CUERNAVACA - THE CITY OF ETERNAL SPRING

by Lisa Coleman

Lisa Coleman is a Pluma de Plata winner and has been freelance writing in Mexico for more than twelve years.

Resting atop an enormous dry lakebed in a highland basin, Mexico City stands tall in historic grandeur. At an altitude of 7,400 feet, it’s the highest city in North America. In the 16th century, this same area was known as Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec empire. The Aztec kings and social elite struggled with winter’s chill and searched the lower regions of the countryside for a sanctuary, a magical retreat beyond the mountains with ideal weather and lush landscape filled with flora and fauna. About 50 miles south of the capital, they found their perennial paradise. They discovered Cuernavaca.

The Aztec name, Cuauhnahuac, is said to have meant “place of great trees.” Legend has it that when Hernan Cortes arrived in 1521, they loosely translated what they heard to be “Cuerno de Vaca” (horn of a cow), and hence the name Cuernavaca. As Cortes and his men conquered the Aztec empire, they quickly realized the incomparable natural resources and possibilities of this popular hideaway. Cortes himself built a palace in the city center and it has been a known as a prominent getaway ever since.

Just an hour and a half from the Mexico City airport, and 2,000 feet lower in elevation, modern day Cuernavaca is capital of the Mexican state of Morelos. Though it has grown immensely over the past decade, it remains startlingly intimate and closely tied to its pre-Columbian roots. In addition to its striking cultural offerings, the city is primarily known for its nearly perfect climate, which provides some of the most prolific growing atmospheres and gardening possibilities in the entire country. The moist, semi-tropical environment breeds fertile Eden-like terrain, an array of exotic plants and flowers, and verdant landscapes highlighted with traditional sculpture, statues and fountains. Though most of city’s luxurious gardens are locked away behind private walled estates, there are several public domains that showcase the intense greenery, cohesive traditional design, and flourishing beauty that have made the gardens of Cuernavaca famous for centuries.

The Hacienda de Cortes is a living monument to Mexico’s rustic past. Built by personal order of the conquistador himself, this massive hacienda was once the most significant sugar refinery in New Spain. Now a hotel, the Hacienda is a fascinating combination of antiquity and modern amenities. The buildings remain almost completely intact and the gardens have been in existence for hundreds of years. Consistent with the masculine style felt throughout most Mexican structures, the overall theme is anchored by huge ancient laurel trees, abundant clinging vines, exposed roots, palms and colorful ground shrubbery to highlight the meandering brick pathways. The planting patterns are simple and can best described as symmetrical rather than artistic. The majority of foliage survives almost completely in the shade of the immense

Bougainvillea Flower in Cuernavaca

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M y son, age eleven, has developed a clever ploy of deftly changing the subject when he has no credible answers for the subject at hand. “Tanner, do you hit your little sister?” “Dad, how about me and you catching a ballgame – spend some quality time?”

Which brings me to wonder about the laser-focus in the news media lately about illegal immigration. Suddenly, everything would be perfect in our fine land if only we would build a wall and turn 11 million laborers into felons, followed by a one way ticket back to Oaxaca. Yeah, that will work.

No one denies that we have a problem and a solution must be agreed upon and legislation enacted. I did note that the feds recently raided a Netherlands-based pallet manufacturer at several of their U.S. plants, arresting seven managers and 1,100 workers. I have a feeling that this company was not a big money contributor to the present administration, nor do I believe that this was nothing more than a political move to appease the anti-immigrant base. Do the same thing at Tyson chicken farms and I will stand corrected. There has been a 90% drop in illegal-immigration employer arrests since 2000 and I doubt that will change.

If you are left to wonder why we would do nothing for so long to enforce the labor laws already on the books you need to understand that corporate America has been trying for decades to lower, and keep low, worker’s wages. Bears Stearns, the Wall Street brokerage firm, describes as “systematic” the practice of replacing lower income wage earners with illegal aliens. This has been going on for the past thirty-five years, supported by both political parties. These are not just jobs that “Americans won’t do,” as is so often claimed. These are what were once middle-class, decent paying jobs, many of them union.

