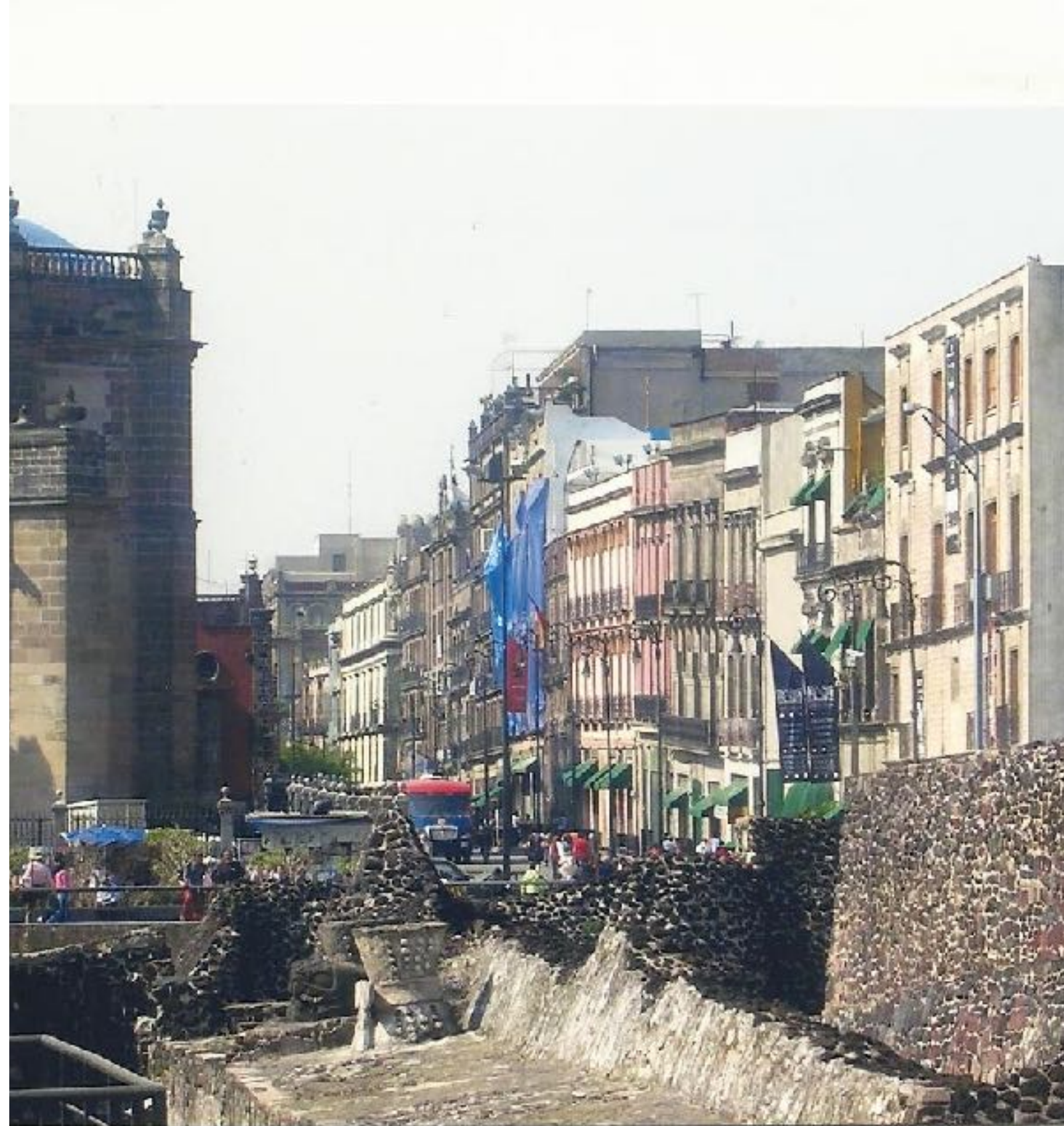


# The Mexican Highlands

November, December 2007





**Esta ciudad no tiene historia  
sólo martirologio.  
El país del dolor,  
la capital del sufrimiento,  
el centro deshecho  
del inmenso desastre interminable.**

Jose Emilio Pacheco,  
City of Memory, 1986

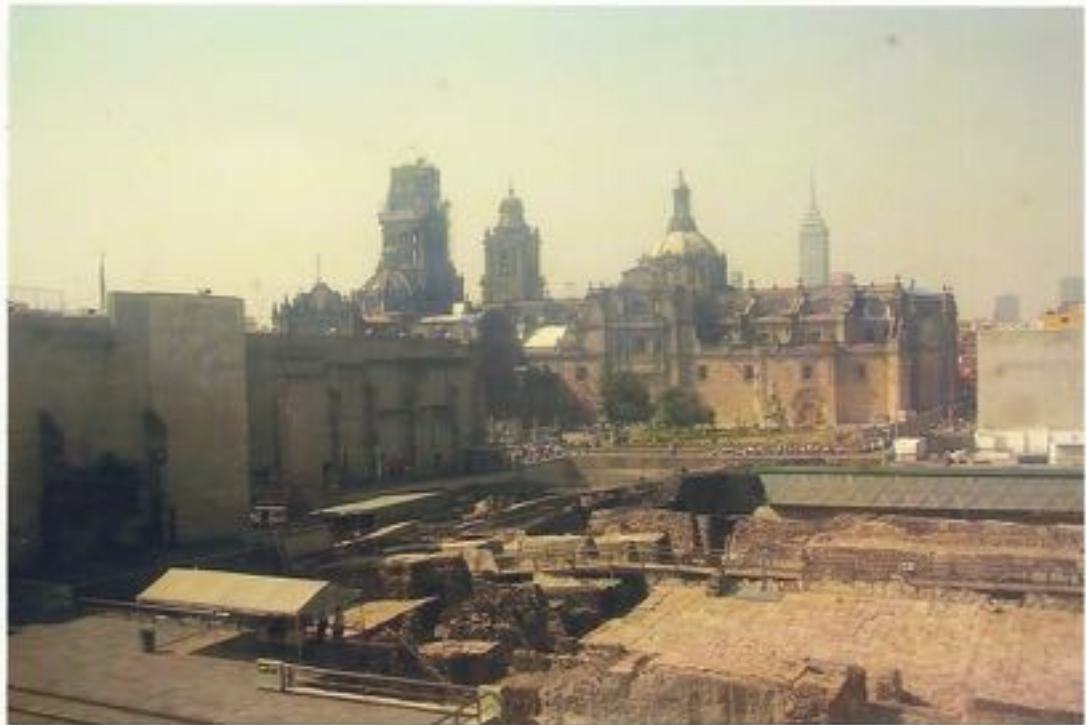
(one year after the earthquake)

This city has no history  
only martyrology.  
country of pain,  
capital of suffering,  
the broken centre  
of the great, unending disaster.



