the San Agustin hotel



The Opera House, San Luis Potosí

wealthy silver merchant Don Antonio De Sosa before it passed into the hands of a group of Augustinian monks who arrived in the region in 1596 to preach and convert in the silver-rich region. Their magnificent home was used as a retreat and a place for visitors ... a role it still plays today.

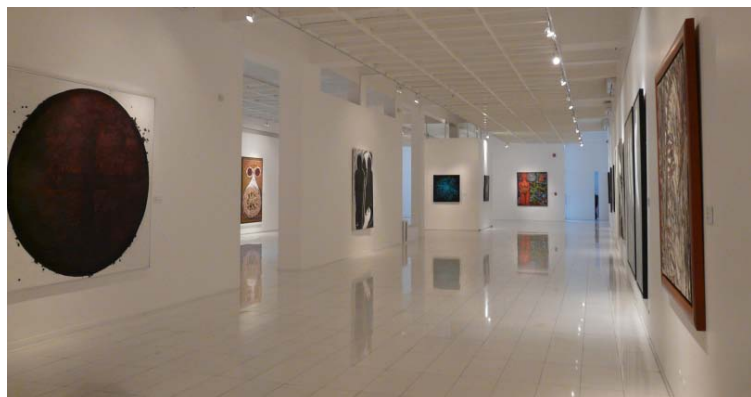
The size of San Luis Potosí surprised us, but as with so many Mexican cities, its sprawling modern sections with their homes, businesses, factories, railway lines and so on surround a relatively small historical section. And it was this old area that we set out to explore on our two days in the city. Armed with a map showing a historical route around town, we discovered the lively zócalo, many fine churches and buildings, the wonderful National Mask Museum and the stimulating Museum of Contemporary Art. On the western border of the historic zone, we loved our lunch at the Cielo Tinto restaurant so much that we returned the following night for dinner. And as our ‘thank you’ dinner for our friends we gathered on the terrace of the modern Apikus restaurant overlooking the zócalo and the beautifully illuminated churches and classical theatre that surround it. A magical evening indeed.

Too soon, we had to leave San Luis. But I was still excited because on the ensuing five days I was to play ‘tour guide’ for my family in Mexico City, a

destination new to them but not to me. As there were four of us, with rather more luggage than usual (outfits for everything from horse riding to wedding attending!) we had arranged with our hotel for a ‘large car’ to pick us up at the airport and soon we were delivered to the W Hotel in Polanco. Well, I say ‘soon’, but that’s not quite accurate. I was to find Mexico City little changed since my last visit some years ago except on one score ... the traffic is quite horrendous. For our first evening, we had booked tickets for the Ballet Folklórico de México at the beautiful Palacio de Bellas Artes. I had been inside this building before and it is well worth a visit. It contains murals by Rivera and Orozco and others, including Rivera’s ‘re-make’ of *Man at the Crossroads*, which was commissioned for the Rockefeller Center in New York City and then torn down because it contained a political message – including the face of Lenin – which was not welcome in America. (The movie *Cradle Will Rock* tells the story.) One can enter the Palacio (free) and see the art works, have a snack and drink in the foyer restaurant and browse the book and gift stores. But you need a ticket to enter the auditorium and this I had not done before. This Mexican ballet is performed every Wednesday and Sunday – it’s lovely – and, of course, you get to see the inside of the theatre and the famous Tiffany glass curtain. But I digress ... the traffic! We left our hotel in Polanco and hour and a half before curtain time for the journey I estimated should take about 20 minutes! We planned to have a drink and



In San Luis Potosí's National Mask Museum



The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Luis Potosí



The magnificent Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City

see the art works before the performance started, but we only just make it in time to see the curtain rise. Whatever your destination in this city ... if you plan on surface travel, leave plenty of time.

Guide books to the city will give most of the information you need to sightsee here according to your tastes. We walked from the W Hotel beside Chapultepec Park to the renowned Anthropology Museum, a 'must' for those interested in Mexico's history and in architecture. We walked through the historic zone to the massive Zócolo where we visited the Cathedral and – after stringent security screening – the National Palace. The screening here is not only for security, but also to preserve the site, thus you are requested to relinquish pens, candies, gum etc., in addition to anything that might be construed as a weapon. But don't let the security procedures put you off, this site is well-worth seeing with its interior gardens, massive squares, more epic murals by Rivera, the President's office and formal rooms and even a nice gift shop.

Beside the Cathedral you'll find the Great Temple and Museum – ruins of the centre of the ancient Aztec empire which were discovered accidentally in 1978 by a telephone repairman. It's fascinating and the terrace café – El Mayor – overlooking the ruins is a great place for a long Mexican lunch.

Not mentioned in many guidebooks is the Education Ministry building just a short

walk behind the cathedral on Republica de Argentina. Entry is free and surrounding its beautiful, quiet courtyard can be found dozens of Diego Rivera murals. My family were so impressed that I led them to such a gem, seemingly hidden in the bustling city.