The abundance of luxuriant greenery, the bold and expansive planting patterns and the predominant use of sculpture as garden accents continues at Hosteria Las Quintas. One of the finest resort spas in all of Mexico, Las Quintas was once an eight-room private home. In 1965, the family converted the

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residence to a hotel, and 1994, expanded to include the spa. Now 90 rooms, Las Quintas has some of the largest and most extraordinary public gardens in the city. With 100,000 square feet of ponds, gigantic laurels and imported plants and flowers, garden connoisseurs will find the grounds not only scenic, but fascinating as well. The foliage is labeled with the origin and name of the plant so a stroll through the property is not only a treat for senses but an education as well. Though most collections are found in private estates, Las Quintas also boasts an incredible compilation of bonsai trees. Some more than one hundred years old, the Japanese phenomenon found its way to Mexico through the passage of the conquistadors. This cultural blending has led to diverse and interesting concepts in terms of design in both homes and gardens, but the overall perception in Cuernavaca is still strongly anchored in the Spanish influence. With that in mind, Las Quintas has been able to successfully combine the harmonious aspects of nature with classic colonial architecture. The gardens here have more ground cover and brightly colored flowers than some of the other hotels, and the perpetual spring-like weather allows them to remain almost constantly in bloom. Though not as intimate as its counterparts, the attitude is decidedly more artistic. Nonetheless, the gardens of Las Quintas still remain powerful with simple lines and an emphasis on aesthetic beauty.

Cuernavaca, the “city of eternal spring,” has the remarkable ability to incorporate a spirited heritage into the modern world. Though each landscape throughout the city is unique in its own right, the similarities in scheme and emotion are a constant. Here the handsome architecture and bold garden design unite to maintain an everlasting tribute to the colonial past. They stand as a noble symbol of a history and a reflection of times gone by. The entire city possesses an undeniable dynamic energy and charm. And whether your interests are strictly sightseeing, or you’d like to discover more about the Mexico’s impressive history and traditions, Cuernavaca holds the key.

*Both AeroMexico and America West offer service directly to Mexico City. You can take a luxury Pullman bus directly from the airport to Cuernavaca for about $10.00.

Where to Stay in Cuernavaca

Hosteria Las Quintas – One of Mexico’s best spas. Ninety individually decorated terrace rooms are nestled throughout a five-acre estate. Complete spa packages are available. For reservations and information call toll free from the U.S. 1-877-784-6827. Website: www.hlasquintas.com

Las Mañanitas – Cuernavaca’s landmark hotel. 21 elegant suites can be found in the privacy of a serene garden setting. For reservations and information call toll free from the U.S. 1-888-413-9199. Website: www.lasmananitas.com.mx

Hacienda de Cortes – A masterpiece from the past. 25 luxury suites bring this original hacienda to life. For reservations and information call toll free from the U.S. 1-877-784-6827. Website: www.haciendadecortez.com

Where to Eat in Cuernavaca

GAIA (pronounced “guya”) – Quite simply, the best restaurant in town. Possibly the best restaurant in all of Mexico! Built in the home of Mexican actor, Cantinflas, famous Mexican painter and muralist, Diego Rivera, is said to have designed the mosaic in the pool, which is the centerpiece of the restaurant. Astonishing fusion Mexican and Mediterranean cooking. Blvd. Juarez 102 in the center of town, in front of the Palace of Cortes. Local phone number (73) 12-36-56.

Casa Hidalgo – Beautiful restaurant with a fantastic view of the Palace of Cortes. Patio seating, romantic atmosphere and continental cuisine. Great jazz music on the weekends. Jardin de los Heroes, #6 in the Center – also across from the palace. Local phone number (73) 12-27-49.

El Gallinero – Means the “chickencoop.” Very interesting, artsy and modern with a quirky atmosphere. Also has a gallery, live music, and part time theater. Good prices, good food. Francisco Leyva, #94 in the center. Local phone number (73) 12-74-25.

Las Mañanitas – A must for any trip to Cuernavaca. Both lunch and dinner are excellent, but be sure to have a cocktail or a snack in the garden in the afternoon. Ricardo Linares, #107. Local phone number (73) 14-14-66.

