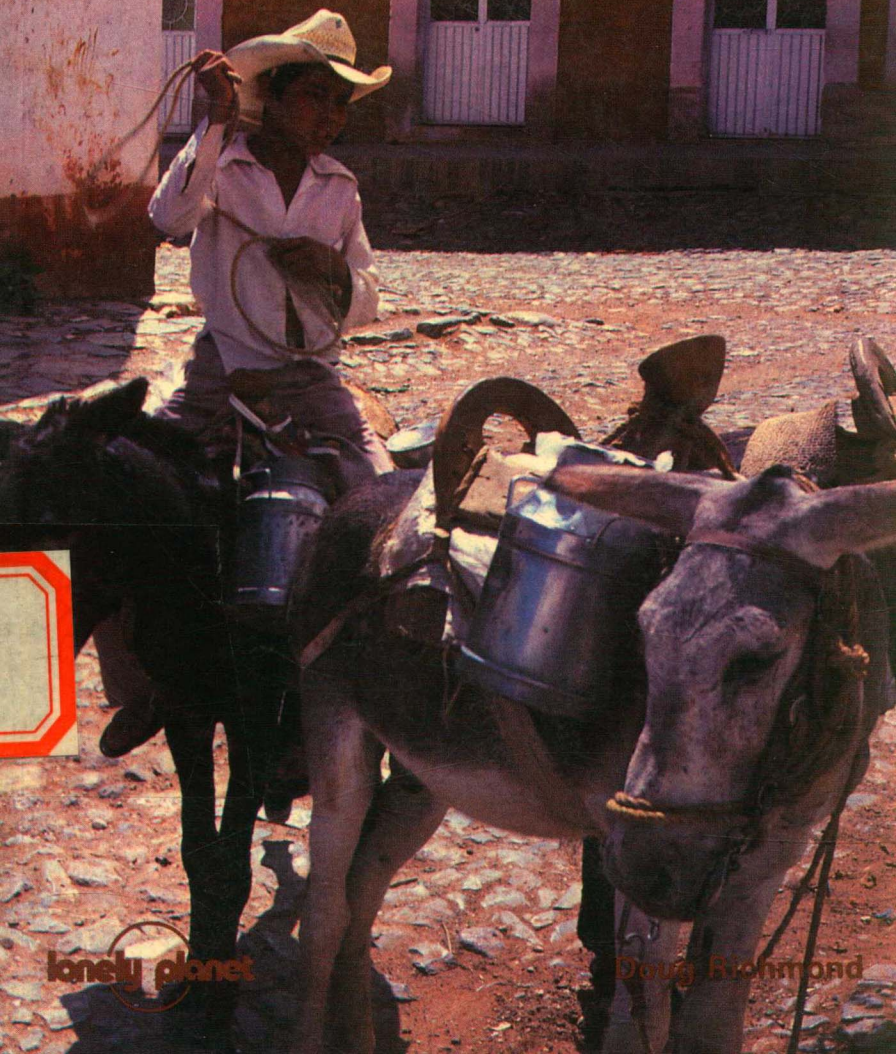


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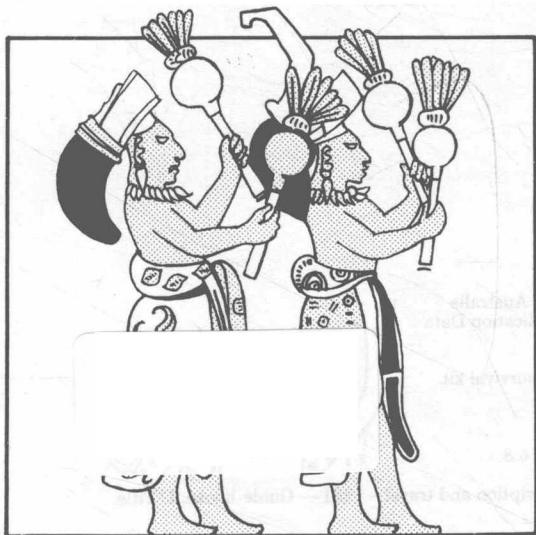


