

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Confessions of an Aging Traveler

Eric · Monday, April 25th, 2022

April 19, 2022

Back from San Miguel de Allende. Me-he-co.



Back to the same ol', same ol'. LA, California. Going on 40 years now!

Like most trips, upon your inevitable return, why does it always seem so exactly the same? Like you were never gone at all?

Whether it was nine days or ten, like this trip, or two, three, or sometimes even eight months, like others, when you come "home," it's almost always like — you were never away. Everything is so familiar. Nothing has changed — no matter how rich, how challenging, how eventful, how life-changing, your adventure was.

This trip, with my Indonesian-born family, Surya, my wife, and Exsel, my son, who spent his, I hope memorable, 15th birthday in San Miguel, was far different than the first time I came in 1997, arriving first with my 21-year-old Chicano-American "mentee," Alejandro, from LA's Pico Union barrio, right near where I taught at USC for thirty-one years in South-Central, Los Angeles.

Back then in 1997, SMA was still a low-profile but quickly-growing international ex-pat community mixed with a deeply traditional, local Catholic Mexican one, attracting countless American painters, musicians, and Vietnam vets, but still nothing compared to what it has become today, in terms of wealth, investment, real estate development, and the now exploding and well-heeled, both young parent and ever-expanding international retirement community.



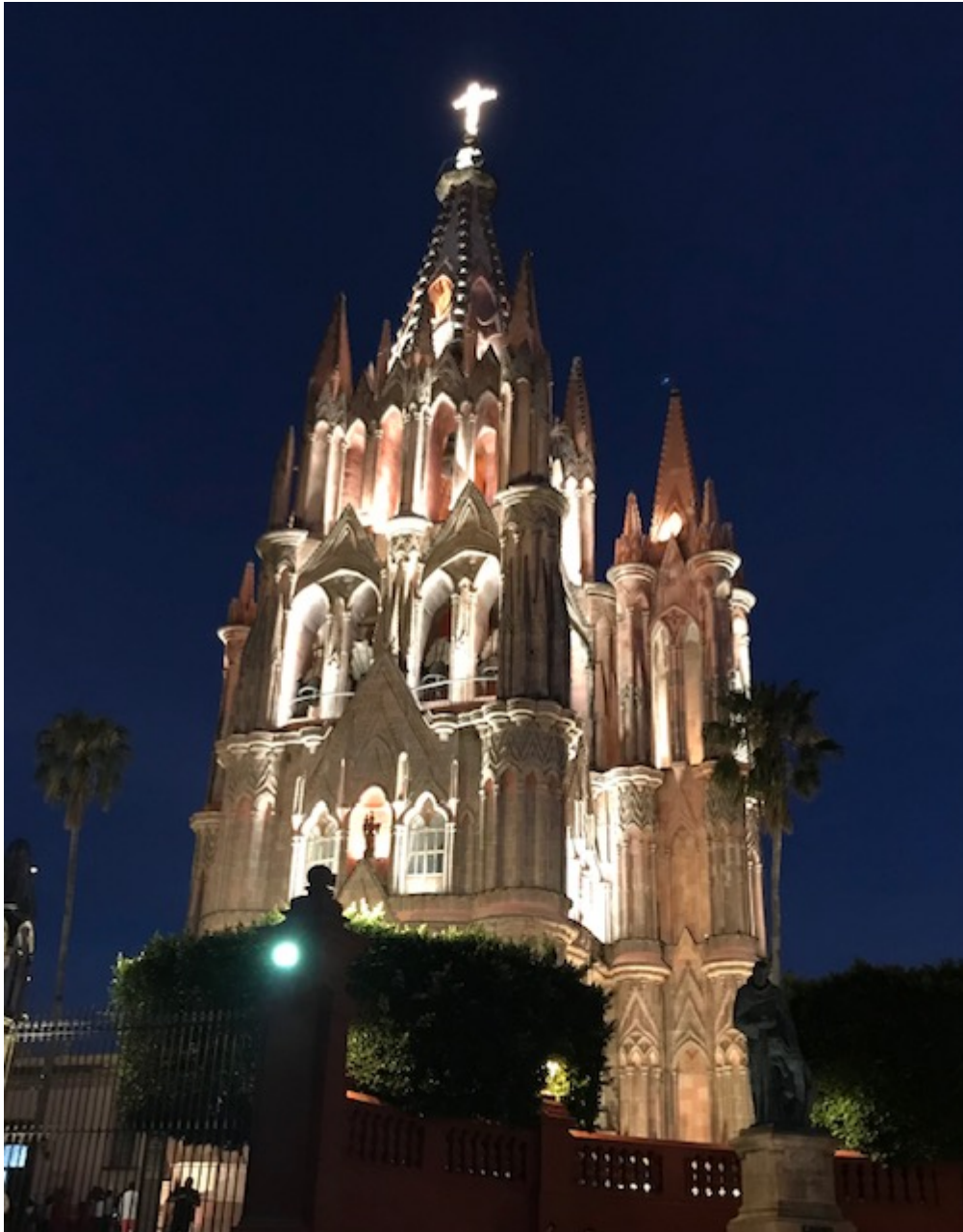
Yet gratifyingly and ever-wonderfully, behind every plain or beautifully and ornately-carved wooden door, still lies an unforeseen courtyard — opening to an architectural secret — of a three hundred year-old local home — still owned by the original family, who has quite profitably turned it into a perfectly-appointed Airbnb, where we, in fact, stayed economically and in gracious comfort, more than a couple of times. Or, equally likely, the home and courtyard have been purchased by a foreign investor who has gracefully turned it into a high-end restaurant, delicious bakery, lamp shop, spa, jewelry shop, or... another gallery, gallery, gallery! There just seems to be so many

