

GUANAJUATO, MÉXICO

Your Expat, Study Abroad, and Vacation Survival
Manual in The Land of Frogs.

*Guanajuato, Mexico:
Your Expat, Study Abroad, and Vacation Survival Manual in The
Land of Frogs*

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Manual in The Land of Frogs.

by

Doug & Cindi Bower

The name Guanajuato is from a local Tarascan Indian word meaning "Place of Frogs."

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Disclaimer: We have not included information about studying abroad in Guanajuato, as the subtitle of the book might imply. However, all study abroad students share something in common. They have to find a place to live and cope with the situations about which we write in this book. It is therefore applicable to study abroad students who come to Guanajuato to live during their course of study. It is also applicable to the vast amounts of tourists who rent apartments and houses for extended vacations.

Introduction

I've often wondered if Americans who expatriate to Mexico are really seeking refuge from something rather than simply seeking something new and exotic to do. Is the drive to add some new spice to your life that strong? Is it strong enough to motivate you to leave hearth and home, to leave your life in America, to move to a different culture? Or, is it something else altogether? Is it something stronger? I think it is something much stronger.

The longer we stay in Mexico and the more American expats we meet, the more we think what brings them here is much more than seeking adventure. It seems all of us are refugees seeking escape. We are seeking not adventure but refuge from a way of life that long ago became intolerable in America.

This has to be it. I can no longer think of anything else.

The other day, I e-mailed my sister to ask her if she

thought America was on the verge of self-destructing. It was reading the news online that prompted me to ask. Having become immune, reading about all the horrors once again was a shock.

By my question, I meant, “just how much can your senses take of the nonstop assault of violence in that country?”

I am beginning to call America, my birthplace, *that country*.

The news is nothing more than a constant barrage, a steady stream, of Americans committing violence against their fellow Americans.

You cannot sit in your favorite restaurant, go to your job, or shop in your local shopping mall without wondering if some crazed lunatic will come through the door with enough weapons to do battle against a small army and simply end your life. How do parents send their kids to school knowing that some other kid, mad at the world, might bring Daddy’s arsenal to school in his backpack to kill anything that moves? How do they cope?

How does any American cope with the FBI statistic that America breeds the vast majority of the world’s serial killers? ¹

How do Americans cope with that?

I used to think the American news media just sensationalized these issues. After all, it is the

¹ Some statistics show the percentage at 85%:
<http://karisable.com/crserial.htm>

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sensational that sells and not the mundane. However, this was my way of coping. This was my way of making myself brave enough to leave the house to go to restaurants, jobs, and shopping malls. It was my way of coping with that which drives normal people to the brink of insanity.

I no longer believe that. I no longer believe the answer is sensationalism. I believe America has become that bad.

What changed my mind was moving to Mexico. It was moving to a country so few Americans know—really know. It was moving to a country most Americans nonsensically judge as violent, dirty, primitive, corrupt, deceitful, and drug-ridden. It was moving to a country that was not perfect, but one based in reality. A reality where you can still walk the streets at night. Mexico violent? Americans must be talking about their own country.

What galls me about the issue of drugs and illegal aliens is Americans judge all undocumented workers as drug kingpins. They would have you believe every Mexican who crosses the border wants to get your family addicted to drugs. But do Americans accurately judge their own part in this mess? It is to America that the drug pipeline is open and flowing. America is the major market for illegal drugs. And, it is this issue that probably affects every other major crime issue; hence, the violence in America. The drugged American might end your life with a bullet when all you wanted was a loaf of bread from The Price Chopper.

So many of our American friends looked at us

askance when we told them we were moving to Mexico. So many regaled us with scary stories of a country they had never visited in their lives. It seemed they completely ignored that America is deconstructing right under their noses. The America in which we could remember feeling safe from harm is gone. It left the scene a long time ago.

Ignorance. I think that must be how Americans who do not pack up and leave the country are able to cope.