Hosteria Las Quintas – All meals are outstanding, but the breakfast buffet is

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Hotel Catedral, Mexico City

by Lynne Doyle

Lynne Doyle is a longtime Mexico File subscriber and contributing editor from Maine. The object of the Las Joyas de Mexico feature is to highlight for MF readers some of the lesser-known but most rewarding of Mexico’s geographic, human and artistic treasures. Lynne can be contacted at LinfordD@aol.com.

I am ALL EXCITED! For years, I have passed through Mexico City for just about every trip I have made into Mexico, and that adds up to a lot of passes. Usually, I am on my way somewhere else, so I have seldom stayed for more than a night or two coming or going, and then usually we have chosen either an airport hotel on the way home (always expensive) or one of the four or five stars guaranteed to be safe and clean, if not reasonably priced and convenient. Which isn’t all bad – we’ve stayed in some really great places over the years (the Sheraton Centro Historico at $150/night, the Camino Real at $275/night), but nothing that could ever be called affordable. It hasn’t really mattered all that much, because we rarely ever stay long in Mexico City, but in preparation for this last trip earlier this month, when I knew we would be in the city for at least a few days at the beginning of the trip, plus a few more days at the end, I made a serious search to find just the right place. And after years of wandering around Mexico City looking for a hotel that looked clean, safe, friendly and even moderately affordable, I am thrilled to report that I have finally found one that I really, really LOVE. Unfortunately, in the process of my search, I hit so many different websites that I no longer have any idea where I found the Hotel Catedral, but luckily, I did find it and I can without qualification recommend it to all of you.

Initially, because it is so close to the zocalo, I was a little leery of it, but because of the amenities listed (restaurant and internet availability) and – if I’m going to be really honest – the amazing price (about $47/night for a double depending on the exchange rate), we decided to take a shot. (Another nice little benefit is that no deposit is required here unless your arrival time will be later than 8:00 pm) Once we arrived, we found so many other added little treasures connected to this place that I’ve decided it was just one of those wonderful serendipitous things that happens every once in a while in Mexico.

Located one block directly behind the Metropolitan Cathedral (which is right on the zocalo), this hotel is surrounded by hundreds of stores and street vendors, making the sidewalks crowded and the noise deafening by day, but by 8:00 pm, everything is closed, the street vendors are all gone, and you can sleep with your windows open if you want. There is one slight disadvantage – if you can call it that – attached to this location. Because of the confluence of one-way streets, taxi drivers seem to always want to leave you at the confl uence of one-way streets, taxi drivers seem to always want to leave you in the middle of its block, but I didn’t find it a big problem because if you feign ignorance and insist on being dropped right at the door, drivers will do it and the extra cost is negligible. They don’t like to go down the street because they cannot easily get around Plaza Mayor and back into the stream of traffic without traveling a couple of extra blocks – but hey – I tip well and sometimes things just aren’t easy.

Once inside this pleasant little place, you are greeted by courteous young women behind the desk, some of whom speak English and some who don’t. But they all manage to get the job done, and check-in for us was quick and easy. Rooms are good sized, some larger than others, some with more goodies than others. Our first bathroom had a bidet, our second room had a key card rather than an old-fashioned key (I think the hotel is in the process of changing their locking system) and a couch in addition to two double beds. Lighting is excellent – bedside reading lights are always a requirement for me and these rooms have recessed lights over the beds controlled by bedside switches. We found water pressure to be excellent (another issue for me), hot water abundant and towels large and thick (my husband’s pet peeve).

Because we arrived mid-afternoon, one of our first stops was the hotel restaurant, which we found to have a large non-smoking section, smiling servers and good, affordable meals. We don’t stay up really late usually, so I can’t speak for late hours, but every time we wanted to eat, the restaurant was open, although sometimes more crowded than others, and the dinner

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SURNAMES AND NICKNAMES IN MEXICO

by Robert B. Simmonds

One aspect of Hispanic culture that seems to provide no end of confusion for those dwelling in more northern locales is their system of naming themselves. What possesses the Mexicans, for example, to call the former president “Salinas” when his real name is Carlos Salinas de Gortari? Why not Gortari? Or de Gortari? And why is it “President Zedillo” when referring to past president Emesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon? (We won’t even try to guess what Ponce de Leon, an early Spanish discoverer, was all about! Why isn’t it Ponce?)

