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A slice of Venice in Mexico City

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MEXICO CITY—This city is full of surprises. This city is full of everything.

The place is huge. The biggest city in North America, the third biggest city in the world, it's got more museums than any other city (over 400 of them, apparently), it's two thousand feet higher in the air than Denver, and as you fly in, its main park, Chapultepec, more than four times the size of High Park, gets almost lost in its 3,000 square kilometres of urban space populated by more than 20 million people.

It's also got something even frequent visitors to the city seem mostly unaware of: 189 kilometres of canals, punctuated by hundreds of tiny man-made islands that support families and businesses who use flat-bottomed wooden punts to get around instead of cars, powered only by 12-foot poles and some pretty impressive upper-body strength. And since about 1920, they've also used souped-up versions of them called trajineras to ferry merry-makers, mostly Mexican, around their winding, gorgeous, relaxing, surprising liquid lengths.



Flat-bottomed wooden boats, known locally as trajineras, decorate the canals along one of the bottlenecked canal harbours in the Xochimilco district of Mexico City.

Ryan James Merigliano/For the toronto star

Before spending a recent weekend in the city, I knew just two things about it. That Gabriel García Márquez has lived there for almost half a century, and that if you get into a cab there, you'll probably be kidnapped and held for ransom. If I'd thought about it even a little, I would have realized that those two things don't quite add up. Márquez, a Colombian, chose to live there, and has famously said he wouldn't want to live anywhere else. He's a pretty bright guy. Why would he live somewhere the taxi fares are so high?

Though I can't say I did an exhaustive study of the taxicab-kidnapping issue, I did notice a great many happy people in the back seats of a great many old-school VW Beetle cabs. Probably Stockholm syndrome. It's quicker to take transit anyway, and it'll cost you about 50 cents to get from wherever you're staying to Xochimilco, the neighbourhood in the south end of the city where the trajineras are. (Among its many other virtues, Mexico City can be exceedingly inexpensive.)

I've been gondola'd on the Grand Canal by gruffly musical men in horizontal stripes, their red and blue ribbons fluttering behind their caps in the soft Venice breeze, and been punted on the cam by milk-faced youths in straw hats that look like bookier versions of a cross between Hugh Grant and that blonde lippy guy from Glee, so I say what I'm about to say advisedly: compared to Xochimilco, they suck.

I knew they'd be colourful—I'd Google-imaged them before I left—but I was still unprepared for yellows and reds and cobalts that exploded out of the calm, clean water in the 25-degree April sun as I rounded the corner and walked towards them through a little market set up to sell plastic things to Mexican versions of me. It was Carmen Miranda in a canal.

They were tightly packed, and we hopped across half a dozen to get to the one that belonged to Alfredo, our punter, or remero. All the boats come with long, skinny tables that can seat about 12 comfortably and ours, delightfully, came with a lovely bucket of beer.

Alfredo talked to us as he poled us along the canals which, he explained, were not canals but the bits of lake left over after all the Xochimilcans had built their islands, that bit of lake itself part of a much larger and now otherwise dry lake into the bed of which Mexico City was built by the Mexicas (also called, but wrongly I learned, the Aztecs).

Actually, I got that last factoid from one of those 400 museums, the Museum of National History just off the zocalo, or main city square. Alfredo kept mostly to stuff we could see. Like the dozens of greenhouses and fields of flowers we passed, destined for the city's flower markets. Or the little boats that would pull up alongside us and pass every once in a while.

The first one I saw, filled with towels and cloths and bowls and various unidentifiable utensils, I thought was someone's private conveyance, a Xochimilcan version of a car filled with Tim Horton's cups and Kleenex boxes. But no. It was a little floating enchilada stand. They pull up ask if you'd like an enchilada, and if you would, they hook their boat to yours and get poled alongside us as they make it from scratch.

Another boat sold micheladas, which someone else in our party explained were as popular in certain Mexican bars in New York as they were here. Beer mixed with lime and tomato juice served in salt-rimmed glasses, apparently. Alfredo told to me they were good. Little floating bars that'll zip over as fast as their poles will propel them to serve you as many of these little wonders as you like. Those Cambridge boys could learn a thing or two from these guys.

