

PBS Mexico Trip
First Leg: Alamos, Mexico
March 9-12, 2006
By Sheri Hitchings

March 8

With a great deal of enthusiasm, we left Jackson Westover Airport, in Jackson, California at 12:12 p.m. for John Wayne-Orange County Airport in Santa Ana, California. As we left, we saw puffs of clouds that looked like cotton candy, and the Sierra Mountains blanketed with snow, another sweet present before spring is upon us. We passed over the Columne River, Madera, Fresno and Bakersfield. There was a screen of fog and thick clouds along the way; in other places bright sunshine marked the path, and then we were in the business of working through the airways of Los Angeles. The shoreline modeled a pristine white beach; shortly after, we landed at John Wayne-Orange County Airport at 1:55 p.m. and rolled into one of our favorite FBOs, Signature, which always provides excellent service and refreshments.

We stayed at Steve and Kathi Blythe's home in Lake Forest, California enjoying Kathi's scrapbooking and Steve's magnificent television capabilities. We couldn't help but reminisce our mutual trip in 2000 (Outback) and 2002 (Circumnavigator) to Australia with GOANA Air Safari, no longer in business, as we dined at the local Outback Restaurant.

March 9

We left Steve and Kathi's for John Wayne-Orange County Airport and had wings up at 8:55 a.m. Out in the wild blue yonder, we had a huge tailwind, moving at 211 knots, faster than ever. We couldn't see through the thick clouds in some places. Interesting clouds created by mountain waves and high winds made the trip eventful. We saw the Salton Sea, passed the International border, saw lots of bare areas and thermal streams seeping out of the ground in a local mining operation. More farmland was evident in the valley; Mexico must have an abundance of vegetable crops as the land below us was lush with farming.

In Laguna Salada, Mexico we saw a sea and farmland. The sand and dunes looked like long swimming snakes. By 10:05 a.m. we were flying over the Gulf

of California, or Golfo De California, with sand appearing like slabs of limestone.

At Puerto Penasco we left the coastline to go inland; Baja stood across from us. A long and dusty road wound through the desert; the barren land, with no evidence of a water source, was interrupted by small mountain ranges with shrub-like trees, once again reminding us of our adventures in Australia's Outback. In the haze, we passed over the hot and barren-looking Hermosillo and more views of the farmland near the Gulf of California and then saw Obregon. I must say we were amazed with how much farmland there is!

We arrived at Obregon Airport at 1:10 p.m. to "face" customs. After a two-hour "adventure", we left at 3:10 p.m. without the necessary papers for the multi-entry (annual permit) we wanted as the computer was broken. Most everyone in our PBS group had arrived and left by the time we departed.

We arrived safely at Alamos, Sonora, Mexico at 3:40 p.m. on the Hacienda's 3,937-foot landing strip for private aircraft. As we exited our planes, we were pleasantly greeted by Santo's bartender Havier and others with margaritas, chips and salsa. What a treat! As we lounged at small tables in the hangar, we noticed how unbelievably large the Swickard's hangar was. It has just been renovated and will obviously become the town's favorite place for theatrical activities and parties. In fact, a fundraiser was planned in the hangar on Saturday night. Our welcome was so enjoyable; we almost didn't want to leave the hangar. However, we couldn't wait to explore Hacienda de los Santos Resort and Spa, in Alamos, a short ride away.

Alamos, an isolated historic Mexican town founded in 1681, is located at the entrance to the Sierra de Alamos-Rio Chuchujaqui Flora and Fauna Protection Area. Renowned for its fascinating biological richness, the town is considered a National Historic Patrimony and honored with the distinction of being a "Magical Town." Located 450 miles south of Tucson, between Copper Canyon and the Sea of Cortes, it reflects times of the past. The city population is 10,000 and municipality is 30,000; the elevation is 1,324 feet.

The Hacienda de los Santos Resort and Spa is the result of the vision of Jim and Nancy Swickard, General Managers and Owners. This Spanish colonial hideaway in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental is one to behold.