The Spanish system of designating surnames reflects the importance of the family in Hispanic culture. The family is close, extended, supportive — and a major source of one’s social identity (“No, chica, you may not play with the Diaz girls — they are beneath us”). Because families tend to live in the same location for generations, the family name comes over time to take on important social meaning with regard to status within any particular region. The name game becomes significant.

And it really is not so confusing once one understands the logic of it all. Put on your thinking cap.

All Mexicans have two last names. The first is the father’s last name and the second is the mother’s last name. So Pedro Gonzales Ulba, of course, has a father named Gonzales and a mother named Ulba. And he is Senor Gonzales, using the father’s last name and not the mother’s — just like in traditional Anglo nomenclature (although we Anglos in the age of gender equality have often moved to hyphenated last names, and we still don’t quite know what to name the child of Peter Adams-Martin and Suzanne Porter-Smith. Would the child be named Johnny Adams-Martin-Porter-Smith? We dread to think what we might call the grandchildren!)

Upon marriage a woman drops her mother’s last name and replaces it with her husband’s last name, with a de (of) in front of it. Thus, Pedro Gonzales Ulba’s sister, Carmen Gonzales Ulba, upon marrying Victor Mejia Rubio, becomes Carmen Gonzales de Mejia. (Hispanic culture is male dominated by U.S. standards, so Carmen is now “of Mejia”).

Simple as pie. And this is not such a gender-discriminatory system as one might imagine. After all, the woman still gets to keep her own identity (as in Carmen Gonzales) with the addendum “de Mejia” suggestive of something like “of the house of Mejia.”

Now we go back to our protagonist again, Pedro Gonzales Ulba. Let’s say that he marries Maria Vasquez Phelan. She now becomes Maria Vasquez de Gonzales. It is customary in Mexico to name the first-born son after the father, so the name of the first son of Pedro and Maria will be Pedro Gonzales Vasquez. This has the advantage of distinguishing between the two Pedros living in the household, Pedro Senior (Pedro Gonzales Ulba) and Pedro Junior (Pedro Gonzales Vasquez) without having to resort to names like “Junior” or “Bubba.” Their daughter, Elena, of course, would be named Elena Gonzales Vasquez.

Consider now some possibilities for Maria Vasquez de Gonzales. Let’s say that she and Pedro get divorced (which is not all that likely given the strong community and religious sanctions against divorce that prevail in Mexico, although the times are changing this tradition to a degree). Maria would now drop the “de Gonzales” part and, retaining her maiden name, would simply be known as Maria Vasquez. If she happened to be famous in her own right, like a famous actress or novelist, she may also choose to be known as Maria Vasquez without adding “de Gonzales” to her name, even though she may well be married (think of Frida Kahlo). If Pedro were to die, then Maria would probably decide to retain her name as Maria Vasquez de Gonzales.

Unless they have parents who may be opposed to the dominance of the Catholic Church and subscribe to a new trend in which babies are named for figures from indigenous traditions (such as Xochitl, for flower, or Cuauhtemoc, for the last Aztec emperor), most Mexicans have Christian names. Thus there is an abundance of Marias, Joses and Jesuses in Mexico (the English equivalent of these names, of course, being Mary, Joseph and Jesus). In fact, the pressure to name a child after religious figures is so great that many boys are named Jose Maria and many girls are named Maria Jose without regard for what the English speaker would regard as traditional gender designations. Mexicans would think nothing of meeting a man with Angel as part of his name, but the typical norteamericano would howl if she or he were to meet a boy named Sue. Likewise, Jesus is a common name in Mexico, but most U.S. citizens would consider it blasphemy, and a sign of madness, to name a child Jesus (“Won’t you hold my little baby Jesus?”).

