



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

The blessing of the horses

San Miguel de Allende, Mexico — If you are one who cares about horses or, as in my case, embrace an unreasonable affinity for all things equine, sooner or later you are going to end up in Mexico. This is particularly true if you came of age in the buckaroo traditions, because caballeros from Spain and Mexico are the fathers of that Great Basin tradition.

I’ve wanted to visit San Miguel de Allende since the 1980s, when my granddad — old cuss that he was — was hired to train cutting horses for the wealthy owner of a fighting bull ranch here. That’s when I first saw pictures of the old man riding in the charreada.

Charreada is the Mexican version of a rodeo, composed of nine events for men and one for women — a wild and synchronized affair known as Escaramuza — and the refined skill exhibited by Mexican charros probably has no peer anywhere in the world.

Which isn’t to say our own fine cowboys and cowgirls can’t give them a run for their money, but it is difficult to square off against vaqueros who cut their own strings and weave their own reatas one cowhide at a time, and who can burn the fat off an eight-plait braid when they dally around those whimsical Mexican saddlehorns.

You won’t see that sort of thing at the NFR.

My wife and I were having dinner last night, serenaded by the bells from La Parroquia — a 17th-century baroque cathedral that dominates the central plaza —and we were discussing why it was, precisely, that I had such a burning desire to come down here and see all of this.

The answer remains elusive despite the obvious draws: First among them, a city that has emphasized community over corporations and therefore retained its small-town charm through episodes of growth. There is the exquisite cuisine served up without any of the pretense that always seems to come with great food. There is the vibrant arts scene that claims Frida Kahlo as its mother and is home to La Aurora, where original Dalis, Eschers, and Warhols hang in a converted 19th-century factory. There are the tight cobblestone streets jammed with old-school mercados where everything from pewter cowboy boots to hand-crafted wool blankets with all natural dyes (alfalfa and marigold are typical) are offered for sale.

There is all of that, plus a mood and a world-view informed by the full spectrum of earthly colors and rooted beneath the crown of a central-highlands volcano, all set down in a climate so pleasant it was chosen by the ancients for the northernmost Meso-American pyramid.

But none of those delights really answer the question. I can’t account for what motivates anybody to do what they do, sometimes even myself, except that I know this city and its inhabitants are rooted in the heart of Mexican horse culture — so much so that there is an annual (and, I’m told, besotted) blessing of the horses

on the plaza in front of La Parroquia, when hundreds of horsemen, muleskinners, and donkey tamers converge on the plaza serenaded by mariachis and bandas rancheros.

Sadly, it’s been hard to completely escape the occasional whiny American and the baggage of their first-world problems, which they like to haul around with them and put on display almost everywhere they go.

SMA is home to a host of American expats, some of whom we regrettably bumped into this morning at Benito Juarez Park while I was thumbing through a marvelous collection of photos from the Mexican Revolution era: action shots of Pancho Villa storming a train with his ragtag compañeros, and marvelous still photos of grinning revolucionarios with rifles and fiddles posing in front of a dusty cantina.

The Americans were running about the park loudly declaiming their own heritage, which is I guess what expats do even when it makes them look ridiculous.

I found the diatribes jarring and embarrassing, and maybe even stupid, since travelling the world while bedecked in clothes and attitudes the average Mexican here will almost certainly never afford, doesn’t have the effect they seem to think



The horse culture of central Mexico is vibrant.

it does. Rather, it has a way of morphing the apologetic into the annoying, and the politically righteous into the pathetic — almost instantly.

Also, it’s a truism that American expats of that sort can’t handle Mexico in the end. Neal Cassady, hero of Kerouac’s masterpiece “On the Road,” was found dead here after a meth-fueled attempt to count every railroad tie between Celaya and San Miguel.

At any rate, I was informed this morning that most of the riders who come into town for the Perigranacion de los Caballos are quite smashed by the time they reach the plaza in front of the church,

which I can only believe is an appropriate condition when lining up for the big ominous dominus — given that alcohol is a time-tested catalyst for wild leaps of faith.

It’s probably no accident that not far from here, at Cañada de la Virgen, the ancient ones lived by a lunar calendar and sacrificed human beings to gain their own notion of a blessing from the heavens.

And yet, even as some questions must always remain unanswered, within minutes of arriving in San Miguel I made a serendipitous friend. Turns out he has horses. And tomorrow we ride.



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