

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Great Cathedral of Mexico

MEXICO – We have been seeing much and learning a great deal about Mexico and Mexico City since we arrived. We have acquired a guide by name, Ramon, who has a fund of valuable information and knowledge as to where the tourist should go and what he should see during an altogether too short visit.

Guides to Mexico City are licensed and under government restriction. They go to school to learn both the English language and the history of Mexico and especially the history of the City, as well as the streets, various industries, best eating places and all the other knowledge necessary to make a competent guide for the tourist trade. The price is reasonable - \$10 a day – American money, and they pay their own expenses, and drive your car.

An inexperienced driver would almost lose his mind in Mexico City trying to read and understand the street signs and at the same time obey traffic rules, keep out of the way of other drivers and the pedestrians who seem to be always out in front. On some streets there is also the problem of cattle, burros and the hundreds of small children. All very interesting and colorful but a bit nerve racking.

Mexico is cleaner than we expected it to be and yet there is great room for improvement. In the vast country from Laredo to Mexico City it appears to the motorist that the buzzard must be the garbageman of Mexico. They are sitting in trees, along fences, on top of roofs and every other conceivable place, seemingly waiting for something to die or to eat what is left from the natives' meals.

Ramon informed us that the new Mayor of Mexico City has enforced a rule that residents must sweep their sidewalks and gutters every day or pay a fine. There is now social security and socialized medicine in Mexico. We saw the handsome, modern buildings of the offices of the former and the hospital of the latter. There are also huge apartment buildings for the families of the government workers.

No automobiles are made in Mexico but many are assembled here. Not every Mexican can own a car because of the heavy duty which is 60% of the cost. There are 269 lines of buses in the City, including first

and second class travel. First class license plates are red with grey numbers and second, black with yellow, and they always have the right-of-way. Most of the streets are one-way streets, it appears to us.

Yesterday we toured the city from the Zocalo, which is the main plaza where all Mexico's history is reflected, and many important events have occurred. "It has been the scene of revolutions, the making and unmaking of Emperors, Viceroyes and Presidents, of fantastically beautiful religious ceremonies and royal processions, of bloodshed and rejoicing." Here we visited the great Mexican Cathedral, the oldest and largest church on the American continent. The present church was started in 1573. It was consecrated in 1667 and completed in 1813. The cost exceeded three million dollars, according to history.

Fourteen chapels flank the aisles, all showing evidence of the great wealth of the church in the early days. Now the poor are more in evidence there than the wealthy. They come with their children to pray in the church and then picnic outside.

The Cathedral shows the vast damage done by an earthquake which occurred about six months ago. The main altar is in disuse at present owing to repair work being done, both to the foundation and to the ceiling. It is amazing to see the many immense buildings that are leaning because of lack of proper foundations when they were built, including those built a century ago, as well as more modern ones. Construction in more recent years has taken care of these problems with pilings and the architecture is quite ultra modern.

In the National Palace (El Palacio Nacional) we viewed the great murals of Diego Rivera, which were begun in 1931 and where his communistic sympathies are certainly in evidence, but at the same time the history of Mexico is depicted in allegorical manner. This block square building was begun in 1692 and holds the executive offices of the President, the general archives of the Nation and other national businesses. From the main balcony the President makes his addresses to the populace on holidays.

It was amusing to visit the national pawnshop which also overlooks the Zocalo. It was founded, we were told, in 1775 by Conde De Regla, Pedro Romero de Terreros, wealthy owner of the Real del Mote mines at Pachuca. The building is the original one, a beautiful restrained Colonial Baroque. Here long period loans were made

without interest as the object of the founder was to benefit all social classes in distress. Now reasonable interest is charged and the borrower has six months in which to redeem his goods, after which it is auctioned.