

## San Miguel de Allende, MX – My three-week visit – October 2022

If there was ever magic in a city, it is in San Miguel de Allende! Located about 200 miles NW of Mexico City at a base elevation of 6,234', it's about the same as Lake Tahoe at 6,200'. However, snow is an anomaly with its more southern location. And, no need for beaches here! The city is filled with celebration - families, smiling faces, inner joy and so much more. The people are happy and proud of their heritage, and honor tradition, arts and music. The Centro (one of numerous neighborhoods) is magnificent with cobblestone narrow streets, bright colored buildings, and parks with Jacaranda and Mesquite trees. Parts of the city are steep not unlike San Francisco, affording magnificent views. Bells are ringing and drums are playing - while rooftops are now gourmet restaurants serving the tastiest tequila and mezcal. Yes, this is stunning Mexico - life embraced with real living! This is high desert living with beautiful weather throughout the year. About 15% of its 140,000 population are Expats who started coming there after WWII. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, today it continues to be a big draw for not only Americans to visit and live, but also for other foreigners and Mexican citizens living in other cities. The influx in recent years of affluent international buyers has resulted in an increase in new luxury services, restaurants and shopping without the loss of local charm. Everyone has a story of why they moved to San Miguel - it is culturally diverse with a flavor for enjoying life.

We flew from Reno to Dallas to Queretaro, MX, a little over an hour from San Miguel. On arrival at the Rosewood Hotel, our home for three weeks, we were greeted with a Sunset Margarita and went right up to Luna, its rooftop tapas bar, for an extraordinary experience viewing La Parroquia (the Parish of Saint Michael) in the center square (El Juardin) of the city and beyond. After that we were escorted to our 700 sq.ft. room with fireplace, coffee area, sitting area, desk (that wasn't used) and lovely private terrace. On check-in, we were assigned our very own Butler, a lovely young woman who was delighted to take care of all our questions and needs. The hotel, about 10 minutes from the center square and recognized for its beautiful gardens, has a fabulous and very well-attended Sunday brunch with different food stations around the courtyards. Hotel guests increase significantly on weekends, and I'd say at least 75% of them are from Mexico City or other regional towns. We discovered what family really means in Mexican culture as it's not unusual to see several generations traveling together.

The next morning, we had a tour of the hotel amenities and absolutely gorgeous grounds, including pool with daytime restaurant (best Baja fish tacos!), tennis courts and spacious lawn area for the bustling wedding business in San Miguel, and the most beautiful Pampas Grasses I've ever seen... walls of them! At 2:30 we were picked up by REALM™ real estate colleagues for a fabulous late lunch (comida) at Atrio, a rooftop restaurant right across from La Parroquia - the centerpiece of San Miguel and main venue for all the religious festivals celebrated with a combination of Catholic and indigenous customs. This means music, dancing, costumes, services and fireworks! Our first weekend celebrated St. Michael, the patron saint of San Miguel, and fireworks and cannons were prevalent not only during the day but through the night...and continued into the following week. The biggest celebration is Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), every year on November 2. However, decorations were already going up when we left, and I'm sure the celebration will start before and continue after the designated day. It's a big draw for visitors as well. Completing our 'comida', we walked through the cobblestone streets back to our hotel, taking in history from our hosts.

San Miguel is a 'city of hidden treasures', in my opinion. It is made up of numerous neighborhoods, and the homes in Centro (the center area of San Miguel) are beautifully constructed wall against wall. Behind closed wooden doors, many beautifully carved hundreds of years ago, are intriguing residences, restaurants and shops. Unless there is a sign, you have no idea until the door is open, whether to a courtyard or entrance to a residence, shop or restaurant. Only seven colors are allowed on the concrete exteriors. Baroque and Colonial Spanish architecture is the predominant theme and concrete is the main construction material for most homes and buildings. For lovely trim and accents, Cantera stone can be carved with decorative detail. Many of the old buildings, as well as some newer, are made of stone or a combination of stone and concrete. We saw lots of stone walls along with streets and sidewalks. As you can see, there are no zoning restrictions here! And, safety rules are questionable too as twice I saw French Doors, one opening to an abyss and another to a swimming pool.