They ignore the reality of life in America. Their need for the delusion that all is well is so strong they will do anything to keep up the pretense that all is right. They will even resort to refusing to watch the news. They never read a newspaper. They will leave or avoid a group of friends who are talking about the horrors of current events. They will do anything and everything to keep up the delusion.

This is the answer my sister gave to the question I asked. She said her family's mental health was so adversely affected by reports of the reality of America, they had to seek professional help. The doctors told them to stop watching the news. Stop being informed of the reality of just how horrible America has become. Is this the answer?

Has America become that bad, as I mentioned earlier? Apparently, mental health professionals are beginning to think so.

More than 300,000 Americans are checking out of America each year. Most wind up in Mexico. In fact, there may be more than a million American expats living here permanently. How many of them could

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more accurately be called *refugees* instead of *expatriates*? How many of them are refugees from a country with which they can no longer cope? How many of these concluded that leaving America, forever, was preferable to continuing to live in a place where life has become intolerable?

When my wife and I moved to Mexico, we came to a land where life is based on a reality we still remember once permeated American life. It is a place where people seem to care about you, no matter your nationality, where racism is a creation of imperialist America, and where you can once again feel safe from harm. It is a land where the perfect do not dwell but one where realists live.

It is a land where you can go to a restaurant, to your job, or to a shopping mall without fearing a madman will open fire and end your life. Such a place still exists. It is called Mexico.

Many whom you ask, "Why did *you* move to Mexico?" give a host of responses. The nearly perfect year-round weather is the answer they give most often. The affordable medical care is another answer that is posited.

I wonder...

I think they are really refugees.

Probably the question American tourists and those considering expatriation to Mexico most often ask us is, "Why did you move to the city of Guanajuato and not one of the more common areas to which most American and Canadian expats gravitate?" It is a good

question. We hope to elaborate the reasons in this book.

History²

Perhaps a little history first would be helpful to orient you to this fine colonial Mexican town.

“The origins of the town of Guanajuato can be traced back to the sixteenth century. The Spanish conquistadors made their first forays into the region during the period of intense activity in the decade beginning in 1520. However, it was between 1540 and 1546 that the region today known as Guanajuato was granted to Rodrigo Vazquez by Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, in reward for his service during the Conquest. The territory was to be used as ranchland for major livestock.

It was probably between 1548 and 1554 when the incidental discovery of abundant silver deposits was made, mainly at the mines of San Bernabe and Rayas. This discovery brought about the birth of Guanajuato as a town. From that moment on, the traffic and settling of mineral prospectors was constant. In 1557, the image of the Virgin Mary arrived in Guanajuato, a gift from the king. Since then, the image has been venerated as Our Lady of Guanajuato.

Slowly, livestock ranches were pushed northward to allow for the development of Guanajuato, which was,

² This historical section is reprinted with the kind permission of el historiador José Eduardo Vidaurri Aréchiga.

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by 1570, already officially recognized as a town. The town developed along the banks of the river that passes through it. This was for practical reasons--the processing of the ore and the production of food for the population required an abundant source of water. On October 26, 1679, by way of an official decree from Viceroy Payo Enriquez Afan de Ribera, the town was elevated to the category of "villa," meaning a town of greater importance, and, in 1741, King Philip V granted the town the title of Most Noble and Loyal City of Santa Fe y Real de Minas de Guanajuato.

The city reached high levels of prosperity during the eighteenth century due to the great mining bonanza. Such was its splendor during the period that various residents, the heads of mining operations, became nobles. These figures included the Marquis of San Clemente, the Marquis of Rayas, and the Count of Valenciana, among others. The year 1767 saw the expulsion of the city's Jesuit priests. This had a profound impact on the city, especially where education was concerned. During the period of Guanajuato's splendor, the majority of the churches, which can be seen today, were built.

