

Hola, Tijuana!

Text and photos by Dr Juliana Poh

Okay, I'll admit that we crossed mostly because we wanted to attempt the busiest border crossing in the world, especially after all the Trump talk about the wall. I had been religiously checking border wait times online a few weeks before the scheduled crossing. We changed some pesos for the one-day trip from a shop at the terminal stop of the San Diego blue line trolley at San Ysidro. Despite blogs writing about two-hour delays for pedestrians and *n* hours for passenger vehicles, we experienced none of that on the Wednesday morning we went. It was a smooth (and short) walk to the Mexican customs in the transit centre. Singaporean and Malaysian passport holders do not require a visa for visits of less than 180 days. And so, we were in Tijuana in under 20 minutes!

Exploring the city centre

Rather than walk 20 minutes to the Zona Centro, we hopped on a "combi" from the unofficial "bus terminus" for 10 pesos (US\$0.70) and were serenaded with a live *guitarra conchera* performance during the short ride. We were enjoying every bit of Mexico already! Zona Centro is landmarked by a big McDonald's outlet and the famous Tijuana Arch on Revolution Avenue, which can be seen from San Ysidro. There's a lot to see on the main street, which is the historic downtown of Tijuana. We stopped by a shop selling beautiful traditional Mexican dresses and lucha libre masks, and were educated by the friendly shopkeeper about the main figures in Mexican wrestling. There were kids' masks available too! Unfortunately, we had no luck in securing tickets to any live matches that day as the timings were not suitable. The main tourist street wasn't particularly busy that morning, but we

did find a sizeable congregation at the historic Metropolitan Cathedral for the noon mass.

Unknowingly, we wandered into the Zona Norte, a neighbourhood notorious for its crime and sleaze. The landscape was different with streetwalker **and** police presence. We quickly found our way back to the main street and enjoyed a snack of famous fish tacos at a roadside eatery. Tacos cost a fraction of the prices in San Diego – US\$2 for two fish tacos and US\$4 for two pork tacos! We were also much entertained watching the tortillas being freshly prepared: from kneading, to pressing, and finally grilling.

With our tummies filled, we explored the local market, which sold everything from food stuff like cheese, dried chilli, honey and sweets, to even tortilla presses and piñatas! I had to pack some goodies home as gifts. By a stroke of luck, we heard that Tijuana is the birthplace of Caesar's salad and decided to stop at Hotel Caesars for more food. (*How much calories could a salad add, right?*) This world-famous dish was created in Caesar's restaurant in 1927 and this is one of the three longest-running restaurants in Tijuana. The deco and black-and-white tiles bring visitors back to the Prohibition era when the restaurant was established. The table-side preparation of the salad was the main draw, of course, with the

waiter giving a live commentary on the ingredients and steps. I have never in my life gotten so excited over a salad. In Singapore, the salad leaves are chopped up into little bits. Here, there is a choice of a small (three leaves) or large (five leaves) portion, and the romaine lettuce are nicely laid out after being evenly tossed with all the ingredients, with one big crunchy crouton. Delicious!

Indulging in local spirits

Post-lunch, we tasted some tequila and mezcal (*yes, they are not the same thing*) in one of the numerous tequila shops along Revolution Avenue. The shopkeeper explained to us that tequila is a type of mezcal made from the blue agave, and both of these centuries-old spirits are produced only in certain





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Legend

1. US\$2 for two yummy fish tacos!
2. One of the several zonkeys seen along Revolution Avenue
3. Tortillas freshly made upon order
4. Having caesar salad where it all started – Hotel Caesars
5. When in Mexico, drink mezcal!
6. Most tourists hang out along colourful Revolution Avenue, which is bustling by noon

Dr Poh works part-time in the emergency department but needs caffeine round the clock; she dreams of the day when caffeine infusions will be legal and easily accessible.

regions of Mexico. Mezcal has become more popular in Singapore in the last three years, but it's still not common to find mezcal with the agave worm in the bottle. Obviously, this became our best souvenir (S\$43) from the trip! It was tempting to lug back some vanilla essence from the same shop too; after all, Mexico is the world's fourth largest producer of vanilla. Their prices were definitely way better than back home – 500 ml for S\$19 – what a steal!

Since we were still able to walk in straight lines after the tasting, we made a trip to the iconic Tijuana Cultural Centre, which houses a history museum, an art museum and an OMNIMAX cinema. It was an interesting peek into the history of the Baja Peninsula and California, dating from the prehistoric times to the 20th century. However, many of

the exhibit labels were not completely translated to English and I felt that it limited my understanding of the region's development. It was still well worth the 20 pesos admission fee though.

Having seen enough zonkeys and eaten enough tacos for the day, we decided to attempt the border crossing before dark, not knowing if there would be crazy queues as blogged. (*Read: fear and excitement at approaching the border*) However, we were pleasantly surprised by the smooth walk throughout the sheltered (and CCTV-monitored) walkway – no crowds and no queues. In fact, it wasn't clear which part was Mexican and which bit was American; it was all over in 15 minutes, passport stamp and all. But one thing for sure – Mexico, we'll be back! ♦



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