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Doug Richmond

Mexico

a travel survival kit



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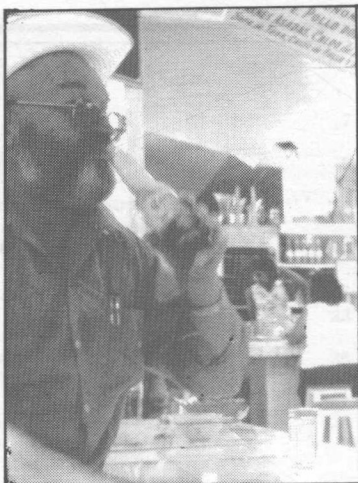
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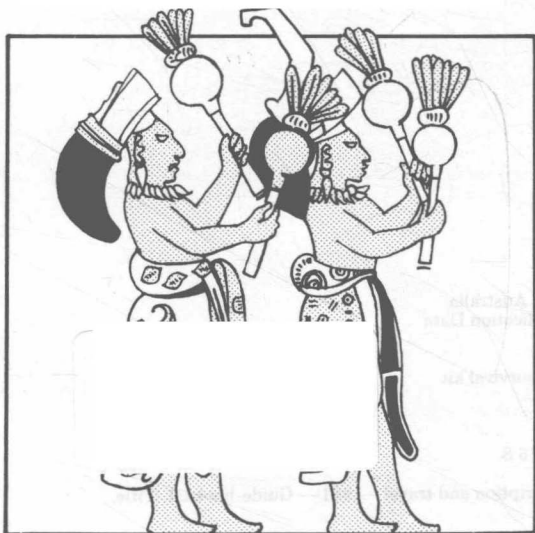


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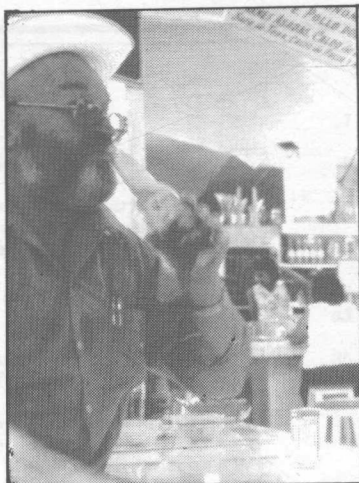
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Introduction

I've long thought that the official motto of the United Mexican States should be '*No hay reglas fijas*' ('There are no fixed rules'). This saying prevails throughout the fabric of Mexican life from the Customs guard at the border to the menu at a favourite restaurant. More than any single factor this is enough to make Mexico more unlike the rest of North America – and Europe as well – than Costa Rica, Spain or Chile.

The majority of the people are Spanish-speaking *mestizos*, a mixture of indigenous tribes and Europeans, with a generous sprinkling of all the other races and nationalities under the sun. But there are still more native-language-only speakers – people living entirely outside the money economy – in Mexico today than there are inhabitants in Guatemala.

Mexico has about 80 million people, half of whom are 15 years of age or younger. The 1981 World Almanac lists the unemployment and under-employment rate as approximately 50%. For some reason the current World Almanac has absolutely nothing to say on the subject, but things aren't improving. The disparity

in wealth between the very rich and the very poor is extreme, and the gap appears to be widening. But there is probably no group of people on earth that treats the stranger in its midst as warmly as the Mexicans do, and everywhere the person who makes mistakes – inevitable – in his or her attempts at speaking Mexican Spanish will be gently corrected, not ridiculed as is the individual who essays poor French in Paris.

Mexico is an industrialized country in which mechanical devices, from water closets to locomotives, seem to take a malicious delight in breaking down at the most inopportune times, a situation that seems to bother no one unduly. When something becomes *discompuesto* it is regarded by the locals as a petty annoyance not worth becoming upset about. This remark applies whether we are talking about a two-room hotel in a little no-plaza tank town out in the wilderness or a posh establishment on the Reforma in the heart of Mexico City.

