

by Nancy Gerlach

Feliz Navidad!

It hardly seems possible that another holiday season is upon us, but it is. I've got to admit it's hard to get into the spirit without cold temperatures and some snow, but here in Mexico the weather is like Christmas in Southern California. The Mexicans, however, are in the Christmas spirit. Around the first of December, real pine Christmas trees showed up at the stores (no lots selling trees here) with prices starting at \$40 US. The Mexicans lined up to buy them even though the trees were still tied up so you couldn't see how full they were. All the trees were sold in a couple of weeks, and like many things in Mexico, you'd better buy it when you see it, because they weren't restocked. One thing we will miss about the holidays in New Mexico, aside from the great traditional food, is the luminaria walk in Old Town on Christmas Eve. That was always special for us.



A produce market in Progreso

We are still learning about life here in Mexico. Many things are similar and familiar, while others are different or "a little off." Shopping, for instance, can be a challenge. We couldn't find flour tortillas for months and assumed that—since wheat isn't grown in this area—corn was going to be it. One day we saw them in a store near the packaged bread (which we don't routinely buy) and were so excited about our find. I looked in another store and realized that's where flour tortillas were always stocked, not in the area with the corn tortillas, and that all the grocery stores carried them. I couldn't find cornstarch anywhere and since stores carry corn everything—including corn ice cream—it was driving me crazy. A friend overheard me complaining, and said of course the stores have it, and showed me the box. Well, the stores not only have cornstarch, they have shelves and shelves of the stuff. It's labeled for atole (which I think of as a cornmeal for a cereal or drink), and it comes in many flavors like chocolate, strawberry, and cajeta. I sure don't think of drinking flavored cornstarch, so I didn't look too closely at the box. Apparently the Mexicans love it, judging from the amount of it on the shelves. With all the big shopping plazas in Merida (including one with a large ice skating rink in the center) with Costco, Sam's, Sears, and Walmart as well as the Mexican department stores, you can pretty much find everything. Just takes a lot of shopping time and then remembering where you saw things.



Chelem

The plaza in

We are still trying to figure out what it costs to live here. Some things are much cheaper and others more expensive than they are in the states. Water, for example, is cheap. It costs \$5.00 US a month and last month the utility company ran a year-end promotion that if you paid for 10 months in advance, the last 2 months of the year were free. And they threw in a t-shirt that proclaims in red and green letters that we've paid our water bill promptly. Jeff wore his shirt to the local market and had all our Mexican friends laughing. You can't drink the tap water, so we have to purchase it in bottles. However, since everyone has to buy it, that too is cheap. We can get a 20 liter bottle refilled for 60-70 cents. Electricity is expensive, but they prorate the fees according to how much you use—the higher the use, the higher the cost per unit—and also what month it is. High-usage months cost more. When we were down a year ago we prepaid our electricity, and to date we haven't had to pay any additional pesos, so we aren't sure about these costs. The propane gas that we buy for the house is running us about \$30.00 per month. Fruits and vegetables are cheap, and if they are in season and there is an abundance, they are dirt cheap. We bought Mandarin oranges for 3 cents per pound! Meat and poultry are more expensive than in the States, with beef being really expensive. The whole turkeys that were stocked for the holidays were priced at \$2.50 per pound. Fish is relatively inexpensive, and we pay around \$2.00 to \$2.50 a pound for fillets cut from fish we selected at the local fish market. You can't get any fresher fish than ones caught that day. Speciality imported cheese is completely out of our price range. I guess it will take us a little while longer to figure out our budget.



A municipal building in Progreso

Progreso is a short 10-minute ride to the east of us. It's a port town of about 40 to 50,000 and it's the port of entry for ships bringing goods into the area. There are grocery stores, a local market, and other shops and services. It's where we do most of our daily shopping, pay our bills, and bank. A few days a week cruise ships stop in Progreso. The Gulf is quite shallow here, and in order for them to be able to dock, the pier there was extended 3 to 3.5 miles out from shore to get to 35-foot-deep water. This influx of tourists is good for the local economy, and since we can see the docked ships from our porch, we don't go into town when the hoards of "boat people" are there, so they don't bother us.

Our house is located just outside the small fishing village of Chelem. The village has a zocalo (town square), municipal building, limited markets, and a lot of fish restaurants. Basically, we are on a narrow strip of land with water to the north and south. To the north is the Gulf of Mexico, to the west is another small village and then the road ends. South is a salt-water lagoon with many mangrove islands.

The lagoon is home to an amazing variety of birds, with even more showing up to winter here. In addition to the usual shore birds, we are treated to masses of egrets, blue herons, (both large and small), storks, cormorants, terns, and a number of birds whose names we don't yet know.



White herons by the road to Progreso

If you can't tell by now, we are enjoying the change and are still amazed that we really did it. We had thought for so long about another big adventure in our lives and of fulfilling a dream of living by the water; sometimes I just don't think it's real, and that we'll wake up and the vacation will be over. Of course, there are things we miss, including good New Mexico chile and good friends, but having the internet makes life a lot easier and the world smaller.

We hope the economy didn't hit you too badly, and that 2009 is truly a Prospero Año Nuevo for all!

Happy Holidays,

Nancy