Just to let you know how special it is, I have been dreaming about coming here for three years, since I heard Jim Swickard make a presentation at a World Beechcraft Society Convention. His talk about this place he first visited sixteen years ago was awesome. The Power Point presentation was exciting, but most of all, I was impressed with his enthusiasm and love for what he and Nancy have lovingly created. They faced many challenges to make it what it is today.

The Alamo's Official Visitors' Guide 2006 reports, "Hacienda de los Santos, a hotel and boutique, offers the greatest luxury and comfort. It has received international recognition." On November 23, 2000, President Zedillo declared 188 structures in the city of Alamos as National Historic Monuments. Another reason for Hacienda de los Santos' importance is five of the city's 147 landmark buildings are within the walls of the resort.

After the Swickards bought the 1685 12-bedroom hacienda, once owned by William Walsh, a judge at the Nuremberg trials; little by little, they acquired more properties. Fortunately, there was enough time in between acquisitions so that they could take their time building and restoring. After the first purchase, the 18th century hacienda next door soon became theirs. Another purchase followed then another two properties and the adjoining 18th century former warehouse of the sugar mill, the present day Cantina. Even though they planned to retire, they were enticed to rent when a Mexican family wanted to rent the first completed residence. The Swickards live on the premises; most of the guests are from Mexico and America, including many adventuresome pilots; we are proud to say Jim shares our love of flying as he is also a pilot.

The resort, for adults only, is comprised of five Spanish colonial haciendas; some were built by a silver baron in the 17th century. Building continues, even now, as one new building with a brick facade was in the construction stage while we were there. We enjoyed watching as the workers hand lifted brick after brick up to the top floor. Within the lovely surrounding buildings is the Santa Ana Dining Room for private parties, Zapata's Cantina, a 3000 bottle wine cellar, a spa, and a 15th century 75-foot majestic theatre called Silver Lake. Designed in Andalusian style, it also holds a grand piano. The Hacienda Gallery is one of the newer buildings.

And to add to the luxurious atmosphere, there's more, including lush landscaping, indoor private courtyards, and outdoor courtyard seating areas, pools, 8 fountains, stone sculptures, miniature golf, outdoor dining, boutique and a connecting stone bridge. During the day, it's a treat to study the art objects in this sanctuary; the retablos of saints (hence the name of the resort) are throughout the grounds. Delightful floral groupings, bougainvillea vines, towering trees and bushes grab your attention; while at night under the moon, you can walk the grounds and contemplate how wonderful life is. Along the way, the beautifully lit pathways, pools and fountains appease your senses along with the fruits and vegetables in their garden.

Concha headboards, typical of Colonial era interiors, are carved in the wall along the walkways and behind the beds in spacious bedrooms. Suites are uniquely appointed with large comfortable beds and fluffy pillows, a water cooler (pure water is drawn from their own well), a safe and small refrigerator. The 17th century fireplaces, a soaking tub for rejuvenation, a large tiled shower, high ceilings, and a fine collection of Spanish Colonial antiques are appreciated. You feel the special luxuriance in this Old World environment the moment you step through the gate.

Decorating was quite a process. Nancy found treasures from Guatemala, Spain, Portugal, Turkey and India; the furniture is predominantly Mexican, much of which is made locally. She began by creating vignettes throughout the hacienda, starting with a small corner of a room. Later, Architect Felipe Almada was hired to refurbish the haciendas and restore original Moorish details.

Following our exploration of our gorgeous suite and unpacking, we took a self-guided tour of the lovely gardens and wound up at 5:30 p.m. at the Cantina. After this meet-and-greet function, a wonderful dinner was served at 6:00 p.m., followed by a fashion show with models showing off ethnic clothing of Senora, Mexico.

We were looking forward to sampling the food. Known to be of excellent quality, the Mexican Contemporary with a European-American flair food was just that. Pleasing to the palate, the five-course gourmet meal was a hit. Following wonderful conversation and live music, Steve and Kathi enthusiastically picked up the beat from the strumming guitars. Flowing

around the dance floor to the unique Mexican rhythm, they were caught up in the moment. The rest of us were just sort of mesmerized, taking in "the magic" by just being present in the moment.