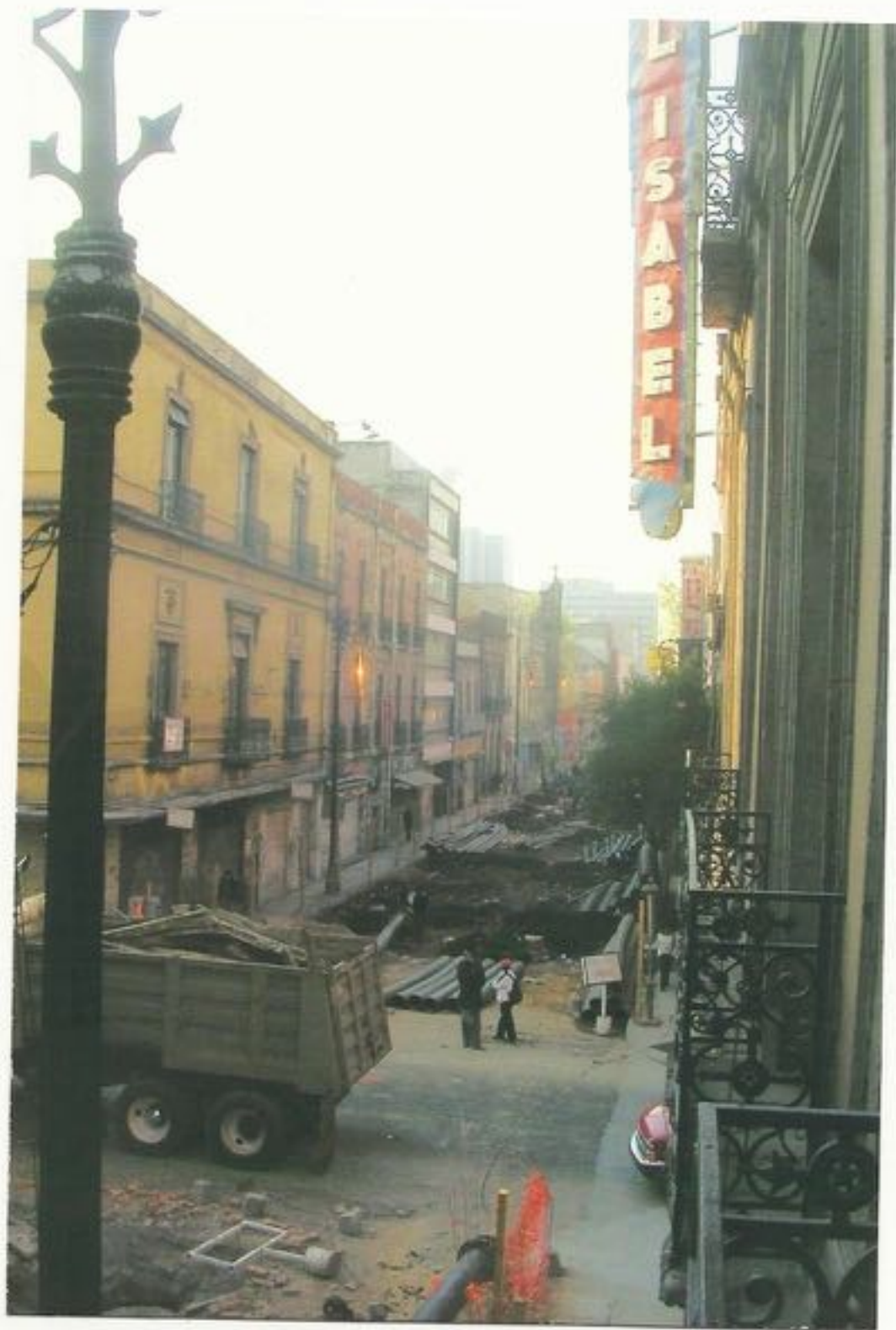
Mexico City is a place that many people love to hate. There are some good reasons for this. The bad air alone is a sufficient reason. There is also a wearying intensity that is more of Manhattan than Mexico, and apart from some old monumental buildings, the architecture ranges from banal to ugly.

The Aztecs built a capital here, long ago on an island in a shallow, swampy lake. The place was good for fishing and agriculture and it offered watery protection against attackers. The ground was unsuited for any but the most basic structures which were built on poles rammed into the muck. Vanity overcame good sense and the Aztecs built huge pyramid structures, some of which can still be seen, all tilted and twisted by foundation failures. The Spanish conquistadors brought a superior class of vanity and placed their buildings on top of the already failed Aztec work. All this has expanded over the centuries into the world's biggest sinking city.





Oh, did I mention the earthquakes?





We have come to terms with the world's biggest city; we find its airport a convenient gateway to Mexico; for twenty cents each, the Metro takes us to our favourite Hotel Isabel, cheap, ugly and conveniently located in the Zona Historica, a five minute walk from the Plaza. We have some favourite Mexican restaurants and a Starbucks. For another twenty cents, the Metro will deliver us to any one of four bus terminals that connect to all of Mexico.



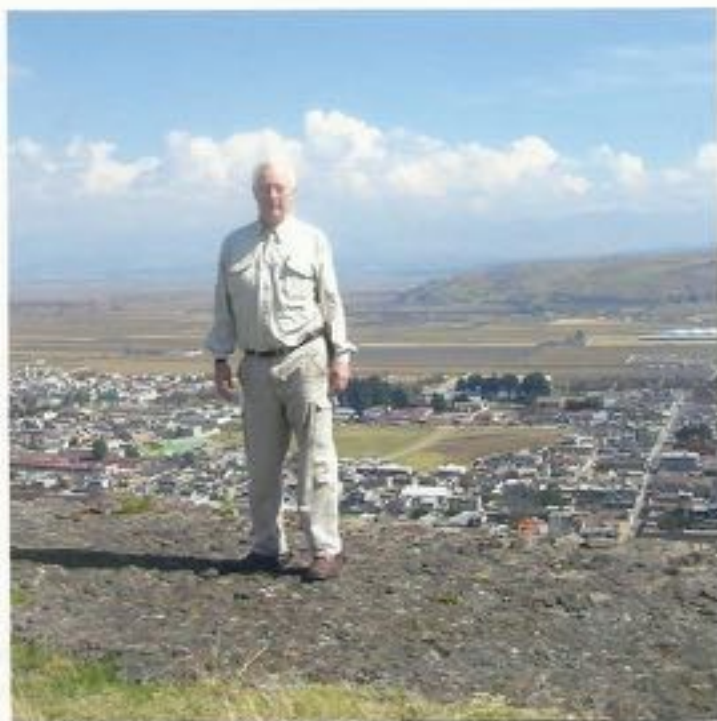
The roads in our neighbourhood are all torn up; we walk on broken sidewalks through the construction mess. Normally we ask for one of the rooms up on the roof, far away from traffic noise. But now, after the workers finish for the night, there is no noise at all. It's like sleeping in a village back street.

Day one, we take a bus that climbs out of the Valley of Mexico to Toluca, elevation 2660 metres (8700 feet). An old market building in Toluca has been outfitted with colourful stained glass windows and a botanical garden. It's an excellent piece of work that stands quite apart from the usual collection of colonial religious and administrative buildings.