artists and galleries in SMA. I wonder how they all survive.

And all this... amidst a city full of 400-year-old, Spanish-colonial Catholic churches, large and small, each with their humble and devout parishioners, each with their daily masses and religious ceremonies, bright and colorful Mexicano rituals, their *tortillas*, *churros*, and *enchiladas*, and their bells, bells, bells, ringing day and night, along their cobblestone streets and adobe-painted walls of yellow, brown, and burnt sienna.



Then, just walk any night into the center of the town, into the main square in front of the shining church, the golden-lit, Baroque-Mexican jewel, La Parroquia. Sit on any one of the many wrought iron benches there, amongst the locals and tourists alike. You will be welcome. There will be no panhandlers or homeless to disturb your peace of mind. Tell me then, if your heart and spirit do not reach up to the sky above, and beyond... to whatever God you believe in. To whatever connects you to the rest of the planet, to the rest of humanity, and to infinity.



“La Parroquia”

This was San Miguel de Allende in 1997, and is still in 2022.

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But as familiar as San Miguel is to itself over these last twenty-five years, it’s exactly this familiarity... that makes me notice... how much *I’ve changed* over the same quarter century. How I’ve aged... become a more careful and timid traveler. No longer the carefree and footloose bachelor “mendicant poet,” as Spalding Gray once called himself in his infamous *Swimming to Cambodia* monologue. How I’m no longer the vagrant/tramp/wanderer improvising my way around the world from town to town, calling “home” wherever I rest my head, as I liked to do throughout my risky and itinerant “e-travels” all around our beautiful and lonely planet for so many years.



The “Manalu-Trules” en San Miguel de Allende, 2022

No, now I’ve been a “family man,” ever since I brought Surya here from Indonesia on August 3, 2001, and Exsel here on May 5, 2015. I became a husband on Valentine’s Day, 2003, and a father on July 6, 2016. Two things I never wanted, or expected, to become. I don’t travel alone anymore. I travel as a threesome. And even that’s been severely tested because... it took Exsel SIX YEARS to get his Green Card... which meant he couldn’t leave the country safely... and be guaranteed re-entry... without “permanent residency.” In fact, he entered America on a simple “tourist visa” in 2015, which quickly expired after two months, and he was actually an “illegal alien” in the eyes of US immigration (USCIS) for almost all of those same six years, who could have been deported at any time! Turns out that my international “risk-taking” was not with banditos in Mexico or drug smugglers in the poppy fields of the “Golden Triangle” of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, but more with the Department of Homeland Security right in my own back yard.

There was one exception in late 2018 where I was invited to teach theater in Moscow in the middle of the white Russian winter.



I went alone for just about two weeks. I flew the family coup and, somehow, they managed just fine without “Pak Trules” (silent “k”, that’s what Exsel and Surya call me at home), for a fortnight. I WhatsApp-ed them from the Moscow hotel, and walked through the heavy falling, wet snow, as I tramped around the beautiful city and crossed golden-lit Moskva River, stood in Red Square next to Lenin’s mausoleum, while having no idea at the time, that in 2022, Mr. Putin would march 100,000 Russian troops into my grandparents’ native Ukraine in a “special military operation.”