Two days on excursions out of the centre of town were on our agenda, and for one of those days we found the excellent services of bonded tour guide/driver Guillermo Cisneros through our hotel concierge. Guillermo drove us in his comfortable Suburban for an hour or so out of town, answering our questions about modern Mexico and his family of four university-educated children as we headed for the wondrous ruins of Teotihuacán.

Guillermo was knowledgeable about these ruins, we walked all over the site together and climbed the Pyramid of the Sun and he also knew of a small site of lovely frescoes in an overlooked, unattended building nearby, which was a 'bonus'. We'd made our trip out to Teotihuacán early, so later asked Guillermo if he were free for the afternoon too, as we were anxious to visit the Dolores Olmedo Museum and the canals and floating gardens of Xochimilco.

It was a long, slow drive to reach the other side of town but reach it we eventually did and were thrilled we had done so as the Dolores Olmedo Museum is quite simply wonderful. It was a 'first' for me and I had misgivings that the drive hadn't been worthwhile as



Editor Ann admiring the immense Diego Rivera murals in the National Palace, Mexico City

we approached the site through a poor and shabby area. But stepping through the gates is like stepping into a gorgeous movie set! Beautiful lawns, trees and flower beds are home to dozens of preening peacocks and an enclosure housing a group of the hairless Xoloiztuintle dogs that Dolores Olmedo was so fond of. Fortunately this lady (1908-2002) was not only wealthy, she was also fond of art, and her 16th century hacienda home and art collection – Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera again, along with many others – was donated to the people of Mexico and is available for all to enjoy. In addition to the famous paintings, the museum also holds over 900 archaeological pieces from Mexico's ancient cultures, in addition to photographs and artefacts from Dolores' overseas travels with which she adorned her home.

There's an excellent gift and book store at the entrance, and a lovely terrace café under the trees in the heart of the garden. Do make time for this serene and interesting place when you visit Mexico City ... you won't be disappointed.

Our second 'out of the centre' day is a popular one with tourists. Take the subway or taxi to Viveros or directly to the Museo Frida Kahlo respectively, after enjoying the museum walk to the centre of Coyoacan (diverting to the Trotsky house if you are interested) and



Teotihuacan from atop the Pyramid of the Moon

enjoy the lively market and Plaza Hidalgo (especially on Saturdays) where there are many sidewalk cafés to choose from. Then walk directly west along Avenue Francisco Sosa, trying to catch a glimpse of the luxurious homes and gardens through cracks in their massive car doors. When this road reaches the busy Avenida Insurgentes Sur, hail a taxi for the short but tedious ride to the well known San Angel Inn, where dinner, drinks – and a rest! – in their flower-bedecked courtyard will be welcome. This old inn used to be very posh, with a dress code and so on. Today all that is in the past.

The food is hearty but not special, but it is obvious this location is much loved by Mexican families and it makes for a happy memory. The staff here will arrange for a taxi back to town.

Now for a word about the W Hotel, a frequent choice for us when we travel as a family as my daughter travels frequently on business and is a Starwood Preferred Guest. As we expected, the W in Mexico City was 'cool and trendy'. The staff were outstanding, both in general hotel services and in the concierge department, recommending nearby restaurants, calling taxis and reserving Guillermo for us (our complete day with him worked out to less than C\$80 per person, a figure that included a 25% gratuity ... we felt it had been a great, including admissions, bargain). The W rooms are unusual in that the enormous bathrooms occupy prime



The courtyard in the National Palace, Mexico City

position window-side, overlooking the city. There's an outdoor terrace for meals and drinks and the inexpensive buffet breakfast (eggs, fruit, pastries etc.) includes sparkling wine! And there's trendy art and furniture everywhere.

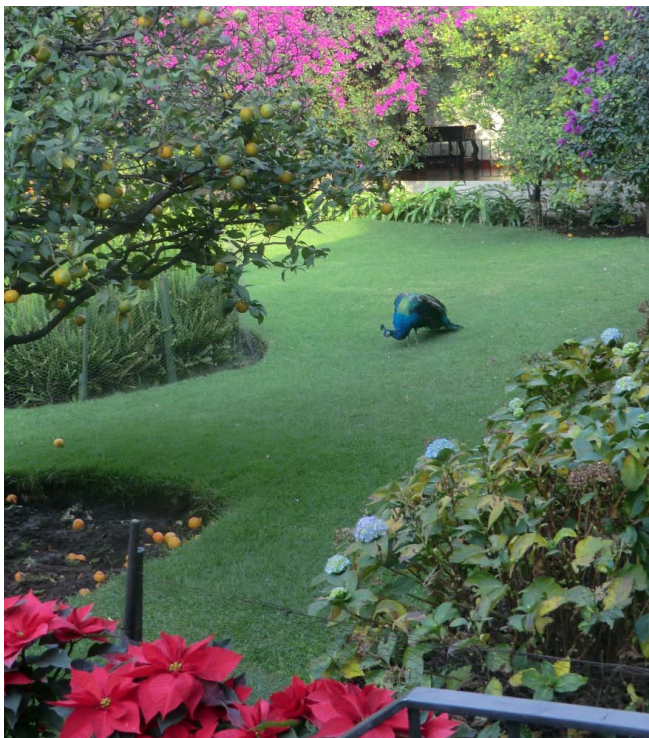
The hotel's location in the Polanco district means that you are within walking distance of many restaurants and other hotels and – if the traffic isn't too bad – your drive to the centre of the city shouldn't take more than half an hour or so. As well as eating in the hotel, we had lunch in El Bajío, across the road, one of a popular chain offering typical Mexican food and 'small plates', in Italian Prego just half a block away, and it was a short walk for a special treat at Dulce Patria restaurant. Compared with Canada, we found restaurant prices everywhere very reasonable (taxi too!).