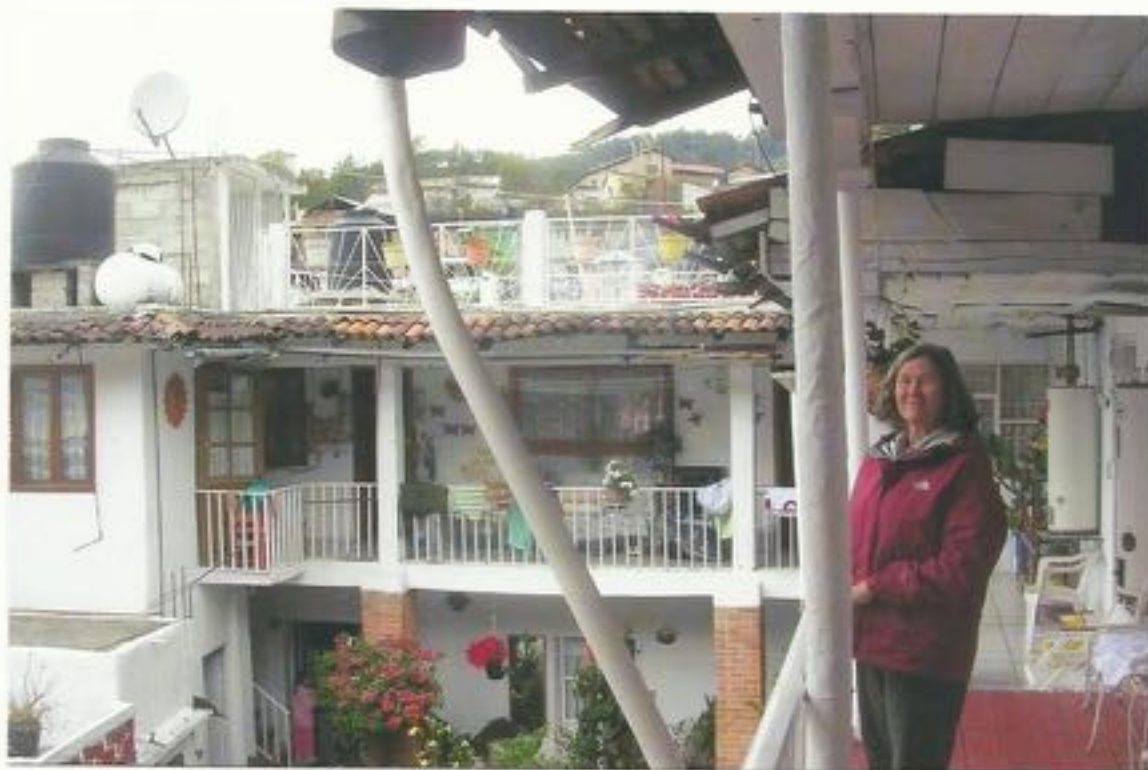
The pyramids at Teotenango are a short bus ride out of town.







Angangueo is a very small town that used to have a silver mine. Now it has a more seasonal and precarious business as the gateway for the monarch butterfly sanctuary at El Rosario. Hotel Juarez is very well located in the centre and has a dozen or so ramshackle rooms around a patio. At 3000 metres (9800 feet) of elevation, we are into cold and foggy conditions. I can't say what part of this sloping town is at 3000 metres, perhaps it's the atrium in front of the church, the only levelled place.



The rooms at Hotel Juarez are all interconnected, as was the normal way in these old constructions, and separated by wood plank doors. We turn in early (old people) to sleep and to keep warm. In the night I hear the arrival of new neighbours, chatting and popping caps off beer bottles onto the floor. And making love, oh yes, and after sex they smoke, - smoke that drifts through the spaces between the planks. The young people have more to do in the night than the old people, but eventually they settle down and we all have a good sleep.

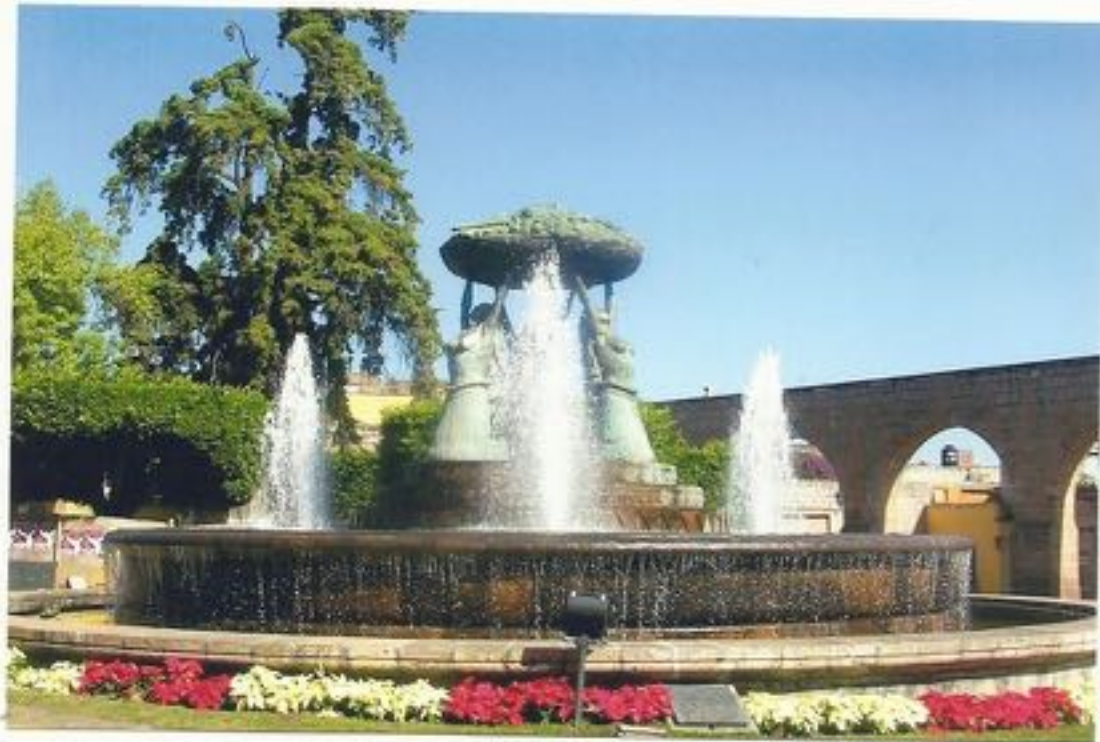




Morning, we are keen to go up the mountain and see the butterflies. Outside our Hotel Juarez two candidates are waiting to drive us up to the site. The young man parked in pole position by the door clearly has priority. He quotes the standard 400 pesos fee for the tour, and holds open the door of his car. Behind him in line is Jesus (say hay-ZUSS) older, looking a bit like a jolly pirate, grinning and holding up three fingers so that only I can see them. We ride with Jesus.