I didn't pay much attention when I first heard "La Bamba," in the distance. Someone's tricked-out trajinera blasting some tunes, I presumed: I'd heard "99 Luftballons" earlier drifting down the lazy river-lake. Then I saw the source of the Bamba: a floating mariachi band. They pulled up alongside us, just like the enchilada lady and the michelada man had. Thirty pesos a song. That's a little less than \$2.50. One Guantanamera coming right up. They hooked themselves to our boat, the six of them an eloquent argument that there is, in fact, a right way to wear a sombrero, and floated slowly along beside us, singing about the girl from Guantanamo as we lay on the light green bow of our boat, inclined just enough to give us a view backwards towards its flaming red roof.

It was like the al fresco lunch we'd had later that day at Azul y Oro out on the university campus: four appetizers, eight main courses, four desserts and as much wine as we could drink for \$54 each, including the tip. We even got to taste three of the seven legendary moles of Oaxaca. But that's another story. I think I understand Márquez a little better now.

JUST THE FACTS

HIRING: If your hotel has a concierge, they'll do it for you, but if you want to handle it yourself, the easiest way is simply to show up at Xochimilco station, where there are stands with people waiting to escort you to a boat, or go directly to one of the embarcaderos or boarding areas and flag down a likely looking remero. The prices are posted on the boats themselves—200 pesos (about \$15) an hour seemed the standard—so you don't have to worry about rip-offs. And if you take it for anything less than two hours, you'll regret it. I'd suggest four.

SLEEPING: There are, I'm going to guess, 1.6 trillion hotels in Mexico City to choose from. I stayed at the centrally located **W**, which restored my faith in this greatly devalued brand. The bathtub looked like a huge nacho bowl, and there was a hammock strung over it facing the window looking out over the city. I loved it. It was the first W outside of the U.S., and is undergoing a renovation at the moment, but that doesn't seem to get in the way of much, including the low-slung lobby bar. The daily weekend rate this time of year starts at about \$165. [W Mexico City](#), Campos Eliseos 252, Chapultepec, Polanco, Mexico City, 011-52-55-91-38-18-00

Los Alcobas: Spanish for the alcoves, this 35-room boutique hotel in the Polanco district is a 1950s apartment building, transformed by Toronto's Yabu Pushelberg into something distinctly millennial. And right now, they've got a bed and breakfast deal that starts at \$275, with food provided by in-house chef Martha Ortiz (see below). Presidente Masaryk 390Col. Polanco. www.lasalcobas.com. 011-52-55-3300-3999

DINING: Dulce Patria. Chef Martha Ortiz, mistress of modern Mexican cuisine, opened this restaurant last year in the [Las Alcobas boutique hotel](#). She pairs her (glorious) desserts with locally made crafts, like the tiny wooden chair she served with her house-made chocolates on the night I was there. Main courses run between \$10 and \$30. Anatole France 100, Col. Polanco. 011-52-55-3300-3999

Azul Y Oro. Chef and Oaxacan food historian Ricardo Munoz Zurita opened the second location of his influential restaurant on the campus of the university where he got his start, cooking in the school cafeteria. The atmospheres casual, the patio lovely, and the prices so low (my eight-course lunch with wine and cocktail was \$54), you'll think youre getting away with something. Faculty of Engineering building, National University of Mexico. Col. Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México, 011-52-5622-7135.

Pujo. If you like your Mexican food fancy, [Pujo](#) is the place to go, but with just a dozen tables or so, it may be tough getting a reservation. But keep trying. The darkened room is the perfect setting for some of the most profound flavours Ive ever tasted. I recommend the daily prix fixe, which hovers around \$65 for 6 courses, including, my night, a chocolate skull with creamy, grey brain-like filling for dessert. Francisco Petrarca 254, Col. Polanco.

GETTING AROUND: The Metro and light rail system is good, safe and cheap. A fare on the subway, for instance, is about 25 cents. Do not take cabs. Not because they'll kidnap you, but because they'll trap you, for hours, on roads and highways built for a population about 90 per cent smaller than it is. For Xochimilco, take the subway to Tasqueña station, and transfer to the light rail line (you'll have to buy another 3 peso ticket) and get off at Xochimilco.

WEBSURFING: As of this month, theres also a free iPhone app on iTunes called Style Map Mexico City that's pretty good. www.mexicocityexperience.com, www.mexicocity.com.