Of course five days in this city is not nearly enough time to do everything you wish: as with other vast and ancient cities there are dozens of museums, historic sites, churches, parks, over-the-top hotels and restaurants of all types. Don't let bad reports put you off ... I can only speak for us, and of course we didn't go into any dubious areas (why would we?) but everywhere we did go we were greeted warmly and felt completely safe. I've spent days in Mexico City alone (as do millions of women) but it was a treat sharing part of this destination with my family and they loved it as I do.

Our five days came to an end and it was time to move our beach clothes to the top of our suitcases! This time it was Aeromexico that flew us to Cancun, where we collected a rental car and headed to the beautiful Esencia seaside estate, just south of Playa del Carmen and about an hour's drive from Cancun, for our friend's wedding. What an idyllic place! You relinquish your car at the entrance gate and board a golf cart for the ride – quite long – through jungle-like vegetation to the main building of the hotel, once the home of an Italian countess. The glittering sea and beach, said to be one of the most beautiful in the region, can be glimpsed beyond the gardens and swimming pools. You're entranced. Once checked in, you are escorted to your room or private villa, where your luggage is already awaiting you.

The rooms are cool and white, some are cottages with private courtyards and plunge pools. Some are in the main house with terraces with lovely views over the ocean. Wherever you are, you'll see brilliantly-coloured birds fluttering nearby. A family of iguanas live under some steps to the main house, a raccoon watches diners in the open-air dining room from his home in the thatched roof and sometimes an opossum comes a-calling. There are two quiet pools beside the beach, and an adjacent terrace for breakfast and lunch.

Most of the visitors seem to spend time on the




In the gardens of the Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico City



The Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico City

beach, where observant staff await your every desire ... from moving your lounge to face the sun to delivering coffee, tea, drinks and snacks. If you can bear to leave the white sand beach there's a special spa here. Aroma is the first organic spa on the Riviera Maya, offering face and body treatments using pure indigenous fruits, plants and herbs, many of them grown on the property. The palapa-roofed spa offers six treatment rooms for individuals and couples, four Jacuzzis and two Mayan-style steam rooms. There are also complimentary yoga sessions offered daily in the gardens.

And then there's the food. Dining here, al fresco, overlooking the romantically-lit gardens, one can really appreciate why Mexican cuisine has been recognized by UNESCO (along with France only) as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage". The food here, delivered by Chef Bernado, is divine, modern and sophisticated with a Mexican flair. It's a wonderful place for a wedding. Of course such delights don't come cheaply, but life is short ... treat yourself to a stay here one day. Charming Fidel is waiting to welcome you!

It had all been a great trip, full of friends, things to see and do, fine hotels and delicious food and it was truly a thrill to share so much of it with my family. Take yours soon and create some wonderful memories! 



The lobby of the W Hotel, Mexico City



The main house at Esencia Estate, Playa del Carmen

Some details ...

- **Hotel Museo Palacio de San Agustín**, 240 Galeana Street, SLP, tel: [country code 52] 444 144 1900, www.palaciodesanaguston.com
- **Restaurant Cielo Tinto**, Carranza #700, SLP, tel: 444 814 0040, www.cielotinto.com.mex
- **Apikus Restaurant**, Escobedo 305 Planta Alta, SLP, tel: 444 128 6991 (listed on various travel sites, usually with five stars!)
- It is not necessary to order a transfer car for Mexico City airport for just two people; many authorized taxis are available, as are hotel shuttles.
- **W Hotel**, Mexico City www.whoels.com
- For advance tickets to **Ballet Folklórico de México**: www.ticketmaster.com.mx Our C\$63.00 pp tickets via Ticketmaster put us in the front row, but you can **probably** buy less premium seats prior to the performance ... it's a large theatre and there were vacant seats when we attended.
- **Guillermo Cisneros**, bonded tour guide, cell phone: 044 555 401 3632, home: 5873 3595.
- **Museo Dolores Olmedo** (your visit to the museum can be combined with a trip to the nearby floating gardens of Xochimilco): www.museodoloresolmedo.org.mx/english/museo.html
- **Dulce Patria Restaurant**, Anatole France 100, Polanco 100, tel: 3300 3999, www.dulcepatriamexico.com
- **Esencia – a Seaside Estate**, Playa del Carmen, www.hotelesencia.com
- **Mexican Tourist Board**, Toronto, tel: 416 925 0079) www.visitmexico.com
- Fans of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera may like to know that Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario will be staging a major survey of these two artists' works from 20 October 2012 through to 20 January 2013. Visit www.ago.net for details.