

Italy



by Cedar Reimer

Mexico City by day and night

by Blythe Lawrence

Last night, there was a children's fair in Mexico City.

That meant the streets were packed with children and their parents. There were kids in costume, kids in arms, kids on shoulders, kids with their faces painted, kids wearing glittery colorful false eyelashes and stick-on mustaches, kids wielding wands or glowing toys, kids posing for pictures with various people dressed as animals or royalty, kids on rides, kids dancing and singing to the music, which blared from every imaginable direction and seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere under the night sky. I had the feeling of being in a very large circus tent, that this reality was not reality at all, that there was another, safer world beyond this madness if I could only find the flap that would let me out.

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There were kids eating sweets, kids clutching balloons, kids crying, kids laughing, kids talking animatedly, kids wearing tiaras, kids grabbing for loose strands of cotton candy near the machines that made them as they floated like balloons toward the sky. Kids entranced by the swirling light and color and spectacle.

These kids were naturally followed at close range by their parents, who didn't seem to be having a bad time either, despite the fact that they were surrounded by so many people that the crowd moved as one—slowly forward like cooling lava as it flows down a mountain—and it was hard to breathe, because there were so many people and because this is Mexico City, where the altitude is approximately 7,300 feet.

But as I was saying, the parents put up with this marvelously well. Many had even donned a pair of glittering eyelashes or a stick-on beard themselves. Some looked downright thrilled as they were strapped into safety harnesses on rides.

Because this is Mexico City, there are eight million people; life is hard, time is short and only at night, I think, can one enjoy the spectacle.

During the day, Mexico City is gritty. There's no other word to describe it. Paris is beautiful, Tokyo is crowded and Mexico

City is gritty. In places it feels like it's undergoing some kind of Haussmanization, with piles of rubble that were once buildings and sidewalks literally inches from taco stands. The modern here is adjacent to the Third World, sometimes at multiple places on the same street. The people who aren't white collar and walk the streets in business suits and heels have deeply lined faces and sun-baked skin. Those who are employed brush the generous amounts of litter into piles on the sidewalk using wire brooms constructed of small, flexible sticks and branches. Street vendors selling jewelry, purses, DVDs, CDs and anything else manufactured in mass quantities are everywhere.

The poor sell packages of gum or lollipops. The poorer sing or play toy accordians and beg. The poorest don't say anything at all. They just look at you, palm outstretched, and murmur, "Senor, senorita, por favor..." and that says everything there is.

Surrounded by mountains, Mexico City is striking from the air. The lower a plane gets, the more the colors of the thousands upon thousands of buildings in this city, built so close together in some areas that they appear almost on top of each other—lime greens, Tintoretto yellows, peaches and deep mauves. But even from the air, one can smell the city and sense the smog—eight million people can't coexist in one place without leaving some residue of their presence. Two bodies of water can be seen, looking like mirrors for the airplane to gaze into, but even they have a brownish tinge, or perhaps it was the early afternoon light. These things aren't visible at night in Mexico City.

The water is not safe to drink. I was aghast to see a small girl filling her water bottle at a fountain in a public park earlier today. The *Frommer's* guidebook has numerous tips for tourists.

Don't drink the water. Milk is OK once your body has acclimated itself to it, but that might take awhile.

Don't eat lettuce or salad. Order beverages without ice. Don't eat strawberries, raw fruits or vegetables and avoid seafood. "Exercise discretion, especially at street food stalls (tacos al pastor are notorious)," *Eyewitness* travel guide warns. Even with all the precautions, another guidebook begins one of its sections with "When you get sick..."

The air is thick. The first afternoon I thought it was hard to breathe. Today it seems better. Tomorrow I don't think I'll notice anything at all. Such is the way one adapts in Mexico City.

During the day there are police on every corner. Often they seem to have nothing to do but talk and joke among themselves while waving halfheartedly at traffic. Other police officers direct traffic and the large number of green-and-white rapid transit vehicles that look suspiciously

like painted VW vans from the 1960s. Hippies once traveled around another country in them. There are no electronically generated signs broadcasting the destination. Paper signs stuck in the windshield do the job in Mexico City.

Some of the police seem employed just to observe the masses, to make sure everyone keeps moving forward slowly.

And I do as well. It's been 10 minutes and I haven't gone 50 feet. The wave of people surging forward toward some undefinable exit at this children's fair seems connected. We're so close together we might as well be joined at the hip. If the person in front of me falls, I probably will too. I can't break free, and it's a disconcerting thought that I must keep my head and step slowly, that for a moment I am part of the masses here in Mexico City, that I must move as they move and endure as they endure.