While nicknames in the English-speaking world bear some resemblance to the formal names they replace (as in Bob for Robert, Bill for William, or Beth for Elizabeth), this is not always the case in Hispanic culture. Thus, Pancho (or Paco) stands for Francisco, Lola for Dolores, Pepe for Jose, Lalo for Eduardo, and Chucho for Jesus. What’s more, everyone knows these equivalents and they don’t have to be explained.

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**May 8-14: Canadian Tour – Mazatlan**

Coronado Classic – Mazatlan, Sinaloa. Considered one of the most important golf events in the world, the Canadian Tour will make its first stop in Mexico in Mazatlan and receive 156 players from 15 different countries. The purse this year is $125,000. [www.cmcgolf.com](http://www.cmcgolf.com)

**TBD: Acapulco Boat Show – Acapulco**

Guerrero. Aimed at fostering an interest in sea and water sports, as well as to promote Mexico’s nautical market, this exposition features everything from mega yachts to aquatic motorcycles. National and international exhibitors include manufacturers, distributors and marina service providers. Boat owners, prospective buyers and sea lovers in general are welcome to attend. [www.acapulcoboatshow.com](http://www.acapulcoboatshow.com)

**May 8: Vineyards Flowering Festival – Ensenada, Baja California**

 Noon - 5pm. Family fair with games, regional foods, wine and live entertainment at Mogor Badan Winery, Carr. Tecate -Ensenada Km. 83.5 in Valle de Guadalupe. Admission: $2/children, $10/adults (includes wine tastings from different wineries). Info & tickets: Viajes Damiana, tel. (646)178-3136 or Baja California Winemakers Association, tel. (646)178-3038; email: [brac@telnor.net](mailto:brac@telnor.net)

**TBD: Canadian Tour - Michelin Morelia Classic – Morelia, Michoacan.**

Considered one of the most important golf events in the world, the Canadian Tour will make its final stop in Morelia. [www.cmcgolf.com](http://www.cmcgolf.com)

**TBD: 18th Alarconian Theatrical Festival (XVIII Jornadas Alarconianas) – Taxco, Guerrero.**

The picturesque silver mining town of Taxco will host 10 days of artistic and cultural events including literature, music, theater, dance, opera and artworks presented by local artists. [www.guerrero.gob.mx/dominios/turismo/taxco.htm](http://www.guerrero.gob.mx/dominios/turismo/taxco.htm)

**TBD: Rolex/IGFA Offshore Championship – Los Cabos, Baja California Sur.**

This annual competition attracts more than 60 qualifying teams from 33 countries representing 250 international anglers and their guests to Cabo San Lucas and the Los Cabos area for four days of intense fishing on 44 local charter boats. Each team is allowed to weigh two fish of each species on each day of fishing, and top prizes include engraved gold and stainless Rolex watches. [http://www.igfa.org/tour_os_2006ud.asp](http://www.igfa.org/tour_os_2006ud.asp)

**TBD: Morelia Organ Festival – Morelia, Michoacan.**

Morelia will celebrate once again the XXX International Organ Festival, gathering together organists from around the globe. Held in the majestic pink stone cathedral of Morelia, this event is renowned for its spectacular performances, complemented by art exhibits throughout the city. Contact: [imcultura@michoacan.gob.mx](mailto:imcultura@michoacan.gob.mx)

**May 21 - Jun 6: International Wine and Cheese Festival (Feria Internacional de Queso y Vino) – Tequisquiapan, Queretaro.**

The enchanting town of Tequisquiapan hosts this annual wine and cheese festival, bringing together wine and cheese producers from all over the country. Visitors will also enjoy regional cuisine, concerts, handicrafts and other cultural events. [www.tequisquiapan.com.mx/index.php](http://www.tequisquiapan.com.mx/index.php)

**May 17-21: International Cup Vallarta Soccer – Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco.**

If you like soccer and the beach, this is a great opportunity to visit Puerto Vallarta. The Committee responsible for this event is formed by the Municipality of Puerto Vallarta, the tourism board, and is also supported by the Football Soccer Association. For the third consecutive year, this event will take place in one of the most beautiful and visited places internationally. For more information, visit: [www.vallartadeportes.com](http://www.vallartadeportes.com)

**TBD: XXI Huatulco Sail Fishing Tournament (XXI Torneo Internacional de la Pesca de Pez Vela) – Huatulco, Oaxaca.**

Huatulco, an excellent site for sport-fishing and surfing, hosts this popular annual tournament, now in its twenty-first year.

