James Rotz — International Travel Report — Destination: Mexico City

My international experience initially began with the intentions of travelling through several important areas in Mexico. I planned to begin in Monterrey, then Mexico City, and end in Tulum. My intentions were to gain a greater understanding of Mexico and its rich history. Many interesting civilizations once inhabited the country — Olmecs, Zapotecs, Teotihuacanos, Mayans, Toltecs, and Aztecs, and I was interested in the lasting influences of these cultures and the effects of Spanish colonization.

In order to investigate and photograph in Mexico, I planned to follow my artistic interests in how humans use and sculpt the environment for their needs and desired purposes. With my travel route in mind, I intended to examine the archaeological sites in comparison to the contemporary landscape.

Unfortunately, there has been a tremendous increase in drug related violence between the Mexican drug cartels, police, and military. Also, this violence and warfare has extended into the general public. Therefore, I was not able to travel freely throughout Mexico. Travel was especially dangerous in the northern states near the US-Mexico border. While I was in Mexico, there was an especially gruesome news story in which eight severed heads were left in pairs at four different points on the main north-south and east-west roads in Durango. The incident took place over 300 miles away, but it was still unnerving to be in a country that was suffering from such extreme violence on a regular basis.

During my stay, I had the opportunity to talk with many travelers from other Mexican states. It was surprising to learn how many had travelled to Mexico City on vacation to escape the drug-related violence. Mexico City continues to be unaffected by the drug-related warfare and that was the one reason why I stayed solely in the city for the duration of my stay.

Being one of the world’s most densely populated cities, Mexico City was initially overwhelming. I used my first few days to become oriented within the city. The underground rail system was an amazing means of traversing the city and exploring its various neighborhoods/suburbs. I was surprised to learn that it is the second most used rail system behind New York City and it is the cheapest in the world at under 30¢ per ride.

The rail system was one of my first experiences that revealed the differences in consumerism between the US and Mexico. At each underground station, there are a multitude of stores. Unlike the US, there are very few retail chain stores not only in the stations, but throughout the city. There is also a proliferation of street vendors. It was interesting to see how vital this aspect of Mexican culture is as reflected in the artwork housed in the National Anthropology Museum. There I saw many murals depicting market scenes with street vendors.

My experiences in various markets allowed me to see how children are included in everyday life. Many street vendors and store operators would have their children in the store and not secluded away at home or in daycare. This seemed at odds with most of my experiences in the US where upon entering a store, restaurant, or café with my children I am greeted with looks of disdain.
Another interesting observation was the frequency that I witnessed Mexican men solely caring for and traveling with their infants.

The city also has a rich history artistically, architecturally, and archaeologically. I felt very fortunate to experience Mexico’s National Anthropology Museum. It was a very informative experience for me. There I was able to get a complete overview of Mexico’s indigenous cultures. It was equally interesting to see how the museum addressed the issue of colonization. It was handled with surprising clarity and candor. There were many dioramas that included elements from the indigenous culture and the colonizer. The colonizer often being represented in the form of Catholic icons – usually the Virgin Mary or Jesus. The dioramas were presented in a neutral manner without any criticism of the colonizer. From this information and my observations in the city, I inferred that the colonialist influences were integrated within the culture.

The multitude of churches was a surprising aspect of urban life. I was aware of Mexico’s religious heritage, but I was not aware of its contemporary prevalence. I stayed in a hotel that was near Mexico City’s Zocalo (or Plaza de la Constitucion), one of the largest public squares in the world. Located in the Zocalo is the Metropolitan Cathedral. This is one of the most revered sites in Mexico City. A second major draw for tourists is the Temple Mayor. This temple is left over from the destruction of Tenochtitlan in 1521. It was the capital of the Aztec empire. Both sites seemed to be equally toured by large amounts of people that held both in what seemed to be equal regard. It was interesting to watch as people entered the cathedral to experience a service or pray at one of the many chapels and others receive blessing from people of Aztec heritage in traditional-looking Aztec garb.

I traveled to Teotihuacan to visit the pyramids. The site is comprised of two pyramids, the Pyramid of the Moon and the Pyramid of the Sun, and many lesser temples and smaller structures. I was surprised to see and hear how Mexican travelers revered the archaeological site. Upon climbing the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, most if not all visitors made their way to touch the center of the pyramid that was once thought to be the center of the universe. It was interesting to see this act. It was a means of acknowledging the importance of their heritage. It connected them physically, touching the point at the center of the universe, and spiritually with their ancestors.
My experience in Mexico City was everything I could have hoped for: fascinating, engaging, and challenging. It was an experience that I will remember for the rest of my life and will be a constant source of inspiration. Although I am still processing the experience, I feel it has left me with a greater understanding of myself as an artist and a greater understanding of the interplay between history and culture. I would like to thank the School of Art and Design and the Smucker-Wagstaffs for their generous support that made this trip possible.
inside the Metropolitan Cathedral

Pyramid of the Sun
Pyramid of the Sun

Pyramid of the Moon