

Enchanting ENSENADA

Article and photos by Emily Fagan #99408

When we first arrived in Ensenada, a vibrant, coastal Mexican city 70 miles south of San Diego, my husband Mark and I were happily overwhelmed by the sights and smells of this energetic town. We had no idea what to expect when traveling in Mexico, and what a delight Ensenada turned out to be.

As soon as we crossed the Mexican border in Tijuana, there was no doubt that we had left the United States behind. Dirty, grubby and resembling the "bad parts of town" in the big American cities we both grew up in, we were intimidated at first to see road signs and billboards only in Spanish. Caught up in traffic and surrounded by poverty, we were a little taken aback.

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Punta Morro ocean view.

Another World

However, once we got through Tijuana and onto the coastal highway, we soared over pretty hills, swept past beautiful ocean views and felt as though we had suddenly been transported to another world. Much less populated than the state of California to the north, we noticed the grass was truly greener, the housing was much less dense and, in a strange way, we felt we were seeing what coastal California was like 50 years ago.

We arrived in the center of Ensenada (which means “cove” in Spanish) to find that it is not only a university town but is also the heart of Mexico’s wine-growing region. Sporting a youthful vibe, it is a city that oozes spirit. Everything in Ensenada radiates out from its main plaza, a massive open area on the waterfront that is marked by three enormous bronze sculpted heads and a towering Mexican flag.

This plaza is filled with activity most weekends and many weekday nights. Street performers and festivals

of all kinds take place there. Mexican culture is truly exuberant, far more outgoing and convivial than the more staid American culture to the north, and music is the language shared by all. Mexicans are raised singing and everyone knows all the words to all the folk songs and Mariachi tunes that dominate their social gatherings. More often than not, music pours forth from Ensenada’s town square every night.

If the town plaza is easy to locate at night by the jubilant sound of a band playing, the huge Mexican flag makes an ideal landmark during the day. It is visible from all over town, so we found it nearly impossible to get lost in Ensenada.

One morning, we witnessed a solemn and respectful celebration going on in the town plaza in front of the sculpted head of Miguel Hidalgo. Punctuated by a marching band, a series of speeches and much pomp and circumstance, we discovered that this event was honoring Miguel Hidalgo’s birthday. But who was he?

Priest Miguel Hidalgo

The priest Miguel Hidalgo is considered to be the father of Mexico, because he initiated the country’s fight for independence from Spain in 1810. Trying to understand Mexico’s chaotic history a little better, we soon learned that over the years, Mexico has had to establish sovereignty not just from the Spanish, but from the French, and in spirit, from the Roman Catholic church as well.

Fifty years after Hidalgo’s death, in 1861, Benito Juarez became Mexico’s first and only indigenous president. The strong features of his huge sculpted head in the center of town reveal the determination it must have taken for him to wrestle Mexico from the control of the Catholic church and to begin a crusade for democracy and equal rights for Mexico’s huge indigenous population.

Gringo Gulch

Leaving these historic landmarks behind, an easy stroll from the town



Wine barrels at the Adobe Guadalupe winery.

plaza took us to Gringo Gulch. This is a series of red brick walking streets and sidewalks that are filled with vendors hawking tourist goodies of all kinds. Much more interesting than the keepsakes, though, were the snippets of conversation we had with many of the vendors as we walked. We found that their good-natured efforts to get us to buy stuff were always easily discouraged with a smiling “No, thanks.” Yet, if we took the time to chat with them, they were eager to practice their English and they were willing to share something of themselves and their lives with us.

Down on the waterfront, we wandered along the Malecón (boardwalk) that looks out over the fishing fleet. This is a great area for photo ops and for soaking in the non-stop action of this busy port. Walking all the way to the northwest end, we came to the enormous fish market. This is a bustling place each morning as the fishermen bring in their catch, and fish of every possible description are laid out on ice. From dorado (mahi-mahi) to octopus to marlin, all the fish of the Pacific are here, presented in rows and ready for the fillet knife. Around the perimeter of the fish market are lots of little fish restaurants. Delicious fish tacos can be found at every one!



Guadalupe Valley Vineyards

One of the biggest tourist draws in the area is the Guadalupe Valley, the center of Mexico’s wine country. Similar to California, the climate in this valley is ideal for growing grapes, and wineries dot the entire countryside. Most wineries offer wine tastings and tours. L.A. Cetto is one of Mexico’s biggest vineyards, and we enjoyed a fabulous guided tour of their facility one afternoon. Given in both English and Spanish, we learned that this area was rich with Russian immigrants a century ago, and some brought cuttings from their favorite grape vines back home.

L.A. Cetto has a beautiful picnic area, and, after our tour, we picked

up a baguette, some lunch meat and a bottle of the award-winning Petit Syrah in their gift shop and enjoyed a delightful afternoon sitting under the grape arbor. Surrounded by both Mexican and American tourists, we enjoyed listening to the happy Spanish and English chatter of vacationers all around us.

At the opposite end of the winery spectrum, we found the boutique Adobe Guadalupe vineyard to be utterly charming. Established by an American woman in honor of her son who had died in a car accident, all the wines there are named for archangels. From Gabriel to Miguel, we loved each of their wines. This vineyard is intimate and boasts gorgeous grounds

as well as a bed and breakfast hotel where guests can stay and relax in the beautiful and bucolic setting.

