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MEXICAN LOVE AFFAIR

By SUZANNE MURPHY-LARRONDE

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February 12, 2002 -- IS it possible to carry on a love affair with a town? If that town happens to be San Miguel de Allende, then the answer is a resounding "yes." So what's the big attraction of this colonial enclave that sits at 6,400 feet above the sea?

Perhaps it's the timeless beauty of San Miguel itself, a national monument since 1926, with its spire-coifed Parroquia, or parish church, in the welcoming central square (El Jardin), its cobbled streets and colonial mansions.

It's also the healthy high-desert climate, the stimulating menu of cultural events and the educational and volunteer opportunities available year-round and within easy walking distance.

As a permanent or part-time expatriate base for American and Canadian retirees, plus assorted artists, writers and bohemians, San Miguel de Allende is certainly among the most popular spots in Mexico.

I decided to go for a month, and rented a place on a quiet street a five-minute walk from El Jardin. My small but well appointed house had two bedrooms, two baths, two small patios with fountains and a rooftop terrace. It included cable TV and a gardener, and cost me \$2,000 a month.

Planning activities was a cinch with the help of the English-language newspaper, "Attencion San Miguel," with its weekly rundown of events.

Much is offered. During one seven-day period, choices included a foreign-film showing, photography lectures by teachers from the Santa Fe Workshop, social gatherings for singles and for couples, gallery openings, a guitar recital and even a celebration of the full moon at the botanical garden.

To get oriented, take the walking tour (\$10) offered by Pro-Patronato Niños, which provides health care for local children. American-resident guides lead you on 1 1/2-hour forays that begin at the imposing, pink-hued La Parroquia.

The church, built in 1683, was renovated in 1880 by a self-taught Indian architect who sought inspiration from European postcards before creating what is today the town's signature landmark.

Other stops include the municipal market, the San Francisco Church, with its lavishly carved stone facade and tiled cupolas and the Bellas Artes, an 18th-century convent-turned-art school and cultural center.

You'll learn about San Miguel's tenuous beginnings during the mid-1550s in the wake of fierce Indian attacks, and its heyday a century later as the crossroads for gold and silver shipments on their way to Mexico City from the mines of Guanajuato and Zacatecas.

Also excellent are the Sunday House and Garden Tours, which afford a glimpse inside many of the town's colonial mansions.

They are sponsored by the expatriot community's public library; the \$15 fee goes to sponsor library programs for local children.

Visitors see three houses in and around town, from centuries-old mansions to Mexican-modern abodes. With a 400-house inventory to choose from, you'll see a new trio each week.

The tours begin at noon, but come early to have a look at the second-largest bilingual library in Latin America.

You'll find that this city of 110,000 residents does not lack in shopping choices. The artisans' market on Loreto street is a good source for crafts.

Zapateria Martha, Relox #27, is the place to buy San Miguel's official sandal, the chic "cocktail/combat boot."

For textiles, try Casa Maxwell, Canal #14. La Calaca, Mesones #93, specializes in Hispanic crafts and antiques, while El Nuevo Mundo, San Francisco #17, offers select handicrafts and clothing.

Stop by Galeria Izamal, Mesones #80, the town's only artist-owned and operated art gallery.

For a town its size, San Miguel boasts a surprising array of dining options. Locals swear by the modest Ole Ole for its chicken fajitas; for hearty Sunday brunches, try the excellent Villa Jacaranda.

The patio of Cafe de la Parroquia is great for a lunch of soup and salad.

As the afternoon fades, the romantic place to be is the second-story terrace of La Capilla, with its views of the square below and the setting sun.

For an upscale evening, El Campanario offers continental fare.

I settled into a comfortable routine. Mornings before Spanish classes at the Instituto Allende, I'd stop at La Ventana, off the main square, for a cappuccino. Sunset often found me at El Jardin, watching the noisy return of hundreds of nesting birds to the square's Indian laurel trees.

My month-long stay proved much too short. I hadn't yet photographed all of the town's 43 fountains or gone for a dip in the steaming thermal springs just a 10-minute drive away. Nor had I seen a bull fight or attended a yoga class.

At least I have a pretext for going back.

\* San Miguel is a 4-hour drive from Mexico City. Casa de Sierra Nevada, rooms from \$250, (888) 341-5995; Casa Granada, a B&B, rooms from \$100, [www.casagranada.com.mx](http://www.casagranada.com.mx). For longer stays: Joanne Rockett Rentals, [smarent@unisono.net.mx](mailto:smarent@unisono.net.mx). San Miguel info: [www.infosma.com](http://www.infosma.com)