In 1786, as ordered by the Spanish crown, the territory of New Spain was administratively divided into twelve provinces. One of these provinces was Guanajuato, which was thus no longer dependent on the province of Michoacán. The first governor of the province was Andres Amat de Tortosa, who was later replaced by Pedro Jose Soriano, who, in turn, was replaced by the most important of the provincial

governors, Juan Antonio de Riaño y Barcena.

The presence of Riaño is significant as he was a benefactor of the city. His status as such, as recorded by the historian and Guanajuato native Lucas Alaman, is clearly demonstrated by the magnificent buildings erected in the capital and throughout the province during his administration. He himself supervised these construction projects. Riaño's wife, Victoria de Saint Maxent, was a dedicated supporter of young Guanajuatans who yearned for an education.

Governor Riaño began the construction of the granary known as the Alhondiga de Granaditas, which was designed to guarantee the townspeople a constant supply of grain. The construction was begun in 1798 and finished in 1809. The Alhondiga was the site of the bloody clash between the insurgent army headed by Miguel Hidalgo and the Spanish who had taken refuge in the granary turned fort. The confrontation took place on September 28, 1810, during the first battle in the struggle for Mexican independence.

In 1826, the first Mexican constitution was ratified, which converted Guanajuato into a free and sovereign state of the Mexican Republic. The first governor, Carlos Montes de Oca, was a dedicated supporter of education in the state. He was the force behind the reopening of the original College of the Most Holy Trinity, founded by the Jesuits, and the old College of the Immaculate Conception, run by Oratorian priests. The latter was to become the State College.

Noteworthy figures during nineteenth-century Mexican history include governors of the state, such as

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the liberals Manuel Doblado and Florencio Antillon. On January 17, 1858, President Juarez temporarily established the capital of the Republic in Guanajuato, due to the constant persecution leveled against him by conservative factions. During the period of the French Intervention, newly installed emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg visited the city in September 1864. It was he who ordered the conversion of the Alhondiga de Granaditas into a prison.

In the year 1867, after Maximilian's empire was brought down, the restoration of the Republic began. Florencio Antillon was named governor of the state, and he remained in power until January 1877, when he was unseated by followers of General Porfirio Diaz. Antillon began the construction of the majestic theater, Teatro Juarez, in 1872.

During the historical period known as the Porfiriato, spanning from 1877 to 1911, Guanajuato saw the construction of important buildings such as the current Legislative Palace, the Mercado Hidalgo market, the Monument to Peace, and the Monument to Hidalgo at the city reservoir and park, Presa de la Olla. Also during this period, the Teatro Juarez was inaugurated and the railway was introduced, among other things.

The promotion of foreign investment (American, German, and British) to reactivate the mining industry was also an important part of the period. The last Porfirista governor of Guanajuato, Joaquin Obregon Gonzalez, commenced construction on the Cuajin tunnel and the reservoir La Esperanza, both projects directed by preeminent engineer of the time, Ponciano

Aguilar.

In the twentieth century, during the Mexican Revolution, the city endured the effects of a severe economic and social crisis. It was occupied in July of 1914 by troops of General Alberto Carrera Torres. Later, in February 1916, President Venustiano Carranza visited Guanajuato and arranged the purchase of grain to alleviate the terrible famine which was upon the city.

In the year 1946, the State College went through a transformation to become the University of Guanajuato. During the decade of the 50's, projects were devised for the near total restoration of the city. The main building of the University was built as was the reservoir Presa de la Soledad; the street Calle Belauzarán was laid upon the old riverbed; work began on the conversion of the Alhondiga into a museum, and the promotion of tourism in Guanajuato also began.

Soon after, construction was completed on the city's underground street and the scenic/panoramic highway. The annual International Cervantino Festival began in 1972."