Guanajuato 2022

But back to this trip south of the border, and how this one time, vagabond traveler, yours Truly, literally found himself tripping over himself, both on his way —to San Miguel — and back. That is, tripping — physically, psychologically, and metaphorically. Let me explain....

First, I have to let you know... that even in the past... that every time, before an international trip... to “parts unknown”... I’ve worried and fretted. It’s who I am. I’m a life-long worrier. It comes in the family. My father was also an expert and life-long worrier. The name of his C-47 plane, of which he was sergeant/mechanic-in-charge during WW2, was “The Worry Wart.” The name was painted on the side of the fuselage. “Worry Wart.” It meant my father worried about absolutely everything that could go wrong with the plane... so nothing would... keeping the crew worry-free... or at least as much as a crew could be in the middle of a world war.

I inherited the worry gene from my dad. Along with his nightmares. Every night, I wake up in extreme anxiety. On the verge of annihilation. Destruction pending doom and disaster. From nightmares as vivid as hell. Then just as quickly, they’re lost and forgotten by morning’s consciousness. Except... they’re translated into daytime... worry. “I don’t have enough money to retire on.” “My son will be deported.” “My cancer will come back.” “My wife will leave me.” Translated to travel: “I don’t have the right documents.” “I’ll miss my plane.” “I’ll get sick over there.” “I’ll never get home.” You get the point. I’m a worrier.

Then once I get on the plane... forgetaboutit. I’m in the flow. I’m Mr. Improvisation. No plans. No worries. “No reservations.”

So naturally, going to San Miguel, my first international family trip with Exsel and Surya — all three of us together — for the first time ever — was a worry ordeal.

And then... the universe cooperated.



You see, we were first supposed to go during Exsel's Christmas break. We had the plane booked, the Airbnbs booked, our friends of friends in Mexico informed, we were ready to go on New Year's Day, 2022. Then... on December 24, 2021, Ho Ho Ho!

I test positive for Covid. But, hell... we're still going. I'll just fly back from San Miguel to Tijuana, and Surya will pick me up there — or I'll walk across the border and we'll drive back from San Ysidro, just south of San Diego on the American side of the border.

But then... on December 29, Surya also... tests positive. Happy New Year!

Exsel can't pick us up in TJ. Or in San Ysidro. We can't infect our dogsitter with Covid....

We cancel.

And reluctantly, re-schedule for Easter Break. April 7-17.

I worry some more. But I get new house/dogsitters. I buy new plane tickets, even though I still haven't gotten the refund from the first cancelled AeroMexico flight.

And then... like Chicken Little... I wait for the sky to fall.... again.

But... it doesn't.

On April 7, we Uber to LAX, and we take off for Mexico City... on time.

We arrive... on time.



Then... we sit on the plane... before we deboard... for almost an hour!

We have to take a shuttle bus from the plane to the terminal. We can't get on the first shuttle. It's full. We're held back for the next one.

I'm the third person on the empty shuttle. I step up... and collapse to my knees. I can't make the step up. My legs are too weak.

I'm bending there on the floor of the bus, seemingly praying, on both knees, with my suitcase in front of me and my backpack behind me.

I think I've made a "cool move" by not falling flat on my face and not losing my four front teeth, but Exsel runs up behind me.

"You ok, Pak Trules?"

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, trying to get up.

He lifts me up by one arm. Other passengers give me a wide berth, front and back. I get up as gracefully as I can, stow my suitcase on the flat rack nearby, and I take a seat.

I say to myself, “I’m rusty, man! I’m 74 years old. I’ve haven’t traveled in years.”



The shuttle gets us to the terminal. We race through the Mexico City airport, pulling our trolley carts behind us, with our backpacks bouncing on our backs, only to discover that I’ve lost one of our three boarding passes for the connecting flight to Leon, the closest town to San Miguel de Allende.

I keep taking all three of our passports in and out of my iPad shoulder bag for every electronic airport baggage check we go through. Shoes off, belt off, backpack off. I have a titanium right hip, a metal fused thoracic spine. I keep setting off the sensors every time I go through. I’ve packed laundry soap into a too-large plastic pill container. The TPA inspectors insist on searching both my trolley carry-on and backpack.

Boy, am I rusty!

We race to the connecting gate. I lead the way.

“Hurry up, you guys!”

