

MEXICANS...

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a traditional meal in the house with homemade *temales* and *atole* and often go to church later that night. By the time we Gringos sit down for our Christmas dinner, Mexicans are still down and out from their celebrations the night before.

Many Mexicans take vacation around Christmas time, making it the second, after Easter, most important vacation time of the year. As with most Mexican fiestas, this is not a one day event. The official Christmas holiday season in Mexico starts with the *posadas* nine days before Christmas and goes on relentlessly to Epiphany January 6. That is the day Mexican children used to get

affluent and having an effect on Mexican tradition becomes clearer every year. Anyone who has come to Cabo or La Paz for the last five years has seen the change on the road. The old battered run-down truck or Volkswagen beetle has become a rarity while newer cars have become the norm. With that growing prosperity, our North American Christmas customs

seem to become also more visible, turning Christmas in a gift-giving frenzy with no end in sight. Not all change is for the better, and I wish we could preserve some of the Mexican traditions, especially at this time of year.

To learn Mexican customs is like learning their language. Living with a Mexican family is the best mode to acquire that knowl-

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their gifts. Despite the anti-clerical laws that were imposed on the church by the Mexican Constitution of 1917, most Mexicans still call themselves Catholic. Many of those seem to practice their faith and this explains why Christmas is still such a predominantly religious fiesta.

That the Mexican population is clearly growing more

edge if you have that opportunity. Once my wife and I were invited to celebrate Christmas Eve with a local family. It got off on a rather slow start, but once every family member had arrived, the servings of food and drinks never stopped. Everyone had at least a few glasses of *ponche con piquete*. This is a nice, punch-like, hot beverage made from seasonal fruits with a cinnamon stick and a royal shot of tequila, a nice one for this occasion. There were so many different appetizers and the actual traditional dinner did not start until 9.30 or 10 that night. There were no small children around, so there wasn't a *piñata*. Too bad, because I would have loved to be blindfolded and have the opportunity to hack that papier-mâché star in a hundred pieces. I hope you have a chance to experience a traditional *Noche Buena* if you like and wish you a Merry Christmas.

As New Years Eve is still a week away, you will have plenty of time to figure out where you would like to be when 2011 turns around. *Prospero año nuevo.*

Tips For Enjoying Los Cabos

You have journeyed into a foreign culture and some things are done differently here, so take a minute to review these pretty simple tips for having a good time in Mexico.

If you are stopped by the police. Be polite but be firm. You don't need to pay them any money. You don't need to show them your passport. If you have made a traffic boo boo, standard procedure is to surrender your drivers license and either follow the policeman to the station or go down later to pay a very modest fine and collect your license. They do not want your license. They do not want you in their jail. Almost always when they stop you they want a bribe. Just say no. They will nearly always let you off with a warning this time, and give your license back. If not, the worst that will happen is you make a trip to the police station. Go for the ride, think of the war stories you'll have for the home folks.

If you are sick or injured. The medical profession here is a crap shoot, with the dice loaded a little against the foreigner, who often is taken advantage of. If you're just a little sick or a little injured, try to wait until you get home. If you can't, take a polite but firm hand with the medical personnel. If they are suggesting procedures that your gut tells you are not needed, follow your gut. One of their favorite first moves is to hook you up to an IV. How often is that done in the US? Use your best judgement and intuition and don't be intimidated. And keep asking what every single procedure is going to cost. Let them know that you are skeptical and they will pick on someone else. Again, be polite but be firm.

Using your credit cards. It's tough not to use them, after all, who wants to carry wads of cash? But the fact is, there is more credit card fraud here than in the US. Check your credit card balance as often as you can, by computer or phone, looking for activity not your own.

Gas stations. Sometimes the pump jockeys get carried away. Get out of the car and point to the green pump, (regular gas,) and tell them what peso amount to put in the tank. If you can't say it in Spanish show them your bill. It's best not to put in so much that you will need change back, because that's when the pea under the shell game starts. And if you give them a 500 peso note, they sometimes say you only gave them a 50. Hand them the money and look them in the eye, and say 500 or 400 or 300, even if you have to say it in English. Be polite but very, very firm and look them in the eye. They will back down and pick on someone less alert.

Changing money. Everyone will take dollars, but they won't give you the best exchange rate. On the other hand, due to anti money laundering laws, most banks won't exchange your dollars for pesos unless you have an account there, which of course you don't. Use your hotel's service, and ask for the exchange rate and the piece of paper from the calculator that they will use, or a receipt with the calculations on it. Count your money and compare it with your slip of paper.

Don't be stupid. Don't take chances that you might be inclined to in the United States or Canada. Don't walk down the street alone, drunk, after midnight. Don't associate with anyone on the street after midnight. If someone comes up to you and offers you drugs or sex, keep walking, don't stop. Don't even slow down to say no thank you, you are then associating with drug dealers.

The most charming part of Mexico is its wonderful people. But, as in all countries, there are some who would take advantage of those they perceive to be vulnerable. Your best posture is to be alert, (which includes not drunk,) and polite but firm in any situation. They back down quickly, as they really are nice people.

Cabo Angels is an organization of local business owners who want to make the tourist experience the best it can be.

They have organized and mobilized to represent the interests of you, the foreigner and the foreign residents when you experience unfair treatment here.

Cabo Angel volunteers patrol the tourist areas, wearing a distinctive purple shirt that says *tourist assistance* on it. They are there to assure the foreigners are treated fairly and with respect.

When you see the Cabo Angels logo that says "Los Cabos Is Tourist Friendly" on participating merchants' window, you know that this is owned by someone who values you and your business.

To file a complaint, go to www.caboangels.org.

Be as specific as possible, including the time of day, the name of the officer, the license plate, and if you took a picture of him, so much the better. Post that. Be aware that just as in the United States or Canada, they are going to want your name and contact information. What harm can that do? None. But if you're really reluctant to include your contact information, you can leave it on the website after you have returned home.

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