And there is no country on earth that can offer so much to the foreign traveller for so little money as Mexico.

Facts about the Country

HISTORY

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly the date that can truly be said to be the beginning of modern Mexico, but I would place it as Good Friday, 1519, the day on which Hernan Cortés arrived on the foreshore of what became Villa Rica de Veracruz, and a more sanguine and hard-bitten little group of freebooters has probably never existed before or since.

Something like 500 men and 16 horses arrived from Cuba in several ships, ships which Cortés promptly burned to discourage dissension, backsliding and desertion among the other ranks. In effect, this single act ensured the success of the undertaking as it forced the Spaniards to conquer or die, and conquer they did. Most of them, and especially the officers, were scions of impoverished lesser nobility and they tended to hail from Extramadura and, to a somewhat lesser degree, from Andalucia. Both regions were, and are, noted more for their lack of opportunity and general poverty than for anything else. This pattern of emigration from Spain to the New World persisted for centuries and is largely responsible for the fact that Mexican Spanish differs sharply from the Castilian dialect which is the language of the so-called 'better classes' in Spain.

At the time he made his propitious landing Cortés had absolutely no idea of the immense number of Indians he was facing, in point of fact he and his men were pitted against hundreds of thousands of Aztecs alone, plus uncounted hordes of other tribesmen. The Aztecs were the dominant nation, but their rule was maintained through constant warfare with their neighbours, a situation on which Cortés and his men capitalized neatly, fostering alliances as they went, often after pitched battles.

Cortés was greatly aided in his conquest

of Mexico – by which I mean the Aztecs – by the fact that the Indians regarded both the Europeans and their horses with superstitious awe which lasted until the Spaniards had a fairly secure toehold on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and had made the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma, prisoner. To give some idea of the magnitude of the task let me point out that Tenochtitlán was larger than either the London or Paris of the time, with an estimated 300,000 or so inhabitants, and the Spanish had fewer than 500 men under arms, including priests, with half that number disabled by diarrhoea. Which is not to say that the Aztecs simply gave up their cause without a struggle. There were continuing battles and skirmishes between the Spaniards and Indians, and also between Cortés' forces and other Spaniards sent out from Cuba to punish him.

On St John's Day, 24 June 1520, there occurred a battle between the Europeans and the Aztecs, during the course of which Moctezuma was struck in the head by a flung stone and killed. The cause of this fight is forgotten, but there is every reason to suspect that the Aztecs were irritated beyond endurance by the Spaniard's edict prohibiting human sacrifice. By 30 June things were looking very bad for Cortés, so he began a retreat under cover of darkness over a causeway to Tacuba with a force consisting of three to four thousand Tlaxcala Indian allies and about 1000 Europeans – by this time he had received some reinforcements. The retreat was intended to be secret, but a wakeful Indian woman saw their flight and sounded the alarm. Thousands of Indians were killed in the ensuing battle, along with several hundred Spaniards. The Europeans put up an excellent rear guard action and the upshot of it was that Cortés wound up with about 400 European survivors, approximately the number with which he

had mounted his expedition. The retreat is remembered in Mexican history books as the *Noche Triste* (Sad Night), and the bloody causeway is commemorated on the maps of modern Mexico City as the street 'Puente de Alvarado' (Alvarado's Bridge), in honour of Cortés' second-in-command.

About a year later, after numerous battles with members of the various Indian tribes and the addition of around 200 more European reinforcements, Cortés was back at Tenochtitlán. He defeated the Aztecs once and for all and effectively made himself ruler of Mexico. He tore down the temples which the Aztecs had used for human sacrifices and used the stones to construct churches and homes – the foundation of what is now the world's largest city.

Although the Conquistadores' stated purpose in conquering Mexico was to spread the word of God and convert the Indians, and only incidentally to make money, I suspect that the latter endeavour was probably regarded privately as the most compelling; and those early Spaniards who survived wound up fabulously wealthy. Many of them returned to their native Extramadura and built immense

mansions, some of which are still in use by their descendants in Cáceres and Mérida.