**May 27: 22nd Annual Triathlon Banamex – Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Guerrero.**

Hundreds of athletes will run, swim and bike along the scenic coasts of Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo. Winners take home trophies and cash prizes. [www.asdeporte.com](http://www.asdeporte.com)

**MAY 28: The Horse Festival – Ensenada, Baja California.**

Organized by Cucapá Equestrian Ranch, in the valley of Guadalupe, close to Ensenada, this event gives you a taste of Baja California. The day is filled with exhibitions of equestrian arts in all its disciplines, combined with art, food and wine. For more information, visit: [http://www.diadelcaballo.com](http://www.diadelcaballo.com)
Day Trips from Cuernavaca

Taxco – A Postcard Comes to Life

Vibrant colors, Old World style, ornate architecture, cobblestone streets and distinctly locked in time – this describes the mystique of Taxco. An hour from Cuernavaca, this is undoubtedly one of the most picturesque towns in all of Mexico. In the early 1500’s, Jose de la Borda (a Frenchman living in Spain) heard of rich mineral deposits in the New World and rushed to Mexico to try his luck. He struck it rich in Taxco. Since then the city has been deemed the “Silver City” and is known worldwide for its pure silver jewelry and handicrafts. Borda developed the city and is credited for the construction of the city masterpiece – the Santa Prisca church. He imported artisans from France and Spain who created the most powerful and elaborate examples of 18th century of baroque architecture. The interior is astounding with twelve intricately carved and gilded altars arranged according to size and religious content. It will rival most any cathedral in the world. There are plenty of cozy eateries surrounding the Town Square for a relaxing lunch. Not only will it be the best shopping day of your life (over 150 silver shops), but it will also leave you with a lasting sense of Mexican history and charm.

Tepoztlán and Tlayacapan – The Magic of Ancient Civilizations

A short 30 minutes from Cuernavaca is the mystical town of Tepoztlán. The legendary birthplace of Quetzalcoatl (“plumed serpent” of ancient Aztec and Toltec folklore), the area is considered a prominent “energy center.” It very well may be the Sedona of Mexico! The towering vertical cliffs of Tepozteco Mountain frame this inviting Mexican village. Ruins from a 15th century temple can be reached after a rather strenuous 3,000-foot hike to the top, but the breathtaking view is well worth the effort. Do some shopping in the marketplace and stop for lunch at Casa Piñón. The food is fantastic, the view wonderful and they usually have live jazz music in the afternoons. (Av. Revolución, No. 42. – your driver should know the way.)

Just up the road (maybe 25 more minutes), you’ll find the enchanting village of Tlayacapan. Lined with colorful shops, and filled with local handicrafts, you can spend hours exploring and enjoying the kindness and warm smiles of the local people. In the 15th century, Tlayacapan was a passageway between the capital of the Aztec empire and southern Mexico. When the Spanish arrived, they built the San Juan Bautista convent that is still the pride of the community. Incredibly well preserved, with a majestic façade and amazing frescos on the walls, this may very well be one of the most intriguing convents in central Mexico. The marvelous chapel is still in use and the museum inside the convent is astounding.

Más o Menos

Business knows that Mexican migrants are not complainers. They work under exploitive conditions in order to send money home to feed their families. They are willing to break our immigration laws for that purpose and keep their mouths shut.

We can solve this problem by requiring business to obey the law and to adhere to market forces. Working class Americans, the men and women who built this country, are losing ground. A guy driving nails or hanging drywall for 30 years is supposed to re-train? I often wonder what my dad would think of all of this, he who served his country with a career in the Air Force for twenty years. I wonder, but I’m pretty sure I know the answer.
New Mexican Law
The Mexican Congress has recently enacted a law allowing journalists to protect the confidentiality of their sources. Press organizations in the U.S. have been campaigning for this as well, so far unsuccessfully, as evidenced by the incarceration of New York Times reporter Judith Miller. “The United States should follow the example of Mexico in allowing this fundamental right of the press,” said a spokesman for the Paris-based press group Reporters Without Borders. In 2002, Mexico passed a transparency law, allowing all members of the public to demand to see government documents. Next, the Mexican government needs to deal with journalists being killed by narco-traffickers and organized crime for printing the truth.