Our second day included a Pilates session at a local studio, and we had one more session before leaving. I hit the gym once for a go on the treadmill, but that was the extent of exercise other than walking. Then we did a little shopping - such a myriad of stores and selections. We bought Mexican cowboy hats that we never wore and ended up FedExing back home (FedEx delivery was fabulous...sent three different items and they came in no time at all). At St. Michael's festivity, there was native dancing and drumming in the square, and we watched a parade of service goers entering La Parroquia. Over the next couple of days, two of our real estate colleagues took us to a beautiful winery restaurant for lunch, so we had our first opportunity to see some of the area away from the main part of town. The whole area is abundant with trees and flowers, and in the late afternoon, birds swarm the beautiful trees in the hotel courtyard, chirping like crazy sharing their respective day's activity, I guess. Later in the trip we visited the big Mercado, overwhelming with its vast selection of hand-crafted gift items as well as products for the home. We also went to Fabrica La Aurora Art & Design Center, a collection of art galleries, interior design services, antiques, artists' studios and restaurants. I had my first Smash Burger at Grampa & Son Burgers, delivered with its store name branded on top of the soft, warm bun. Best burger I've ever had. Guess there's no Trade Mark rule as this was not a franchise like the one at the airport. That Smash Burger was good, but not the same thing. Art galleries, interior design and specialty stores along with small 'mom & pop' shops are scattered all through the community.

About a year ago, City Market opened in San Miguel. Owned by a Mexican company, it has it all over Whole Foods. The first thing we saw when we walked in was a Christmas tree and related items - another big celebration time! Some of the beautifully-displayed produce is put into crushed ice, the meat and fish are supposed to be fabulous, and I have never seen such an extensive wine selection/department. Our mission there was not to buy groceries but to hit the ATM for both pesos and dollars. And, it had very good ice cream. Of course, there are many Mexican markets including organic. Speaking of which, one of the local farms is leased by Taylor Farms, a purveyor of salad and broccoli in our local markets.

We were treated to a tour of 6 homes for sale, all quite different and each a surprise behind the closed door. The first one we saw we guessed the asking price at about \$3.5M; we were \$1M over. This one is located near our hotel and across from Parque Juarez, a beautiful park for walking, basketball and doggies. Many homes feature rooftop lounging areas, especially with view opportunities. One of the homes visited was built on late 18<sup>th</sup> C ruins and was the main part of a large Hacienda. It was reconceived by a well-known local architect and contains lots of original stone. Solar is big where it can be used, significantly dropping power costs. One person I spoke to - with house and pool - said his monthly bill is \$25. Water is also very reasonable; propane, no natural gas; little need for air conditioning. After our tour, we had lunch at The Restaurant, a rather mundane name for one of the top restaurants in San Miguel! We topped off the day with another one of several visits to Luna for a Margarita and fabulous guacamole. Because of our late lunches, we usually ended up with a snack for dinner, even a couple of nights with room service and a movie.

Our next adventure was a 10-hour trip to Guanajuato, capital of the State of Guanajuato and historic city, about 1.5 hrs. drive through rural country with beautiful cosmos fields, morning glories and ancient aqueducts. In 1988, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Known for its silver mines, La Valenciana mine accounted for two-thirds of the world's silver production at the height of its production. We had a fabulous driver/guide who was born and raised in San Miguel, spoke great English and knew not only stories of the area but the history behind the churches and buildings. When we stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the town, he pointed out all the churches as well as homes of famous people, including Diego Rivera. From the vista, you can't see any streets because of all the beautiful trees. Here the hillside homes are a rainbow of colors, not constricted by any requirements. There is a famous Mummy Museum here, but when we saw photos of some of them, we opted out of that visit. We stopped for a Margarita at a restaurant our driver knew, then headed to our included lunch at a great restaurant on the other hillside overlooking the town, again nestled among residences. However, the structures are more individual here and do not have the same walled effect seen in San Miguel. Guanajuato is known also for its underground stone tunnels that you drive through, so we

parked in one and walked up the steps to the main plaza and shopping area. Lots and lots of stone walls and structures here.

The other guided tour we took with Mario was to the Sanctuary of Atotonilco, a church complex part of the World Heritage Site. Considered by many as Mexico's Sistine Chapel, it was built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and features rich Mexican Baroque mural work that took over 30 years. I'm told it's the third most important church in Mexico but can't verify that. It's not unusual to have 5,000 visitors a week. It is also a pilgrimage and procession site to practice spiritual exercises that include mortification of the flesh through flagellation and fasting. Not into fasting or flagellation, we had lunch at nearby Nirvana, a small residential community with boutique hotel and intimate garden seating surrounded with native flowers and plants.