Then followed 300 years of Spanish colonization and rule in Mexico, years which the energetic Spaniards put to very good use. Nearly every city of any consequence in the country was surveyed and planned during the 16th century, and the plans approved in Spain.

New-world Spanish cities were built around a central plaza on which were located the church and government offices, with the remaining frontage being taken up by the establishments of the leading merchants and professional people, a system which is followed to this day. In time, these bare-ground plazas, originally used much of the time for parade grounds, acquired stately trees, ornate fountains and, almost always, bandstands. Now they are both the central park and the focal point for social activities and provide much of modern Mexico's charm. Called the *plaza*, *zócalo*, *plaza de armas*, *jardín* or *parque centro*, it is the single feature that sets a Spanish-designed town apart from its equivalent in the United States and Canada. And about the nastiest thing one can call a Mexican town these days is a 'no-plaza village', for without a *zócalo* a town in Mexico doesn't really amount to a whole lot.

It didn't take very long for the general population to take on its present ethnic characteristics, for the virile Spaniards soon mixed with the indigenous population and created the *mestizo*, today the predominant ethnic group in the country by a wide margin. The degree of intermixture is amazing when you consider that there were never more than 20,000 Spaniards in New Spain at any one time.

Spain was an efficient ruler. It had to be, for it controlled Mexico for some 300 years; but the way it looked on Mexico as a cow to be milked irritated the upper-class Mexicans no end. For example, only *Peninsulares* or *Gachupines* (the Mexican term for Spaniards born in Spain) could



10 Facts about the Country

hold high office. All wine had to be shipped in from the mother country, although it was well known that the colony was able to make wines of equal quality. The Spanish rule of thumb was 'What is good for Spain is good for Mexico.'

Eventually these, plus hundreds of other perceived indignities, became too much for the Mexicans to bear. A parish priest, one Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, raised the cry for Mexican independence – the famous *Grito* repeated each 14 September by the leading political lights of the country, both national and local: 'Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe! Death to the Gachupines!'

Unfortunately Father Hidalgo was a much better schemer and plotter than he was a soldier, and it didn't take too long for the hated Gachupines to capture and execute him along with three of his cohorts and put their heads up on hooks at the four corners of the Alhóndiga, a large public granary in Guanajuato.

The rebels persevered, and in 1821 Mexico became a free and independent nation. The years that followed, characterized by political fecklessness, were typical of the freed Spanish colonies in North, South and Central America. For example, when Mexico became a nation it inherited the Spanish government holdings and a very efficient tax-collection system, but by means of diligent mismanagement it was able to dissipate its wealth and default on its foreign obligations within a very few years. In 1836 the fledgling Republic lost a great deal of its holdings when Texas revolted. Mexico was unable to overcome the Texans who were outnumbered by about the same ratio as the Aztecs had outnumbered the Spaniards some three centuries previously.

By 1846 relations between the United States and Mexico had reached an impasse over unpaid debts – a perennial problem besetting countries dealing with Mexico then and now – and Mexican mistreatment of US citizens residing in Mexico, among other things. The Mexicans

in turn were incensed by the United States' annexation of the Republic of Texas which had been a free nation for a decade. There were dozens of other differences. Most people today believe the ensuing war was a one-sided mismatch with the odds greatly favouring the United States, but such was by no means the case. In fact, European military experts and politicians were sure that Mexico would win the war hands-down and in very short order. Mexico had a modern, supposedly well-trained army, a dashing officer corps, flamboyant uniforms and a very short supply line, whereas the United States was blessed with none of these supposed advantages.

When the war got under way, Santa Ana, the disgraced one-legged politician-cum-soldier who had been instrumental in losing Texas for the Mexicans, was in exile in Cuba. He promptly contacted the US government and suggested that he be smuggled into Mexico where he was sure he could persuade the government to call off hostilities on terms favourable to the US. The United States ostensibly fell in with his line of reasoning and returned him to Mexico via Veracruz – probably the dirtiest and most subtle trick a country at war ever played on an enemy.