Nobody’s there. The gate’s empty.

We’ve missed our flight.

I’ve never missed a flight in my life.

Now I have.

I never collapsed into prayer position stepping onto a shuttle bus.

Now I have.

I've never traveled at 74 years old.

Now I have.

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I go to Customer Service and rebook the connecting flight to Leon.

It's only two hours later. We're lucky.

The only problem is we miss the San Miguel city tour I booked immediately after our Airbnb check in, and our lunch that I booked with John, my first friend of a friend, who was supposed to meet us at La Parroquia's Jardin right after our 1:30 tour.

Two strikes against the aging traveler, and we haven't even gotten to San Miguel. Over-ambitious, man. Rusty!

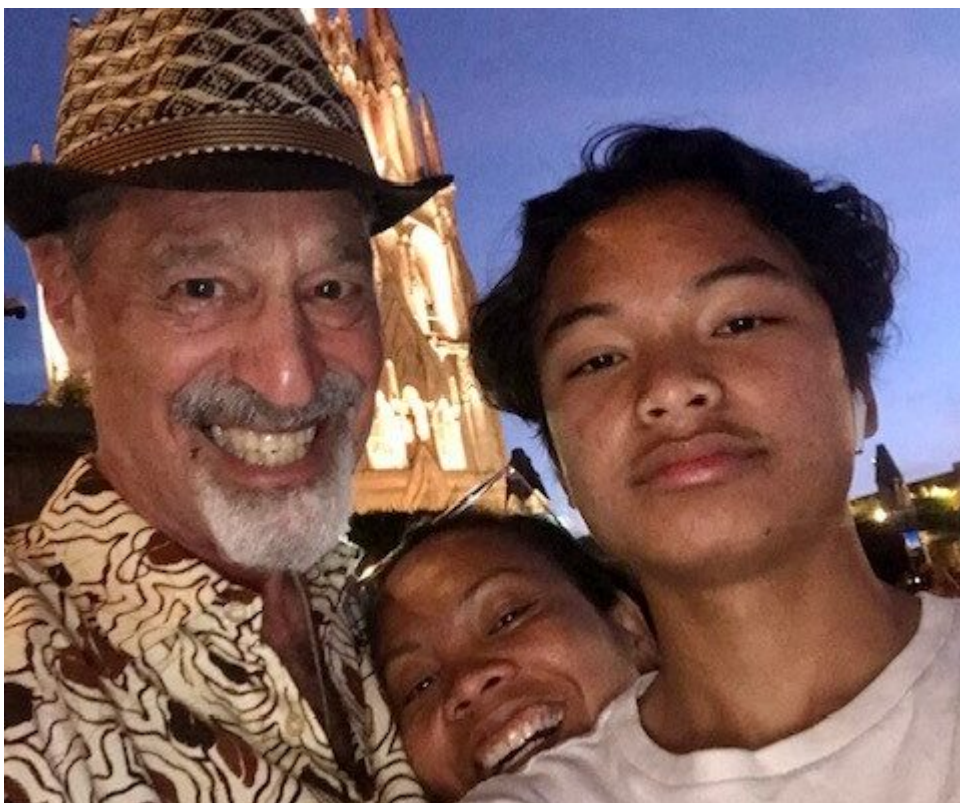


San Miguel is beautiful. From the minute we check in at our first Airbnb, a traditional, high, red brick-ceilinged, second-floor loft in a beautifully-planted and Mexican art-decorated cobblestone courtyard, with every colorful Mexican-tiled detail and each thoughtful amenity in place, I know “I’m home.” In fact, when I post my first Facebook photos (I admit, I love to share my travels), that’s what my “Friends” say. “You look right at home.” “When are you moving?” “Are you ever coming back to LA?”



I'd like to answer: "Done deal. We're not coming back."

My new SMA friend, John, rents a 1-bedroom here right in the center of town for \$300/month. He knows everything about the town; he's been here twenty years. After a few years, *gringos* can get permanent residency, free health care, you don't need a car, things cost a fraction of what they do in LA. There are bi-lingual, international schools with tons of American, English-speaking kids, everything here has been groomed and honed for an easy ex-pat transition: rental, real estate purchase, health care, child-rearing... why not just take the leap?



Well, as I said before, I'm a threesome now. There are two other family members to consider, Surya and Exsel. Surya likes her easy ability to get a job in LA. She couldn't work in a restaurant in San Miguel, she doesn't speak Spanish. And although she'd jump right in to learn, she's just "not ready" to jump across the border right now.