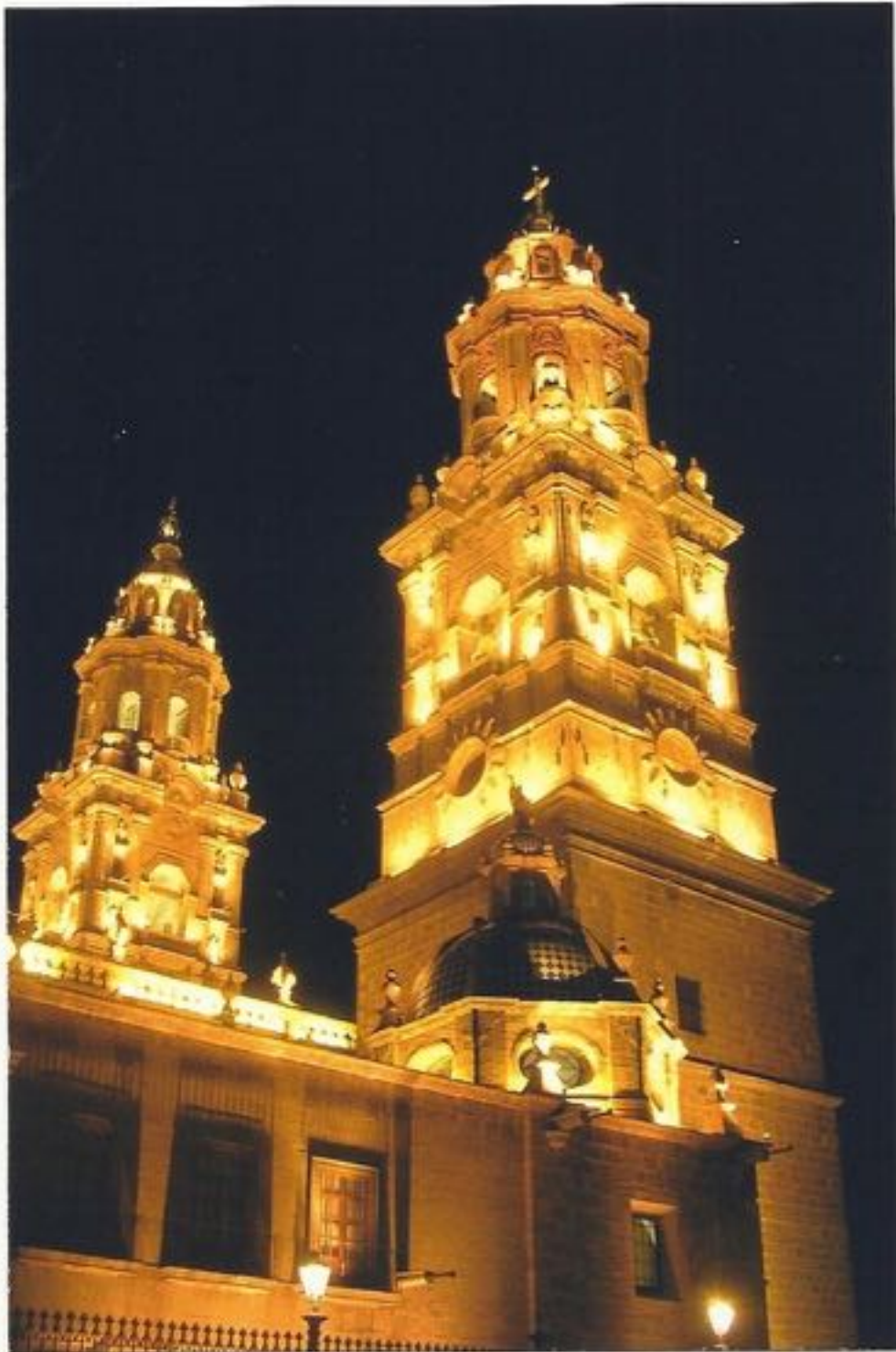


We have a ride up a rough mountain track, along cliff edges with spectacular views down to the valley, then a long hike up-hill beyond the parking place, the 12000 foot altitude making us breathless. At the mountain top, we see the thousands of butterflies loading down the branches. It's too cold for them to be flying about. My highly intelligent camera focuses automatically on the water droplets right in front of my face, and it catches only a blur of a monochrome clump of butterflies. We are not disappointed but we are tired and the cold fog penetrates to the bone. Jesus takes us down by a different route and puts us on a bus to Zitácuaro.





**Morelia** is a city of half a million people with a near perfect climate at 6000 feet high, with a university, some magnificent architecture, an aqueduct and three lovely bare-breasted ladies holding up a big bowl of fruit. It should be full of retired norteamericanos, but no, they're all hanging out at San Miguel de Allende.





**Pátzcuaro** is a smaller place with cobbled streets, red tiled roofs and no big city pretensions. It's totally charming, but we don't give it the time it deserves; we decide to make a dash to the sea.







The bus takes us to Uruápan, then another bus to Lázaro Cárdenas, a harbour city on the Pacific shore. From there a smaller bus drops us as night is falling at Caleta de Campos, a little end-of-the-road village perched on a cliff above the sea. We find a room at Hotel Los Arcos, overlooking the light-house. Our host Rodrigo (my namesake) has to be roused from his bed to drag himself upstairs and show us a room. \$20. No one else is staying here.

We walk out with a flashlight and find a good fillet of fish dinner in the dusty main street.

In the night, the mosquitoes eat us up. There are no screens, only screen frames. We thought a place so high up, with a sea breeze would be bug-free. Wrong! No screens and no beach access. Time to keep moving.

In preparation for the beach I find a sombrero for \$3 and we head off to the highway. We negotiate a fare by taxi along the coastal highway #200 to Playa Maruata.









**Playa Maruata** has four beaches, separated by big rocky outcrops. A sand road connects it all together. At left in the photo below, where the sign says "CABANAS AQUI", that's our cabaña. To the right where the sign says HIELO, that's the convenience store. There are a number of restaurants open, that operate along with the cabañas. As the place is very uncrowded, we are the only customers and we're eating whatever they have to offer today, depending on what has come in from the sea. Beer is a dollar and available everywhere.

High season here is in summer, when Mexicans go to the beach to get away from the heat. There is also a rush to the sea in Christmas Week and Holy Week. Right now, the place is all but empty. The locals must be curious about these two old gringos, but they are ever gracious and never intrude into our space.

There are no chocolates on the pillows at Cabañas Aqui, no towels, no soap, no hair dryer, no toilet seat. This is a basic Mexican cabaña by the sea, but with upgrades, - a toilet, basin and cold shower. All is peaceful and quiet except for the song of the surf. There are no mosquitoes, but there are some cucarachas.





Motor boats go out to sea and bring back a catch that is cleaned on the shore. The vultures hang around, as tame as pigeons, and clean up the left-overs. We have fresh fillet of fish every evening for dinner, cooked with mojo de ajo, - (garlic sauce), rice and beans, home made tortillas, beer.







The other mode of fishing is with surf nets. If he locates a school of fish, a man may feed his family with just one cast of the net. The women wait on shore with their plastic buckets.















Our beach also has a sea turtle sanctuary. The big turtles come ashore at night and dig holes where they lay their eggs. The rescuers of eggs come out in the morning and transplant them into a fenced area where they can be protected. The newly hatched turtles will be escorted to the safety of the sea.

At about two in the morning, we go out and walk far down the beach under a bright moon. We see sand flying out of a big hole, a hole big enough to hide an adult person. We sit at a distance where we won't disturb the turtle.

Eventually, she climbs out and slowly crawls down to the surf line. The waves reach out to her as she continues her slow, awkward journey. Then a big wave comes in and covers her.

When it recedes, she is gone.



We return in the morning to photograph the place of the turtle.





Mostly we dine at Restaurante Chelo, an enramada made of palm branches with plastic "Cerveza Corona" tables and chairs in the sand. It's located on the beach, right in the centre of the photo. Señor Chelo sits around, lord of the manor, surveying this grand institution that carries his name; Alma seems to be doing all the work.