The most conservative estimate of how many Americans live in Mexico is roughly one million. They live in various places all over the country. The greatest concentrations of American expats are in the following areas: San Miguel de Allende, Puerto Vallarta, Ajijic, Lake Chapala, and Guadalajara. The reason for these concentrations is multifaceted. However, no matter the reason, the fact remains that Americans have created

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American Enclaves or *Colonies* in these areas. They have slowly but surely changed the culture from solely and uniquely Mexican to something other than Mexican.

Many of the Americans who live in the areas mentioned above would argue most vehemently this is not so. Those whom we have interviewed either won't or don't see what the Mexican nationals in those areas see. The Americans tell us it isn't any more expensive to live in these areas than it is to live in Guanajuato. They also will testify strenuously that all the expats speak Spanish. The sad reality is, neither is true.

We have written numerous articles, op-ed columns, and two books on this issue. In doing research, we have gone into those areas, armed with a workable proficiency in the language, and asked the locals themselves what they thought of their American expat guests. The result of these interviews revealed the sad truth that:

- Many Americans and Canadians who expatriate to Mexico *never* bother to learn the language.
- The expats, consequently, *never* absorb the culture because they *won't* speak to the Mexicans as friendly neighbors.
- Eventually, the American expats build gated communities to keep out the locals.

“Why won't they learn our language, and why won't they associate with us?” —pretty much sums up the sentiment the cabdrivers, the store vendors, the locals

in the service industry in these American Enclaves have expressed to us. One Mexican, a vice president with one of Mexico's major banks, e-mailed to ask, "Why do Americans act like they hate us so much?"

Today's Guanajuato

Modern day Guanajuato! How does one describe it? Before deciding to move here, we bought a copy of Tony Cohan's fine book, *On Mexican Time*.³ In his book, he wrote of a magical place. A place in which life was still the way it was when we were children. *A place where you could go back in time and start over.* His book was about San Miguel de Allende. But, it was about a San Miguel de Allende of many years ago. A San Miguel de Allende that was invaded by Americans who have changed it from a place once desired into a place now to be eschewed.⁴

We often have this discussion with our Mexican friends here in Guanajuato. We express our fear that Guanajuato will turn into another San Miguel since it is what San Miguel used to be. Therein lies the attraction.

Our Mexican neighbors tell us the Americans now own San Miguel de Allende. They run the show with their money. Money buys them control. Some of the professionals we know here tell us this will never happen to Guanajuato. Some are not so sure.

Tony Cohan's book, though about another town,

³ On Mexican Time, Tony Cohan, Broadway Books, @ 2000; Amazon.com

⁴ http://www.escapeartist.com/efam/78/San_Miguel.html

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describes Guanajuato perfectly.⁵ You must read this book if you are thinking about moving here. It will give you, in literary description and narrative, what it is like to live in a genuine Mexican town still largely untouched, invaded, or ruined by Americanization.

Guanajuato is *starting over again*. It is here that second chances are found!

There you have the answer to the question people most often ask us. We simply could not live in an area where the Mexican identity has been stolen in favor of creating an environment more suitable to *American Tastes* like San Miguel de Allende, Puerto Vallarta, Ajijic, Lake Chapala, or Guadalajara. We wanted to live in *Mexico*, not somewhere that caters to *American Tastes*. We could have stayed in the United States if that was what we wanted.

For more information about our move to Mexico, and other issues such as *The Ugly American Syndrome, Customs and Culture, Gringo Landia*; check out our book, *The Plain Truth about Living in Mexico*, available at Amazon.com.

Please e-mail us at expatriate03@yahoo.com for additional titles we have written.

NOTE: Some of the material in this book will be repetitious. This is because much of what I have included comes from my column and from articles I have written at various times.

I want to acknowledge my wife's careful and

⁵ This opinion is expressedly that of the authors of this book.

Doug & Cindi Bower

meticulous editing of this manuscript. She not only wrote two chapters for this book, but her hand is evident in each word of the text of this work. Thank you my love!

PART ONE
Guanajuato: The Land of Frogs