And Exsel? He says, "Sure, Pak Trules, move to Mexico. Just wait until I graduate high school." Meaning... he likes Eagle Rock High School, and his friends there, right where he is. He doesn't want to move either.



So I have to consciously rear my horses — and stop all my natural urges and instincts — to interview every *gringo* I meet — to grill them on their transition. Their move across *de border*. To assemble a working portfolio on all the things I mention above.

It's very hard for me to do. To rear myself in. But... I do.

And instead, I decide to just to enjoy the trip. The visit. We even take another short, two-day jaunt to Guanajuato, a nearby, more Mexican-tourist-friendly town, just about ninety minutes away. Guanajuato is actually the state capital, with the renowned international university, where we stay in another Airbnb loft in a winding back alley in the center of the city, where we are serenaded by a troupe of *callejoneada* (student *mariachis*), seven times a night, every thirty minutes on the half hour! Very funny and very charming. At least for two nights!



We luxury bus it back to San Miguel for \$19 for the three of us, and check into another local family-owned, five star Airbnb. This one is a whole traditional-style San Miguel house, 2 floors, two bedrooms upstairs, well-stocked kitchen, comfortable living room & dining room, wet bar downstairs, hand-painted flower-mural walls, air-con. Two amenity-stocked bathrooms. How much? \$60/night! A three-minute cobblestoned walk to La Parroquia and the town square, all the fancy restaurants, all the local churches, street food, mangos, avocados, liquor stores. Surya gets a facial and massage for \$30. Exsel gets the same for his 15th birthday. Ole!

Me? I'm tired. My legs hurt all the time. 24/7. Just like at home. There are no magical elixirs in San Miguel that will change that. I've had this neuropathic pain in my knees and shins ever since 2018 that no battery of doctors has been able to diagnose or treat successfully. They all contradict one another, and not one's treatment has made a dent of difference. It's been frustrating and chronically painful. The best relief is... distraction. Engaging my mind elsewhere. So... this trip is good. Even worry is good. Anything but — being aware of the pain.

But it doesn't make me much of a hiker or long walker. Sometimes Surya and Exsel will go

exploring on their own. And I haven't scheduled many "activities" for us "to do" once we've arrive. For me, that's okay. I'm perfectly fine soaking up the atmosphere, and taking short walks through the colorful streets. That's what I travel for — to be in a different culture. To see and absorb the people, the language, the sights, sounds, smells, food, the music, dancing, the religion. But Surya and Exsel, perhaps they need something more.

"Next time," Surya says for the first time, "I think I will do some of the planning."



At least, luckily, and unknown to me before we came, we've arrived during "Semana Santa," The Week of the Saints, the holy week of Easter rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. It's totally wonderful, moving, and amazing. Especially for Surya, who has become a practicing Protestant again of late.

Not only is the whole Catholic city of San Miguel transformed by the story of Mary and Jesus, but thousands of people from all over central Mexico come flocking into SMA to see and share the week. It begins with "Viernes de Dolores," Friday of Tears, when the town recreates Mother Mary crying for the loss of her Son. And when many many of the private homeowners of San Miguel

decorate their homes and open up their courtyards with elaborate religious installations, creating altars to Christ, sometimes with music like Gregorian chant, and offering sweet ices and food treats for as many visitors who want to come. It is a truly beautiful and memorable day of worship and ceremony. One of a kind in all the world.

Look at some of the photos:











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Eventually, as all trips, visits, adventures, and mis-adventures do.... our journey to San Miguel must end, and we must return...to LA.

...which we do... mostly uneventfully...

...with no missed connections... no lost boarding passes... and no more trips onto shuttle busses. Although I do still worry as much as possible.



I realize that “in the end...

“...the love you take....”

Nope. Wrong song book!

I realize, that although old Pak Trules may not be quite as sprite and spry on his feet as he once was, and although he (I) may every once and a while... miss a plane connection... or fall to my knees in prayer on a connecting shuttle bus at an airport...

Let’s hope that this is not my last international trip.

Even if I am heading to the hospital in two days for a little surgical procedure to hopefully help out my aching knees and shins,

And even if... I have to fly on six legs — including four of my wife’s and son’s, in addition to the two of my own

— from now on....



May the force (of life) be with you!

-Señor (South of the Border) Trules



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[John Morrow](#), our bohemian and artful new friend in SMA



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