Obrador on the Ropes
After recently enjoying a 16-point lead in the upcoming Mexico presidential election, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has seen his margin fall to three or four points ahead of the PAN ruling party candidate Felipe Calderon. There is a growing fear that Obrador is too far to the left politically and that his vow to help the poor will harm the fledgling and volatile economy. He also got into a spat with still-popular President Vicente Fox, comparing him to a “chachalaca,” a wild bird with a loud squawk. He has since apologized.

Cancun Now Restored
Six months after being ravaged by Hurricane Wilma, the Mexican government has declared Cancun’s beaches to be officially restored. The restoration involved $19 million used to dredge sand from the ocean floor, replacing miles of beaches adjacent to the glitzy resort hotels that define the Riviera Maya. Up to 100,000 square feet of sand a day were dredged to complete the task. The hurricane is estimated to have caused over $1 billion in damage. Cancun normally receives around 3 million visitors a year, primarily from the United States and Europe.

hour featured live music. All meals were – I felt – great combinations of Mexican and American foods and no one with us complained about anything. My husband, who pretty much travels on his stomach, was pleased with the pancakes and, most of all, with the ice cream and a little dessert called Tres Marias featuring strawberry ice cream, which he tells me is not always terrific in Mexico. I was happy with the gin and tonics and my favorite, arrachera (thin, marinated, and grilled beef), which was always cooked to perfection.

One of the extra little bonuses we found were two rooftop gardens complete with little patches of grass, terra cotta pots filled with flowers, tables with umbrellas and panoramic views of the cathedral on one side of the hotel and the city all the way to the mountains on the other side. Additionally, and maybe best of all, this hotel features free storage of excess luggage. We left the city for several days of travel in Michoacan and since we were traveling by car with several other people, couldn’t really carry everything we brought with us. The hotel happily stored our extra belongings and purchases until we returned. There is also a little travel agency in the lobby where guests can arrange tours, two computers located in the lobby for use by guests, a bar where drinks could be purchased and carried up to the roof to boost enjoyment of the sunsets, and smiling bellhops to carry anything and everything and find cabs for you. During our stay, I saw one of the girls on the desk go to great lengths to juggle rooms for guests who arrived without reservations so that they could be accommodated. Also available are three English-speaking television stations for those interested, although during our time there, the signal was hinky and two of the stations were without volume – not a big problem for me as I generally tend to read rather than watch television. Fortunately, CNN was in fine fettle so we could keep track of what was happening in the real world.

Perhaps one of the best things about Hotel Catedral, in spite of my initial reservations, was its location. We walked daily to the zocalo, visited again Plaza Mayor and Palacio de Gobierno, were within a moderate walk to Casa de Azulejos, Belles Artes and Parque Alameda, and important to my husband – philistine that he is – close to a large McDonald’s. Restaurants around us were plentiful and at least the ones we sampled were all fine and affordable. We weren’t very far from everything we wanted to do and see, and were about 20 minutes and $100 pesos from the airport. And significant to me, in spite of the crowded streets and sidewalks, I never at any point felt unsafe or at risk. I must add here that I have been told by other travelers in Mexico that I am naive and not really in tune with the issues surrounding Americans visiting Mexico City, but I respectfully disagree. I’m not stupid and I read the papers – however, I found the city dwellers the same as I find most people in Mexico – friendly, helpful, and courteous when they bump into you. What more can you ask??

So should you find yourself in Mexico City for any length of time, don’t hesitate to choose this great little hotel. There are an unlimited amount of things to do in the city that you ordinarily wouldn’t think of (another article coming about this topic) and this place is convenient to many of them. The people are nice, the rooms are clean, the food is good, the price is right, and those roof gardens are something else again.