

Guadalajara & Lake Chapala, Mexico

By Sue Berry, Willamette International Travel

March, 2007

Lake Chapala — Mexico's largest lake is less than an hour's drive from Guadalajara. We had a very late arrival due to the weather, but had a driver from the B&B waiting for us. The drive is not a bad one. Lake Chapala is wringed with small farming towns, and Ajijic is not large either, but due to the large ex-pat population it has art galleries and many different ethnic restaurants. It is not San Miguel de Allende, not as sophisticated — much more of a sleepy little town, but one of the nice trade offs is the lack of traffic compared to SMA. They say towards the end of spring it gets very dusty so that would be one time to stay away. Other than that the temperature is quite even all year round, and because of the altitude of just over 5,000' it doesn't seem that hot. Also there was a nice breeze from the lake on most days.

In Ajijic we stayed at the Casa del Sol, newly opened in January, owned and managed by an very nice American woman from Kennebunkport. It is within a few blocks walk of the plaza and shops, but nothing is very far. Most of the guests so far have been Canadians or Americans. The majority of rooms have balconies. Two of the six have two-bedded rooms and one of those overlooks the street which is fairly noisy. The other looks over the pool area and is very nice.

There is no daily maid service. You do make your bed and change your own towels. The breakfast is varied each morning and good. It is very well decorated, has upscale mattresses and bedding, and a fairly large pool. There are many B&Bs here operated by Canadians or Americans. We also saw the hotel Real de Chapala, about 10 minutes out of town and on the lake. It is more of a large resort atmosphere. I didn't get to see a room, but the public rooms, beach and pool area looked nice. It didn't seem that busy.

While in Ajijic we ate one night at Tango, right on the lake. I had the seafood which was excellent. The atmosphere is great with lake view and guitar-playing owner providing the entertainment.

Ajijic can be a base for day tours if one does not want to stay in Guadalajara. Various tours like Tlaquepaque, Tonalá (only 5 minutes apart by car) and Tequila can be done from there. We had a private driver take us on a day tour to Tonalá and Tlaquepaque from Ajijic and it worked fine. Tonalá is where most of the handicrafts are made for the entire country. It has more workshops than shops or galleries. Ceramics and pottery are the main thing — they produce 11 different types and use over 20 traditional techniques. A lot of what they make ends up in Tlaquepaque. Tlaquepaque is the upscale shopping area in converted haciendas with some pedestrian-only shopping streets and some nice restaurants. One of the most well-known galleiros is Sergio Bustamante — bronze, ceramic and papier mache sculptures — among the most popular and most copied in Mexico. El Patio is probably the best-known restaurant. It is a great outdoor atmosphere and a mariachi band plays for about an hour during peak lunch time.

Our driver was from the area near Ajijic. He charged 400 Pesos per person for the day shown above and 500 Pesos per person for the one below which was more of a tour (not including entrance fees or tipping). He has a van that takes five passengers. He is an official bonded guide, is obviously very proud of his country, speaks good English and is knowledgeable.

Guadalajara: air pollution is an issue here, some days more so than others.

Hotel Mendoza: centrally located, right off the square in the historic area of the city. There was a sister-city contingent from Portland staying there and a Grand Circle group, but also many local business people. We had asked for an inside room with balcony and this was nice to have and very quiet. The rooms are basic and they are currently renovating the pool, but the location is everything. I wanted to take a walking tour of the historic area, but they do not operate every day of the week and are apparently only in Spanish according to the tourist office. The permanent indoor market is about 5 minutes walk from the hotel.

We had dinner one night at Santo Coyote. It was about 10 minutes by taxi from the hotel (about \$5 per direction). It is a very large restaurant, outdoors in a garden-like setting with lots of twinkling lights. The setting and the fact that they custom-make your salsa at the table are their two main claims to fame.

The other dinner was at El Sacromonte, also very well-known. Authentic Mexican recipes and different, like quesadillas with rose petal sauce. This one was also about 10 min by taxi from the hotel. It is a small, indoor restaurant on a fairly busy street, but it quiets down later in the evening. Better food and less expensive than Santo Coyote.

While in Guadalajara we had the driver take us for a day .We saw Teuchitlan, small pyramid ruins that were more interesting than I anticipated. They were excavating the day we were there, and we also went to the museum nearby for the movie presentation. Then on to Tequila. It is a scenic area with the agave and sugar cane fields and mountains as a backdrop. We had a short tour of the Herradura tequila factory which has been owned by the same family for generations. They only went from traditional production to modern in 1972 and have maintained the traditional building so you can view that as well as the modern part. The family still live in part of the hacienda when in town. The majority of people in Tequila are employed by this industry.

All in all an easy trip to do in a short period of time, not expensive, and enough variety to be interesting.