Another introduction led to dinner with new friends, meeting for a drink at their home a little away from Centro. Their home is newer – about 8 years old – and quite modern with floor to ceiling glass in the living and bedrooms overlooking a pool, landscaped garden and acreage beyond. Got my doggie fix with their older girl and new puppy. On the way to dinner, we drove on the freeway that circles the town. Later in the trip, they took us to another gorgeous vineyard/winery, olive and lavender farm, Viñedos San Lucas, also a residential development with hotel, polo field and lovely open-air restaurant with the most dramatic tasting room/building that we'd ever seen. Developed by a Mexican consortium, the architectural style is Tuscan. Their adjoining similar development, Viñedos San Francisco, has only single story, more contemporary architecture, and the newest one, about 10 miles away, I understand will have a French theme. They call it 'smart vineyard living', and the grounds are beautiful with owners participating in the annual wine, olive oil and lavender yield.

Our final introduction to a mutual friend took us to Zandunga, a beautiful ranch with entertainment pavilion owned by Gil (Heel) Gutierrez, internationally acclaimed virtuoso guitarist, about 20 minutes from downtown San Miguel. A great friend and sometimes band mate of Doc Severinsen, who also now lives in San Miguel, he recently returned from Doc's fifth Farewell Tour at 93 yrs. old. Zandunga has fairly regular concerts on Sundays. The day we were there, Gil's band performed a fabulous concert with a lovely violinist and a visiting saxophone player for about an hour. Then, four musicians of a Cuban band joined them for another performance allowing dancing....and the floor was jammed! Advance tickets are needed and include lunch with no host bar.

The culture is lovely as the Mexicans are friendly, happy to help, appreciate nature and all its beautiful flowers and trees, are kind and really enjoy their families, music, good food and their fiestas! Our driver, Mario, said there are about 100 when his and his wife's families get together for holiday celebrations. The city is clean - did not see any trash - and recycling is important. There are no stop signs or signals in San Miguel, other than two I saw at town intersections along the freeway. At cross streets, many one-way in Centro, each takes his turn and no one honks. Very civilized! I didn't see one accident. With all the cobblestone streets, Mario said one should never buy a used car from San Miguel! My real estate colleagues have drivers as parking is a challenge and pretty difficult when showing property. One couple drives their own car everywhere - to Mexico City, about 3 hours away; to Zihuantanejo about 9 hours away; and to Queretaro about every 10 days for Costco run. Queretaro also has high-end retail – Chanel, Louis Vuitton, etc. The roads between cities are very good and safe. True regional Mexican food, all types of restaurants and a large selection of tequilas and mezcals are abundant. One restaurant list I got had 21 suggestions. However, with our 'comida' lifestyle, we hardly ate out for dinner so got to only 4 of the 21. And, with no pressure to jam everything into a short period, we kicked back at our lovely hotel on occasion, enjoying relaxed Mexican minutes.

Along with a great Walking & Shopping Guide, outside of town there are tours to wineries with restaurants, several hot springs, pyramids both close and closer to Mexico City, and neighboring towns that have their own cultural attractions. Horseback riding along with guided bike and walking tours are also available. Migrating Monarch butterflies settle in a community about 3 hours away in Spring.

One last mention is health care, which is exceptional and very reasonable. In addition to great dentistry that we've heard about (some friends have taken advantage of its great pricing), elder care is beyond. The mother of one friend was paying \$12K a month in Los Angeles; she's now in assisted living in San Miguel at \$3,000 a month with better care than before. The only extra is PT service for \$7.50 a session.

Tempting as it is, I'm not moving! However, I'd go back to visit for sure. Friends want us to meet them in Mexico City for a few days, then drive back to San Miguel with them. We learned that Mexico City is the new Los Angeles - tops in architecture and design, museums, music and food. They know the city, so that is certainly a great way to see any new place. We can't wait! Cost of living in San Miguel is very attractive, and it seems that most things we are used to buying and can't live without are available at about a quarter of the cost. If one is going to spend a lot of time there, I think learning Spanish would be smart as you'd be able to communicate with those who don't speak English and learn even more about their customs. The Expats have created a number of non-profit charitable organizations to benefit the community, including a rescue organization for dogs.

If you're looking for an affordable lifestyle without chaos, then this welcoming and beautiful high-desert city just might be the answer. My real estate friends, who've lived there for over 20 years, will be happy to share their expertise with anyone exploring a vacation home or serious move. Give me a call to introduce you or answer any questions. Hasta Pronto!



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