We are learning quickly that you would be hard pressed to beat the hospitality, service and indeed the wonders of our little space in heaven, or should I say Mexico? Agreeably, it is like heaven here. As well, we were inevitably struck by cupid's arrow. No wonder Conde Nast Magazine calls it, "One of Mexico's most romantic hotels."

March 10

We were up and at 'em at 7a.m., not wanting to miss a moment of excitement this day held. We had a lovely breakfast, and then went to the Square of Alamos, partaking of a guided tour by a member of the visitor's center whose eyes were bloodshot, but his heart was of pure gold.

He gave us an interesting tour, including poking around an old-as-the-hills but-still-functioning printing office, something I doubt my great grandfather would have even used. They print one sheet at a time, with two watching, in an unbelievably slow process. Time just seemed to stop for me. We moved on, trekking through the dusty premises then viewing crumbling adobe, weeds and junk in the yard. Peeking through an old doorway, we saw more of the same. As we continued on, we could sense the guide's pride; he didn't see what we saw. He, in fact, loved showing off every pebble of this special little neck of the woods, no matter the condition.

We learned on this tour that many Americans (about 300 of the population of 10,000), living in nearby Gringo Gulch or the trailer park away from town, have now made Alamos their home or part-time residence. They truly share the same pride as our guide, and in addition, they are committed to helping financially and physically in the renovation of the area.

After a little shopping in the heart of the town at Plaza de las Armas, or Plaza, we explored the Plaza framed by old and stately buildings with arched entryways. We watched as elders with hunched shoulders sat on rickety benches, delighted in the antics of playful children nearby. Looking like they didn't have a care in the world, the children eagerly sucked on hard candies

while the square's palm trees swayed. The hundred-year-old bandstand with its artistic leather ceiling and a push cart peddler selling juice gave credence to the fact that this was a unique place.

Other older children and teenagers were in the video arcade across from the Plaza, dressed and acting just like American kids. Working frantically on video machines, their mouths were busy chomping on gum or candy while arms were pumping the machines, with one hand in constant motion while the other was juggling a cola. Bursts of laughter and rambunctious singing to the loud Mexican music turned us around and out of the small hot room in a flash. As much as we love music, we decided leaving was better than becoming deaf.

Across the street is the Purissima Concepcion Church, with its aisles lined with colorful flowers; we envisioned an elegant wedding in the near future. Built after the second half of the 18th century, the church has stood the test of time. On the outside is a Baroque style facade; in the interior there is an old arcade, spectacular columns and preserved wooden furniture. Bullet marks, evidence of hard times during the Mexican Revolution, can still be seen on the tower hovering above us; our guide seemed proud to point them out to us.

A sign of resilience now permeates Alamos. Historically, the opulence here was the target of bandits and Indians. During the 1920's and 1930's, much of the population left; the once fabulous mansions fell in disrepair. Then it became a Mecca for writers, artists and entrepreneurs. A dairy farmer from Pennsylvania accumulated two wives and many of the Plaza buildings. These widows thrive on his real estate acquisitions. I wonder if they live together now too. Many of the residences, owned by only three or four different owners throughout the town's history, are 200 to 300 years old.

Nearby the City Market explodes with life and bargaining, and an 18th century cemetery is preserved. A great cholera outbreak in 1750 in this region killed 6,000 people, and the cemetery could not accommodate all the bodies. Again, I wondered where they were finally put to rest. The City Hall, inaugurated in 1899, with its 48 iron columns and large stained-glass windows, tower and theatre, is a landmark building. The Mint, now a school,

was opened in 1827. It served as a silver mint during the days of the mining boom.