Immediately upon Santa Ana's arrival in Mexico, he convinced the government to appoint him commander-in-chief of all Mexican forces, and also to make him president several times. By means of gross ineptitude in the way military operations were conducted, the Mexicans managed to lose the crucial battles of Buena Vista, Cerro Gordo and the ultimate struggle for Mexico City itself. This not only cost them the war, but also the parts of their northern territory that eventually became the US states of California, Arizona, Utah and Nevada, plus parts of New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming.

Incidentally, this war is pretty much neglected in history lessons in the schools of both the United States and Mexico, although it was the most important

struggle ever undertaken by either of the antagonists.

In 1857 a full-blooded Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca named Benito Juárez, whose statue today graces nearly every plaza in Mexico, took over as president and a three-year civil war began. It ended with the Juaristas passing laws disestablishing the Catholic Church as the official religion. Civil registration of marriages, births and deaths became compulsory, and the huge wealth of the Church was expropriated.

Juárez was still running the country when the French, with the assistance of Spain and England, invaded Mexico for the same old reason – non-payment of justly contracted debts. That is, England and Spain were strictly on a bill-collecting mission, but the French were after bigger game – the whole country. To this end they installed as emperor one Maximilian of Austria who should have been suspicious of the whole enterprise when he discovered that he would have to give up his claim to the Austrian crown if he accepted the crown of Mexico.

The result was that Mexico got another emperor – its second – and for a while Maximilian ruled Mexico, and fairly ably, too. Among the monuments to his brief reign is Mexico City's famous Reforma, the boulevard he conceived and executed as the focal point of the city, patterned after the Champs Elysees in Paris. Another enduring legacy of Emperor Maximilian is the *Code Napoleon*, still the basis of Mexican law. However, Maximilian and his scatty wife, Carlotta, had badly misjudged Mexico and the determination of the Mexicans and, worse, he had lodged his trust in a French emperor, Napoleon III. When push came to shove, Napoleon abandoned his protégé to his fate: to be stood up on a hill between two of his faithful generals and shot. The hill is called The Hill of Bells (Cerro de las Campanas) and is located on the outskirts of Queretaro. There is a little chapel on the spot now, built by the Austrians, and called, appropriately, 'the Chapel of Expiation'.

Díaz, who had served as a general under Juárez, followed his leader as president. Like Juárez, he was an Indian, and he ruled Mexico with an iron fist for some 30 years. These were the three decades during which the Republic made the greatest material advances since the days of Spanish rule. Under Díaz' aegis, railroads were built, highways constructed and many of the capital improvements serving Mexico today were created. But the poor suffered at the expense of the rich, and in 1911 they put on their armbands, took up their 7 mm Mausers and threw the rascals out.

The revolution had as its avowed aim the alleviation of the miserable conditions of the poor (especially the rural poor); the redistribution of land; and the destruction of the huge *haciendas* (estates). The rallying cry of one of its leaders, Emiliano Zapata, 'Tierra y Libertad!' ('Land and Liberty!') is still a force in the land. The revolution lasted until 1917, with flare-ups until the 1930s, and during that period Mexico essentially lapsed into anarchy. This is the period many people still think of when you mention Mexico. It was the land of *bandidos* and crossed bandoliers and big hats and wiry horses. During the final days of the revolution the country was plagued by roving gangs of bandits; the sacking of towns and the robbery and murder of wayfarers was commonplace. And it was during this final period that some of the most bloody fighting occurred between the religious fanatics known as the Cristeros and the proponents of secular government.

During the late 1930s Mexico expropriated the oil industry which was to prove a bonanza 40 years later when an immense pool of oil was discovered in the area around Villahermosa and Coatzacoalcas. The country now ranks among the leading oil-producing nations, but this has done the average Mexican very little good. One reason for this is that under Mexican law the oil belongs to the state and not to the owner of the land over the oil. This means