La Bufadora

On another day, we ventured out to La Bufadora, a wonderful blow hole where the water sprays a hundred feet or so in the air. Locals have created quite a tourist spectacle out of this natural phenomenon, and we waded through rows of vendors’ booths to get to the action at the water’s edge. There, in addition to the huge blasts of spray in the air, we watched a street performer, dressed in the fantastic attire of the ancient Maya, playing the flute. His outfit included a feather headdress and jingling shells on his shins!

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Seeing the Sights

Back in the busy streets of Ensenada, we watched a steady stream of horses and buggies going past. Ensenada loves its tourists, and these brightly painted buggies take folks all over town in style. For those that want an even crazier ride, there is a little “train” that drives around town. Complete with a smiley face painted on the engine car, tourists pile into this open-air ride and get a wonderful tour of the sights.

Rivera Cultural Center

One of our favorite sights was the Rivera Cultural Center. Located in a huge, historic white building just southeast of the town plaza, this building is a museum that houses wonderful wall frescoes throughout. Lots of ceramic tiles decorate the outer walls as well, including paintings of some of Baja California’s most famous mission churches and quotations from the world’s greatest thinkers. All in Spanish, we were amused to see John F. Kennedy, as well as Confucius, quoted in several places.

Birthplace of Margaritas

Philosophical quotes aside, perhaps the best thing in the Riviera Cultural Center is the little bar tucked in the



back. This bar is touted as the birthplace of the Margarita, and they sure know how to make a good one. As the story goes, in the late 1940s, when the building was owned by one Margarita Plant, she asked her bartender to create a drink that would make Mexico’s native Tequila acceptable to her fussy palate. To this day, the bartenders here follow the simple recipe her bartender, Sr. Negrete, devised: Squeeze the juice of several limes into a large glass and add a healthy dose of both tequila and controy. Then line the rim of the glass with lime juice and salt. Yum! Just beware—they go down way too easily! We kept having to remind

ourselves of the warning we had seen on t-shirts in the gift shops on Gringo Gulch: “One Tequila, Two Tequila, Three Tequila, Floor!”

Statue of Cuatehmoc

Outside the Cultural Center is a series of gardens decorated with stone sculptures. Most fascinating to us was the exotic statue of Cuatehmoc, the last king of the Aztecs, dressed in an elaborate headdress and warrior garb. It is hard to imagine what it was like for the thousands of Aztecs that saw their city destroyed and rebuilt as Mexico City when the Spanish arrived in 1520. But a look at this rendition of the young Aztec king gives pause for thought. Assuming the throne at age 18, after his uncle Montezuma died, he fought with valor but was ultimately deceived and killed at age 25 by the ruthless Spaniard Hernán Cortés.

The Best Tacos

A block or two southeast of the Cultural Center, on the same main street, we found the best beef tacos we have tasted anywhere in Mexico. Located in a group of small taco restaurants on the ocean side of the street, Las Brisas Taquería has several red Coca-Cola umbrellas out front and lots of stools lined up against the white countertops inside. Owner Norma opened this restaurant over 20 years ago, and her delicious (and secret) recipe for marinating her beef has kept happy patrons

The Newport-Ensenada sailboat race.



returning ever since. Priced at just over a dollar a taco, each one is served with a dozen condiments you can add to enhance the flavor even more. We loved her tacos so much that on a recent three-week visit to Ensenada, we went there almost every night! If you go, please say “hello” to Norma for us.

Major Events

Over the years, we have been lucky to witness several of the major events that put Ensenada on the map. Dozens of sailboats race from Newport, California, to Ensenada every spring, and off-road desert road racers take to the rough Baja terrain twice a year in the Baja 500 and Baja 1,000 events. Closer to our hearts, though, is the Rosarito-Ensenada bicycle race. We also discovered that Ensenada has a very active running community, sponsoring popular 5k and 10k races every few weeks.

Our favorite event was not a race at all, however. It was Carnival, the week-long Mexican equivalent to Mardi Gras, where everyone blows off steam prior to Lent. From an hours-long parade with floats, dancers and bands, to parties in the town plaza every night, this is a huge and fun event. If you are partial to more quiet thrills, like we are, Carnival is best enjoyed in small doses, but it is something not to be missed.

Beautiful Country

All together, we have spent over three years traveling throughout Mexico. It is a colorful and friendly country that offers a warm, laid-back and fascinating change from the hurried, and often frantic, culture we call our own. Returning to Ensenada recently, after all those years further south where we had fallen in love with the beautiful colonial cities of central Mexico, the exotic ancient Mayan ruins in southern Mexico, and the lively beach towns along the Pacific coast, we were amazed to find that Ensenada remains one of our favorite places in the whole country. It is an easy drive from San Diego, and is a trip very well worth taking. 🇲🇽



Chapter 8 Mexican Connection is headed for Ensenada, Mexico, February 3, 2014. For more information about this rally, or other Chapter 8 rallies, see page 45 or visit www.mexicanconnection08.com



For more stories from our seven months in Ensenada, visit our website: www.roadlesstraveled.us



Emily and Mark Fagan #99408 have traveled full-time since 2007. Starting out in a 27-foot travel trailer, they moved up to a 36-foot fifth-wheel, and for two-and-a-half years boondocked their way across most of the Western and Southern states. Seeking warmer winter destinations, they took their voyaging lifestyle to the sea and now alternate between sailing and RVing. You can follow their adventures at www.roadlesstraveled.us.

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