We see her here grinding cornmeal into a fine flour for tortillas. The tortilla press is seen on a shelf behind her. A wood fire crackles under the clay stove at her left side. Wood for the fire is delivered by a donkey and the dinner is always catch of the day.



Three days of Playa Maruata have left us well rested and quite blissed out. We had better get moving again before we become permanent fixtures. A walk up to the highway in the morning and we flag down a bus in about ten minutes. We're off to Colima.





**Colima** is well into its Christmas festivities, centred on Our Lady of Guadalupe. The public squares are full of vendors selling every kind of traditional sugary treats, kids' toys, handicrafts, religious stuff, clothing, decorations . . . . .

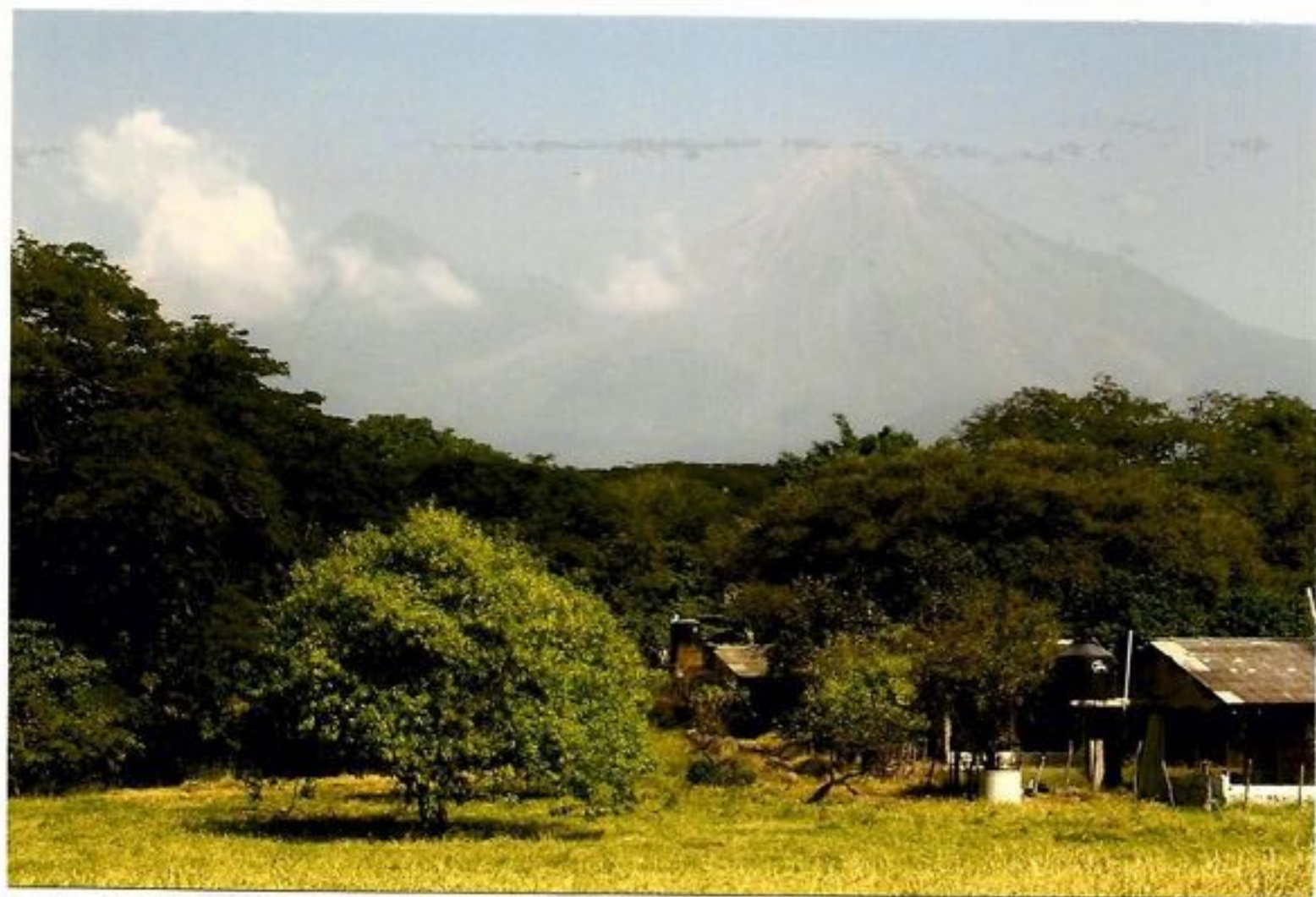
An evening band concert is presented in the Plaza Principal, but it has to compete with church bells and a noisy parade. The parade consists of many people dressed in a native costume-religious habit fusion, with bells like morris dancers, a powerful drumbeat and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They march right into the church to attend a mass; the bells ring out a noisy welcome, and the brass band plays on, striving to be heard through the din.

Religion is still a powerful force here in a country where religious property and sectarian education were abolished a hundred and fifty years ago. The religious icons are carried through the streets by young men who look more like sports fans than religious zealots. The interior of the church is decked out in the national colours and the celebrations owe as much to native traditions as they do to Rome. Something for everyone to identify with.

If you can imagine a town with 125,000 people and a university, (think Kingston Ontario) you have a very liveable place, not yet discovered by a great number of tourists.









One of the good things about Colima is **Comala**, a small suburban town that you can reach in a few minutes by bus. The little plaza is pleasantly shaded and surrounded by arcades, restaurants and shops. If you just walk up to the end of the street, you can look upon Volcan de Fuego. The Volcano of Fire is well named; it blew its top as recently as 2001.

When the volcano erupted, the army came in to relocate the population of La Yerbabuena, a small native village on the lower slopes. An eruption of another kind was already ongoing, a land claim issue with involvement of the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos. The argument still goes on about whether the removal was a public safety measure or a political pacification measure. Always in Mexico, there are layers to every story.





