



Fiesta de Vida: My First Year in Mexico

by Darlene Carucci



Day 9 of the Festival of the Virgin, Photograph by Darlene Carucci

I had visions of what my move to Puerto Vallarta would – and would not – include.

Sun, surf, exploration and adventure topped my list and have all been realized. Snow, cold, gray and darkness were excluded and happily not missed.

But who knew that my number one time investment would be fiestas?

Now, we as Americans have our holidays that we embrace and celebrate. We've got great big ones like Christmas and New Year's, Thanksgiving, and Halloween; and smaller ones like St. Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day. But we're left behind in the celebration department when compared to Mexico.

I've now been here four months and have nearly lost track of the holidays we've celebrated. It's been a four-month blur of festivals and food and drink and music... strung together with small little gaps for recovery and discipline.

These fiestas are not simply observed for one day. Oh no. The President himself got so excited one week prior to the Independence Day/Bicentennial holiday that a national proclamation was declared, making this a 3-day work reprieve, blended into the weekend, for an all out 5-day celebration! The parents from my daughter's school were contacted last minute to change the monthly calendar, with apologies and promises that this would not happen again for 200 years.

This amazing celebration took place during the high-heat season of September. It was commemorated with two parades, the first being a charro (cowboy) parade of formal dress and presentation, and a second all-out marching band, military, float and school processional parade.

In between the parades were park concerts, carnival rides, mariachi bands, clowns, mimes, and endless amounts of extraordinary home-cooked, hand-prepared food.

The climax was thousands of people in the square at 11:00 p.m., waiting for El Grito (the Greeter) to raise his hands and shout "Viva Mexico," at which time the greeting is returned, the bells ring, tequila is toasted and fireworks soar! Think New Year's Eve in Times Square meets Fourth of July in Hyannis Harbor!

And I thought a celebration of the end of rainy season was something to get excited about.

No sooner did we all recover from this and get back on track, when it was time to get busy discussing and planning Halloween, which has been conveniently strung together with Day of the Angels and Day of the Dead. Another five-day celebration!

These events would bring us out of October and right into November. Though this holiday has more religious undertones, it is a feast on a grand scale. Beautiful candies, cakes and breads are prepared exclusively for this holiday.

Food vendors are out in a vengeance on every corner, sabotaging my minimal gym progress. Corita, the underworld bride, smiles at me mockingly on every block as if to say, "Oh no you don't!"

We spent Halloween night handing out treats to the children while seated at the beach bars, sipping margaritas on a balmy 80-degree, moonlit evening.

Amusingly, the costumed children shout, "Halloweeeeeeeeen!" and not "Trick or treat," excitedly embracing this increasingly popular Americanized tradition.

Pacing myself, I saved some energy so as not miss the opportunity to spend the entire next day touring and paying tribute to numerous alters honoring those who were here and have left before us.



Day of the Dead 2010 Photograph by Darlene Carucci

These elaborate, lovingly thoughtful presentations are emotional and humbling. To stop and honor those who were loved and are gone is beautiful. To see their photographs, their faces, favorite foods, and personal belongings like a pair of glasses or toy, all artistically displayed upon a colorful alter is quite poignant.

There is much tradition and symbolism in the colors, flowers and incense chosen for these dedications. These altars can be found in storefronts, home fronts, public buildings and hotels. I could not get enough of this.

After a day of dragging my daughter around in the sweltering heat, with short breaks for our favorite popsicles, or a beer for me and a soda for her, we compromised. I sacrificed the observance of the graveyard vigils for a market square pagan drumming parade and consumption of some of the most delicious street vendor food I've eaten.

November arrived with the promise of routine and discipline. I needed to get back on my planned vacation of structured reading, writing, sunning, exercising, and exploring. But, not to be outdone by October, November had two school holidays to commemorate.

Mid-November brought Day of Revolution, not to be confused with Independence Day. This Monday, tied into the weekend holiday, was a centennial event, observed (gratefully) on a smaller scale of celebration and feasting. Besides, we needed to bank some calories because the American School my daughter attends also observes Thanksgiving.

Like good Americans abroad, we chose to spend Thanksgiving at the beach nibbling on chips and salsa. I would have had a turkey taco if available. After all of the many exhausting Thanksgiving Day dinners I have cooked and cleaned up after over the years, I was internally gloating that I had this opportunity to opt out.



Desserts from Day 7 of The Festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 2010
Photograph by Darlene Carucci

Amazingly, December arrived with even more fiestas! December 1st marked the beginning of the 12-day religious festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe. How lucky for us that the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe is conveniently located in the center of Puerto Vallarta, just blocks from our home.

The Virgin is Mexico's most adored icon, and she is honored with a pilgrimage/processional to the Cathedral.

These beautiful processions, by various neighborhoods, towns, organizations, workplaces, schools, hotels, etc., are observed with marching bands, mariachi, native tribal dancing, singing, candle holding and presentations of offerings. All sing the same beautiful and joyous hymn, La Gualupana. I would wake up each morning humming this tune!

Each group wore their own unique clothing or shirts and designed their own individual floats, complete with a live Madonna. This is an honor, and lucky is the young girl chosen to be the Virgin and dressed in elaborate robes.

This amazing cultural event took place each weekday evening from 5:00 p.m. until the last group arrived, in miles-long processions from all over the city, generally around 10 p.m., at which time the dinner hour would begin. We really needed to pace ourselves here.

Standing as a spectator watching the joy of these participating people was magical. To see mothers and fathers pushing carriages, carrying babies, families, young and old with such pride and joy from a country with so little was transforming! This is what Christmas is about. It's the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It's spiritual and non-commercial.

The Cathedral where this took place is what drew me to Puerto Vallarta. Last spring, I looked up at the Virgin's crown and promised I would be back. And here I am.

There are those rare "Wow, I did it!" moments. For me, it was on a Saturday night when I stood on the beachfront of the Malecon with the warm breeze of the ocean on my back, illuminated by the pirate ship fireworks.

There were pilgrims in the foreground, the church bells pealing to recognize the arrival of another new group of pilgrims, and a guest appearance by a Californian Bag Pipers band referred to as the Escoces next to me under the banner draped columns of the amphitheater of Los Arcos. The band was performing a beautiful rendition of Amazing Grace.

I stood there in wonderment, grinning with tears in my eyes as I looked up at that crown and said thank you. If I could choose to adopt one Mexican holiday to celebrate when I return home, this would be it. Perhaps I'll start a movement!



Darlene Carucci left her home in Harwich Port to seek adventure abroad. She and her youngest daughter are living in Puerto Vallarta for the year, soaking up the sun and the culture of Mexico. They plan to return to the Cape in June. Maybe.