

Highlights of the Society Tour through Mexico in 1948

Manuel M. Castoreña

Mr. President, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am going to try to give you a brief description of some of the scenic spots visited on our pilgrimage to Mexico.

The scenic part of our trip began at San Miguel de Allende. Mr. Griswold, Mr. Barrett and Mr. Hillman, who were in charge of all arrangements, couldn't have chosen a better place to raise the curtain for a marvelous performance of scenic beauty than at San Miguel de Allende. Allende is a small town about three hundred years old, and it is the most picturesque and cleanest little town I have ever visited. I particularly enjoyed walking around its winding cobblestone streets and admiring the beauty of its old Colonial buildings, the Churches and the Plaza "Town Square" with its traditional old Kiosco "Band Stand." The Mercado "Market Place" at Allende is quaint and interesting. Inside the building there are a number of booths displaying and offering to the buying public a great variety of merchandise. Outside and around the building merchants set up tables with a square piece of canvas on a pole for shelter, others simply spread a piece of cloth on the pavement and spread their wares about them. If you speak Spanish it is interesting and sometimes amusing to watch and listen to the natives do their trading.

For the camera fan or the artist Allende offers a wealth of material, everywhere there is a picture. In fact, it is called the Artist's Town, one of Mexico's finest Art Academies, catering largely to American students, is located here.

Most of us fell in love with this beautiful little town, and our only regret was not to be able to spend a little more time there.

From San Miguel de Allende we journeyed on to Queretaro. This interesting old town was founded by the Otomi Indians some four hundred years ago. There are many beautiful and strange sights in this historic old town. The old Colonial Aqueduct built about two centuries ago and still in operation, the numerous churches, the Federal Palace, once an Augustinian Monastery and nearby, El Cerro de Las Campanas "Hill of the Bells" where the Emperor Maximilian was executed in the year 1867, were some of the places of interest visited by our group.

Mexico City was our next stop. The Capital has so much to offer to the visitor, that it would be impossible to tell you about the many marvelous sights to be enjoyed there without making this report too lengthy. However, I will mention a few places that in my estimation are of special interest. Xochimilco, better known as the Floating Gardens, offers a unique treat to the visitor. On Sundays or any holiday the canals are full with Trjineras "canopied boats" arched with fresh flowers, vendors paddle about offering flowers, food and souvenirs, string orchestras and marimbas will come alongside and delight you with romantic songs and music.

The Shrine and Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe with its beautiful religious art treasures, is something to admire. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron Saint of all Mexicans. Every year on the twelfth day of December people from all over Mexico and many parts of the world come to the Shrine to pay homage to the Virgin.

El Castillo de Chapultepec "Chapultepec Castle" for many years the official residence of Mexico's Presidents, crowns the heights of Chapultepec Park and Lake and commands a magnificent view of the entire city. Camera fans with our group lost no time in taking full advantage of this spot for some good shots.



The 1948 Pilgrimage Group at the Mexican White House.

In the city there are numerous beautiful buildings, churches and monuments, the Palace of Fine Arts is a magnificent structure. It houses the Art Gallery and the Opera House. Thirty years were spent in the construction of the building. The National Pawn-Shop is another interesting place to visit. People interested in antiques can spend much time there inspecting the thousands of articles on display. Money is loaned on anything of value and all proceeds go entirely to charity. There are many more places of interest in this great city, but as I said before time does not permit to mention all of them.

The road from Mexico City to Vera Cruz took us through the jungle lands of Southern Mexico, we were thrilled by the beauty of the country in that region. I can't begin to describe it. The tropical fruits, the variety of trees and the exotic beauty of the many kinds of flowers that could be seen from the train is unmatched.

Vera Cruz is one of Mexico's oldest and most important harbors. The Spanish Conquistadores first landed there and Cortez named it the "Rich Town of the True Cross." The City Hall, the old Fortress San Juan de Ulua and other remnants of that era

are still there to remind the visitor of the Conquistadores.

Fortin de las Flores "Fort of the Flowers" was next on our itinerary, the name fits perfectly. Fortin is literally a mass of flowers of every kind and description.