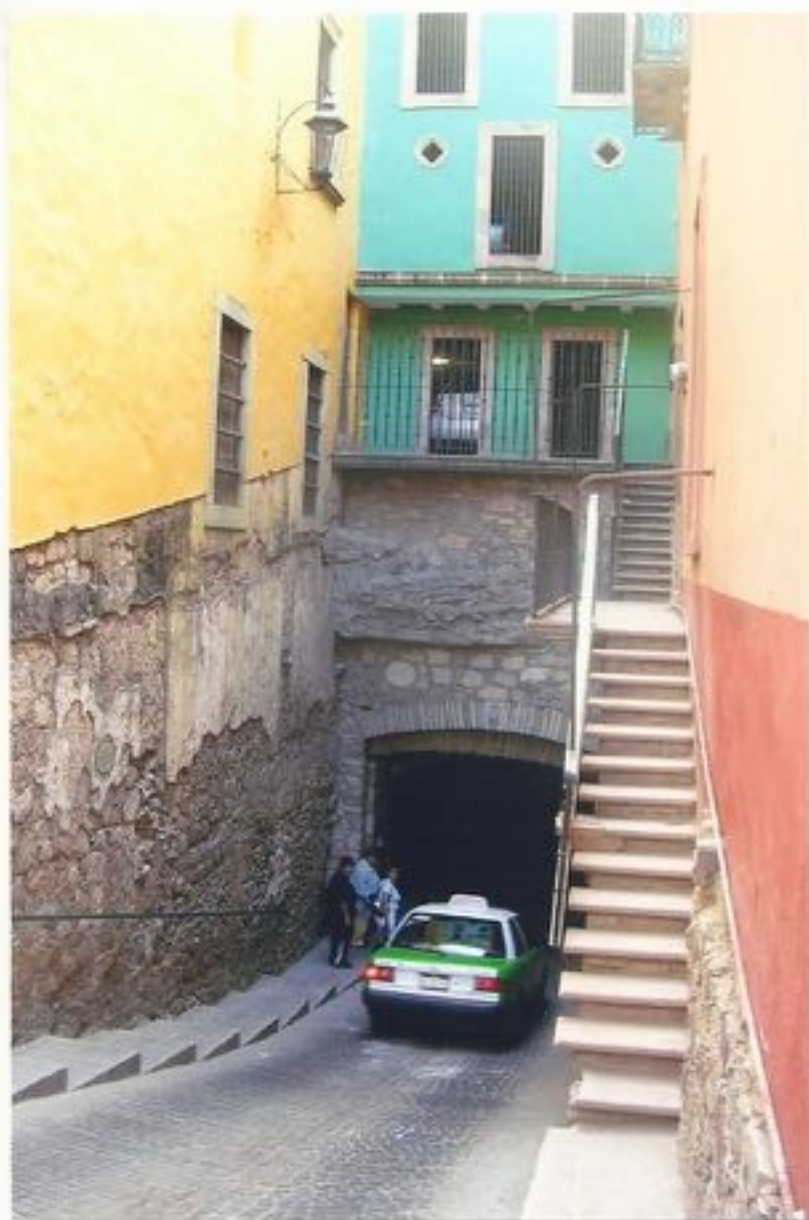


Imagine a little Mexican river in a narrow valley. Typically, these rivers are seasonal, reducing to a trickle in the dry season, becoming a raging torrent in the wet season. Now, introduce a primitive gold and silver mining operation and a rough village on the lower slopes. Let simmer for four centuries or so. **Guanajuato!**

The town is colourful and lively, with charming public spaces, a university and a comfortable pedestrian environment. Only a very few streets are wide enough for motor traffic. On one of these I saw a plaque high on the wall, recording the level of the flood of 1901. All the rest are pedestrian ways, either up the hill or down the hill, rarely on the level.

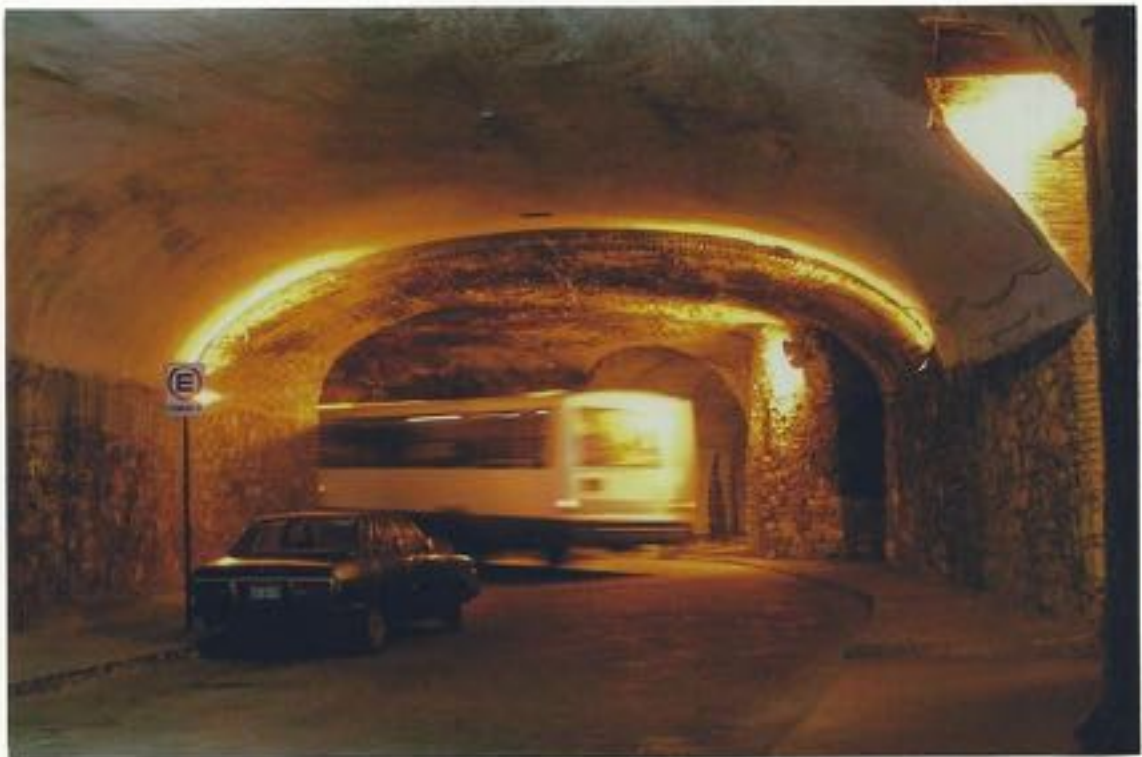






The troublesome river has now been converted into a traffic tunnel that looks like a medieval dungeon. All eastbound traffic now goes through the tunnel.

And where is the river? I have no idea. I think there must be another tunnel for water.

