

By Dr Martin Chio



A Physician's Journey: Bienvenido a Mexico!*

On the Pyramid of the Moon with the Pyramid of the Sun and the Avenue of the Dead behind me.

I hadn't realised how persuasive the Editor of SMA news could be. Over a seemingly innocent meal, he asked if I could contribute and add some frivolity and colour to the publication, to which I mumbled a non-committal reply. Soon after an official letter arrived at my workplace (somewhat similar to credit cards one does not remember applying for) with pre-approved membership of the SMA News Editorial Board. So here I am; to provide an alternative view to the everyday life of medical practitioners (MOH-approved terminology for our profession ...).

I thought I would share what doctors do at overseas conferences, with me as possibly an atypical example. As a result of my sub-specialities, I have been fortunate to attend an Asia-Pacific conference in Dubai, present a poster at the European Academy conference in Istanbul and most recently, present another poster at an International Society conference in Mexico City.

MEXICO CITY

I was quite excited as this was my first time in Latin America. The Singapore "contingent" comprised public hospital and private specialists, staff of a local NGO, HPB and MOH; we were among 25,000

delegates from around the world. There were the usual excellent plenaries by renowned experts and various symposia and sessions for special interest groups.

One does not fly more than 24 hours just to listen to experts. I was very eager to discover the city, its history and its culture. But first, I had to overcome my main concern: safe transportation. I had read in various guidebooks and websites about the dangerous prospect of being robbed or kidnapped by unscrupulous drivers. It did not help my apprehension that on my first night on the way home after dinner, the burly young taxi driver got lost and had to ask for directions 3 times and we were careening through dark lanes and unmarked roads. So when we chanced upon an animated female taxi driver – Maricella, with the help of smatterings of Spanish, arrangements were made for her to provide transport for the rest of our trip. Phew.

I joined the half-day tour to Teotihuacán organised by the conference. About an hour's drive from the city centre, Teotihuacán is a UNESCO world heritage site containing one of the largest pyramids in pre-Columbian Americas built in the 1st century. I wasn't aware of the

Martin aspires to be a food and travel photographer but is 'bonded' to serve for many years to come...



Street performers in the Zócalo



Bench along the Paseo de la Reforma



Guacamole and chips at the W hotel



Jaguar warrior mural, Museo Nacional de Antropología



Mural by Diego Rivera, Palacio Nacional



Mexican art and craft

significance of Mexican pyramids as sites of worship and sacrifice as opposed to the use of Egyptian pyramids as tombs. The structures were well-preserved and maintained; despite the high-altitude (2km above sea-level) I managed to clamber up the 70 metre high Pyramid of the Sun and took some amazing photos.

On the bus, I sat next to a very pleasant volunteer from an NGO in Ontario, Canada. She shared about her role and work in the NGO and how she was coping with her illness; I was amazed how she travelled so well with her tracheostomy. I am always all ears when it comes to listening to stories and adventures by fellow travellers.

I popped into the Museo Nacional de Antropología to escape the torrential downpour which occurred like clockwork at tea-time every day I was in Mexico, and was grateful there were hand-held audio guides in English which helped me to navigate through the 23 halls of Mexican history and regional culture. The significant exhibits were the Aztec Sun Stone, giant stone heads of the Olmec civilisation, treasures recovered from the Maya civilisation and dioramas of contemporary and rural Mexican life. It also has a model of the layout of the former Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, the site of which is now occupied by the central area of modern-day Mexico City.

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I managed to spend sometime in the Zócalo historical area where I visited the Templo Mayor, Catedral Metropolitana and Palacio Nacional.

The Templo Mayor was the main temple of the Tenochtitlan. The temple rose 60 metres above the city's ritual precinct and was surmounted by dual shrines to the deities Huitzilopochtli (god of war and sun) and Tlaloc (god of rain and fertility). It was mostly destroyed in 1521 when Spanish conquistadores, lead by Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec empire. The remains have been turned into a walk-through museum which is one of the more popular tourist sites to visit.

The Catedral Metropolitana is one of the largest churches in Latin America. The style of architecture is Spanish Baroque and a pair of 64-metre neoclassical towers which hold 18 bells fronts the edifice. The most famous of the cathedral's retablos (altars) is the Altar de los Reyes, built by the Spanish artist Gerónimo de Balbás, the first example of the Estipite style in Mexico.

In the Palacio Nacional, I was suitably impressed by the work of the muralist Diego Rivera who produced enormous murals depicting and celebrating the history of Mexico, which occupy 110m² of wall space on the second floor.

This was just a whistle-stop tour of the city. I hope to be able to explore more if I get the chance to return. In the meantime, I'd better brush up my Spanish...



Margaritas at La Casa de las Sirenas

On my last night, I met up with Alan, a friend whom I met while on HMDP in London while staying at Goodenough College (www.goodenough.ac.uk); it had been more than a year since we last met. He introduced me to the proper way to consume tequila and we ate, chatted about life in Mexico and reminisced about life in London. This was the perfect way to end my trip.

Am so looking forward to Cape Town next year ... ■

*Welcome to Mexico!