The Hotel Ruiz Galindo where we spent the night, is a beautiful rambling type structure of Colonial architecture. Its white walls, red tile roofs and spotless red-tiled maze of corridors and staircases, give it a unique charm. The swimming pool is of special attraction to the guests, hundreds of gardenias are placed there daily.

The people of the town were celebrating their yearly Fiesta de las Flores "Feast of the Flowers." The Plaza was decorated with bright colored banners, flags and flowers. Colorful little booths were set up all around the Plaza, and of course, a Fiesta is not a Fiesta unless there is music, singing and dancing. Most of us joined in the festivities and a very enjoyable evening was had by all. The next day a sight-seeing tour in and around Fortin revealed all the natural beauty to be enjoyed and admired in this quaint little jungle town. The wonderful views of the Pico de Orizaba, Mexico's highest volcano with its cap of eternal snow that towers over 18,000 feet, is a sight never to be forgotten. Without doubt this was the highlight of the tour.

After lunch we boarded a fleet of Autos and the tour proceeded to Puebla. The highway between Fortin and Puebla is full of hair pin turns and dizzy curves, that lift it to an elevation of over 10,000 feet, at the summit, four of Mexico's peaks can be seen. Almost in front we could see the perfect cone of Popocatepetl guarding his beloved Ixtaccihuatl beneath her blanket of eternal snow. To the right stands La Malinche, a mountain named for Cortez's Indian wife, and back of us, Orizaba, barely discernible through a hazy mist. Indeed a rare sight.

Puebla is Mexico's third largest city, and figures quite prominently in Mexican History. It was here, that on the fifth of May 1862, General Ignacio Zaragoza, Commander in Chief of Mexico's armed forces, led his army to victory against the invading forces of France. Since then Mexicans observe the fifth of May as their second independence day.

The City is noted for its tile, fine glassware and onyxes. The Churches are the finest I have ever seen. The huge Cathedral with its Altar of the Kings is a beautiful work done entirely in gray Puebla onyx. The Rosario Chapel in Santo Domingo Church is almost impossible to describe. Every inch of the Chapel is carved with intricate embellishments.

A short drive from Puebla is the little town of Atlixco. Mr. Barrett just gave you a very fine report on what took place there, so let us go on. After a very short stay in Cuernavaca, famed week-end resort for Mexico's smart set, we were on our way to the little mining town, Taxco.

The scenery along the highway is somewhat different from what we had seen before. It almost follows the same route of the old cobblestone King's Highway built by Cortez, in fact, small patches of the old road are still there and most of the stone bridges are still standing.

Taxco is a little mining town built on the side of a hill; the cobblestone streets are very narrow and steep. From a distance the houses seem to be built one on top of the other. The Plaza is small but has a charm all its own. Tall Indian Laurels encircle it and under their inviting shade Indians set up shop. On one side and the other of its main streets

there are numerous shops, where the visitor can purchase a variety of articles made of silver, for which the town is noted. Artists from different parts of the world have adopted this pretty little town and have settled there.

After a delightful lunch at the Rancho Telva Hotel, the tour party started back to Mexico City to board our special train for Guanajuato, our last sightseeing stop.

Guanajuato, Capital of the State by the same name, is one of the few cities in Mexico that remain unspoiled since Spanish days. It is a rich mining center. Near the city is the largest silver mine in existence. Of special interest are the Catacombs, fine old Colonial buildings and the huge statue of Pipila, one of Mexico's heroes, overlooking the entire city and pointing to the Fortress Granaditas, the Fort that because of his bravery and daring Hidalgo was able to capture from the Spaniards.

A concert by a military band was offered to us at one of the beautiful parks of the city, and finally a banquet, given by Mr. Hillman to the tour party with the Governor of the State and other high State and City officials attending.

At this point, ladies and gentlemen, the curtain was lowered, the end of a perfect performance, well planned and expertly presented. A beautiful experience long to be remembered.



Hotel Ruiz Galindo, Fortin de las Flores.
Left to right: Mr. and Mrs. Jack Shepherd, Chaffee Young, Mr. and Mrs. Elwood Trask.
In the background: Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Shepard and Mr. and Mrs. Carl Hoelscher.