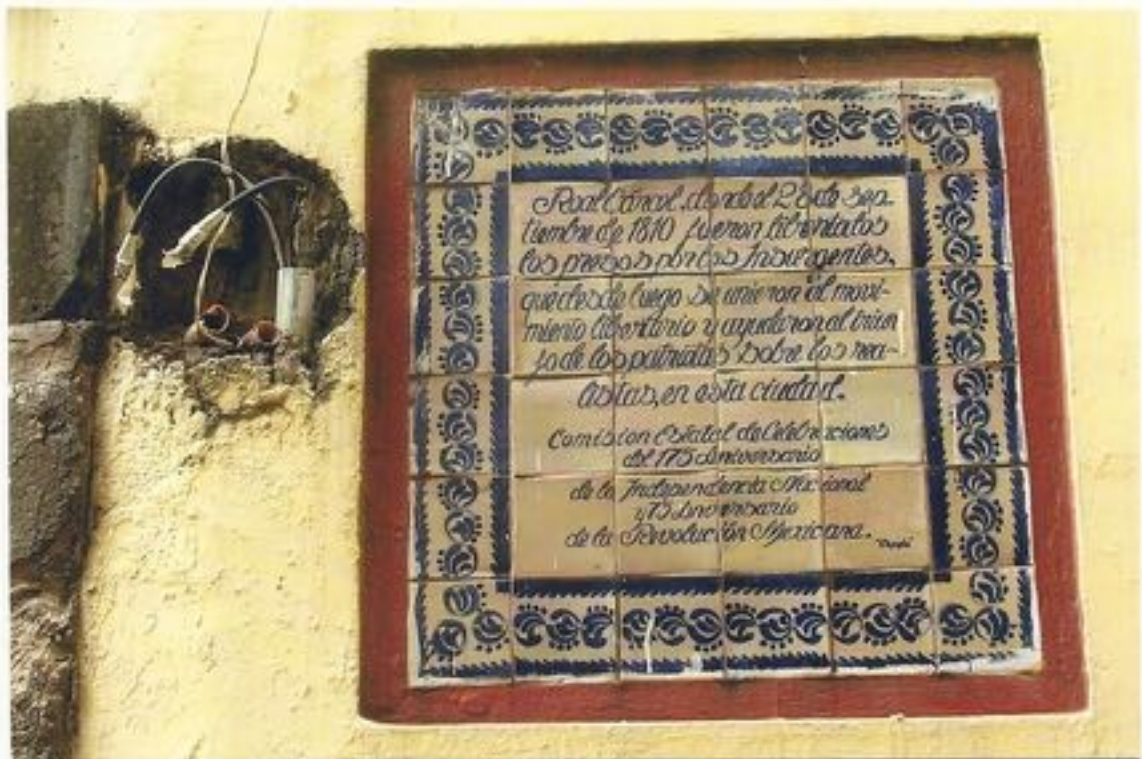






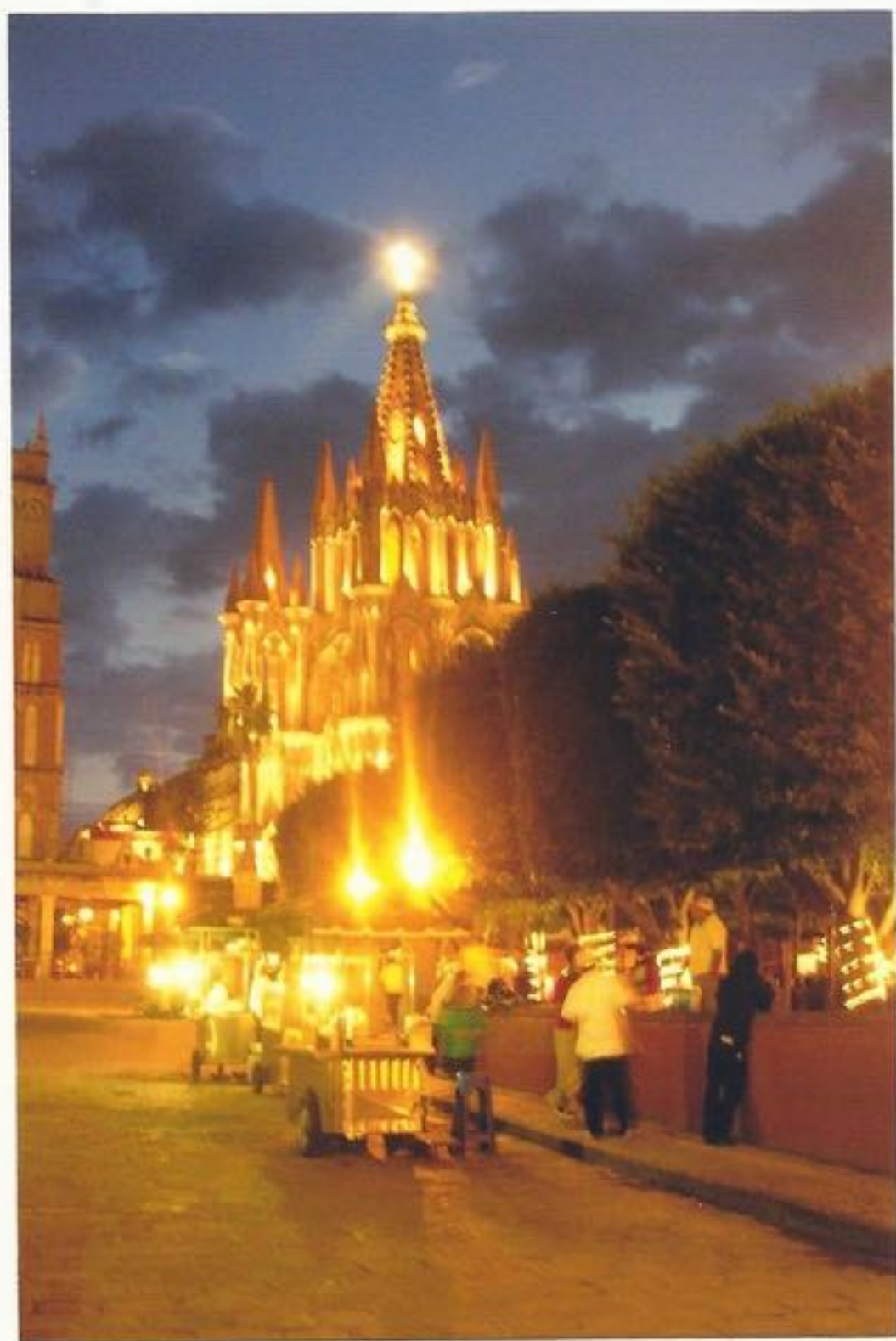
Royal Prison, where on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 1810  
the prisoners were liberated by insurgents who later  
formed the liberation movement and supported the  
victory of the patriots over the royalists in this city

State Commission for Celebrations of the 175<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary of National Independence  
and the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Mexican Revolution.



History and culture are expressed in this photo. The plaque is translated above. The electrical fixture speaks of another aspect of Mexico's culture. It is normal to see bare wires hanging about, holes in sidewalks and streets, edges unprotected by guard rails. In our litigious society, if you step into a hole or fall off a roof terrace you're likely to sue. In Mexico, they will simply reply: "You should have watched where you were going."

Picture on the left page: our little balcony in Casa de Pita in the little Callejon de la Cabecita. (little alley of the little head) ???





**San Miguel de Allende** has become a popular wintering ground for norteamericanos, and so it has acquired a layer of fancy shops and restaurants worthy of a much bigger place. The old snowbirds are seen everywhere, strolling in the cobbled streets or sitting in the cafes, looking prosperous and contented if a bit world-weary.

Just out of town to the north, volcanic hot springs offer swimming in hot pools or caves, massages, food and drink. We go.







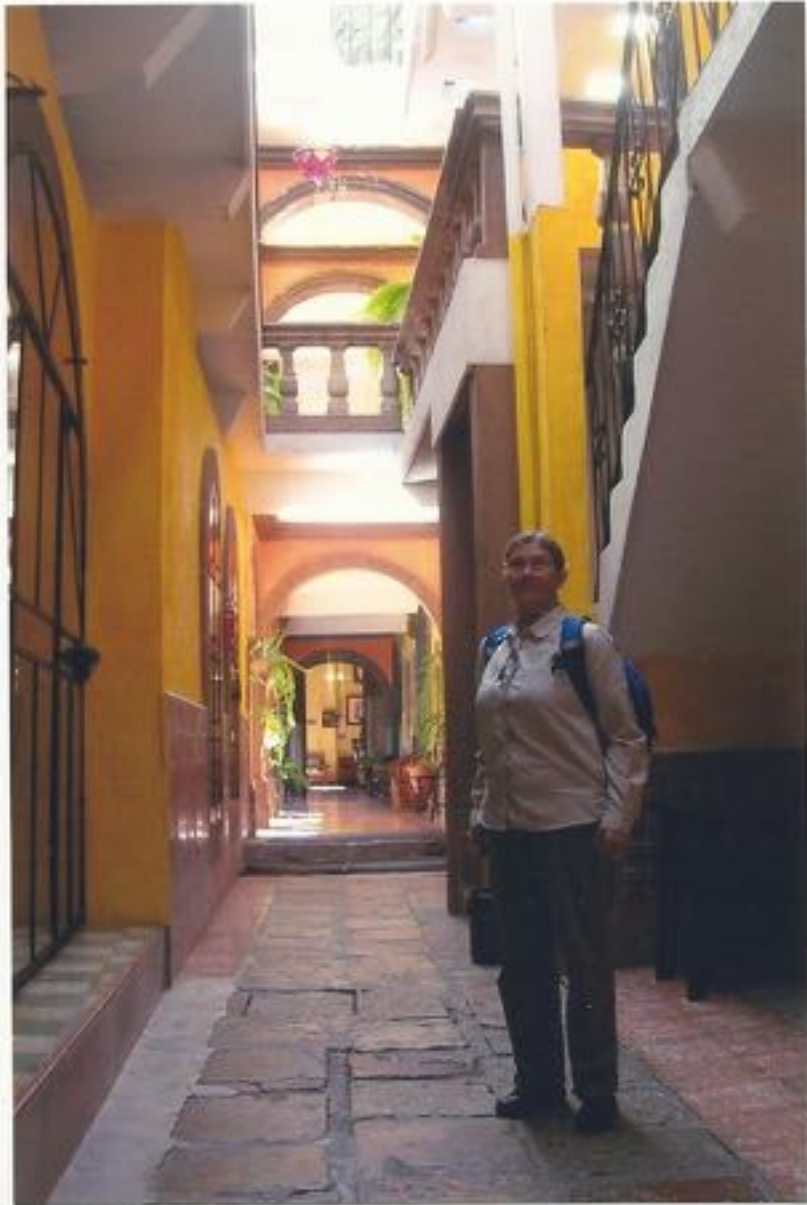
The equestrian statue represents Ignacio de Allende, a son of this town who was one of the early instigators of the independence movement in 1810. Unfortunately, he was caught and executed by the Spanish. Independence was achieved in 1821 and the town's name was changed from San Miguel el Grande to San Miguel de Allende. There are not actually any reports that say he was a pigeon fancier.

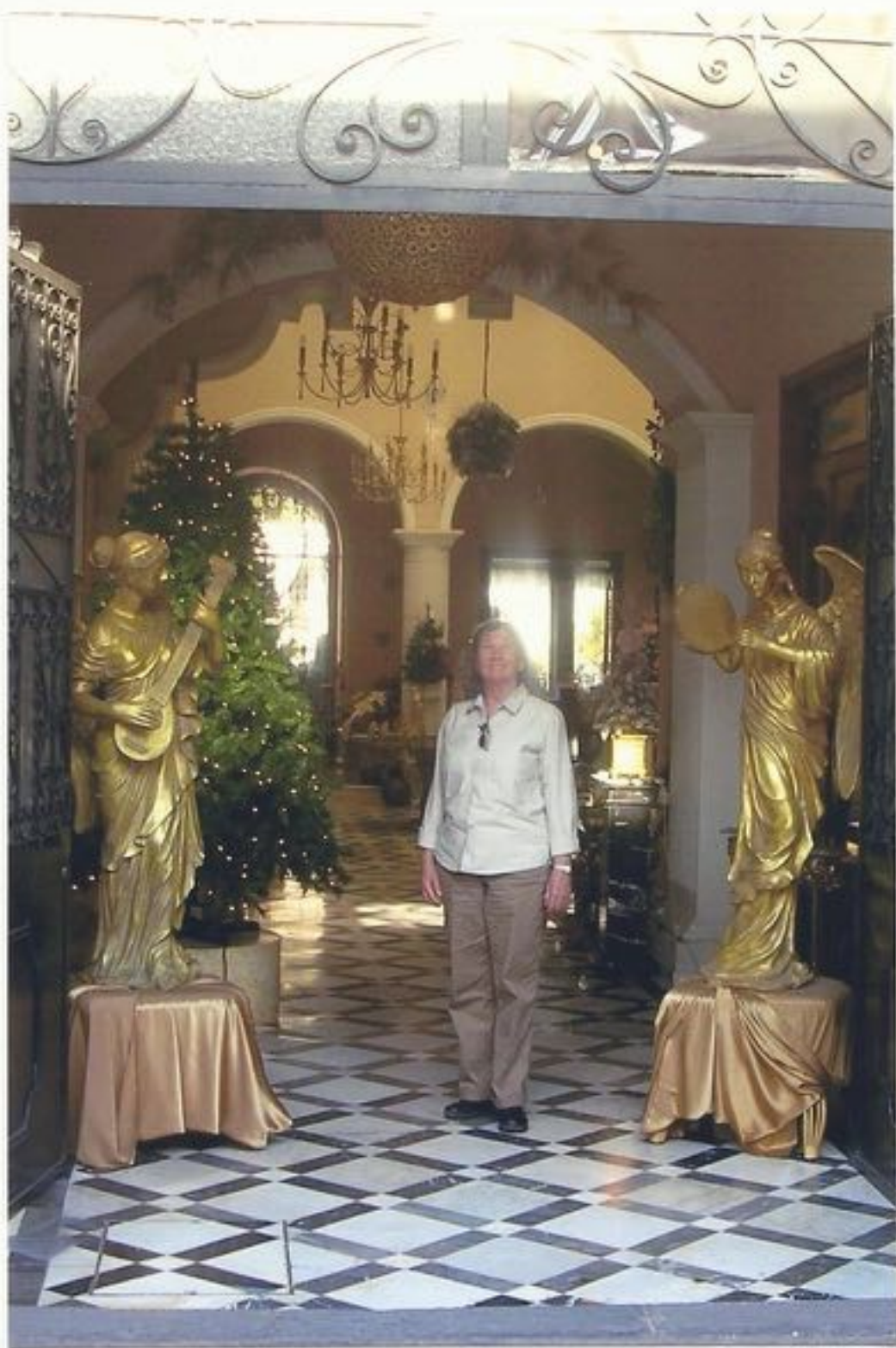






Hotel San Sebastian, San Miguel de Allende, centre of town, about 40 dollars.





**Querétaro** is the place where the independence movement started. It is also the place where the Emperor Maximilian was executed by firing squad. Maximilian was sent by France to seize and plunder that part of the vulnerable new republic that had not been seized by the Americans. Also in Querétaro the present Mexican constitution was drawn up in 1917 after the revolution that toppled the dictator Porfirio Diaz.

A lot of history here, but the fellow in the photo is not a Mexican hero. He is a scupper, one of many in the Museo de Arte, formerly an 18<sup>th</sup> century monastery. Water from the roof flows through his head and out of the pipe in his mouth to land in the patio.







To-day, the story in **Mexico City** is about the rink, claimed to be the biggest rink in the world. Ten big refrigeration units power this rink under the hot Mexican sun. In mid day some melting occurs and the affected areas are marked off with barriers. In the world's biggest city, a lot of people are lining up for a chance to skate.

You have to line up for a ticket that tells you when you can line up again. Then you're in line for a pair of skates, no charge, and they help you onto the ice. Hundreds of helpers in white shirts and hats are present to help you start. A lot of people are just hanging onto the boards and some others are skating rather well, bopping to the music. The bleacher seats fill with people who just want to watch the spectacle.

All this makes us think of our home in the land of snow. Tomorrow, we fly.