We had lunch at Santos and I later had a facial, something I have only done once before, while Phil relaxed. Steve then provided us information on "cactus juice" or his personal rendition of the Tequila 101 class in the Cantina. We sampled different tequilas before some of us left for a horseback ride to the barbeque "South of the Border-Cowboy Style" at Santos Ranch. It was a very laid back ride, I must say. As we "strolled" with the horses over the cobblestone roads, we witnessed humble homes with plastic Clorox bottles tied to the doorknobs and freshly planted palm trees plopped in the ground randomly placed on mounds of dirt and rock. Standing beside the road, friendly-looking locals waved as we passed; teenagers in old cars chugged along spewing dust. Other cars filled with large families and screaming engines, left clouds of trailing smoke behind them.

As we arrived, we were cordially greeted at Santos Ranch with a treat. Yes, you guessed. More margaritas! Delicious of course, they were appreciated after the ride! What ambience out in the wilderness with torch lights and wonderful Mariachi Mexican music. Some of us braved it and had a great time with our Santos bartenders and waiters, dancing Mexican two-step. I won't report exactly who that would be. It was fun, and we have the pictures as proof of a good time! After a delicious meal, we were driven back to the resort where in our suites romantic fires and plates of fruit tempted us. This is the life, isn't it! I wonder if Jim and Nancy need another maid and waiter. We could handle that for a few months of the year! Now, that's a thought, isn't it?

But, what would life be like, I wonder? I searched the Alamos website and found the current calendar of events. Some things we could do would be to volunteer with Amigos de Educacion and give home tours or help in the school. We could spend Monday nights at Santos for dinner and a film, or take dance classes, join the History Club or learn Spanish. We could always shop at the Sunday market along the Arroyo Aduana or take a plane ride or we could always just hang out at the hangar. We could also have a movie at the Cine Alamos, the Museum Theatre on Sundays. There are plenty of art functions, hikes, dances, and a carnival, travel log & lecture series, cooking school, fashion shows, crafts, monthly art walk through galleries, book

signings, photography classes or belly dancing to keep us out of trouble. Hmm. Food for thought, isn't it?

March 11

Some early birds took a crisp morning walk and scaled the hill near Santos, shopping for the local crafts. We took a walk to the Plaza before we went on the Home and Garden Tour. We love to take these tours while on vacation and often take them when we are staying in Puerto Vallarta; it helps us more fully understand the culture and art of the locals. This morning tour in the historic district was sponsored by the Amigos De Educacion De Alamos; our donations provide tuition, scholarships and promote better education for the children of Alamos. Most mansions on tour were built in the late 1700's, abandoned and then restored after WWII.

We were interested in the history of the area. Alamos was one of the most important Mexican cities. In the 1700's, the silver mines were of greatest importance to the 30,000 inhabitants, who were mostly the rich Spanish from Spain; rich mineral gushed forth in the area and a flood of people arrived.

Architects were sent here to develop the Moorish fashion with homes built around courtyards. In colonial mansions, all rooms open onto the patio; vegetable gardens were often planted on the roofs of the homes. In the 18th century, Andalusian silver barons shared the cobblestone streets with horses, roosters, mules and pickup trucks. The 19th century brought about much success, but this splendor was lost by the 20th century, but now, it has resurged.

Welcoming archways entice visitors. The cobblestone streets transport us to the past and slow us down in the present. The town is quaint and charming.

In the homes were many interesting antiques. Furniture was painstakingly made by hand. In one home, a dining room table was made from one piece of wood and was large enough for twelve people to dine together. The table, laden with interesting shells and mood-setting candles, was inviting. Wooden beams lined the ceilings; wooden doors allowed us to enter a typical garage, laundry room and storage room. Termites have caused problems, however, a solution was found in the amop tree, a cedar 14 feet in length which the

termites don't like. Now, though, beams are usually made of cement, and most walls, which are a thick adobe and mud combination, are painted in faux style.

Residential properties range in price from US\$20,000 to US\$750,000. Land can be owned here, but if you buy land in Mexican beach areas, it goes into a trust. Currently, when a home is sold it is sold with the furniture. By the way, city water may only be used for two hours three times a week; there are no wells.

The Huicholis Indian crafts were abundant in the homes and stores. Old antique pieces, dug up from Guatemala, and handmade Mayan rugs contributed to the festive feel in the homes. Tiles, also made by hand, were on floors, kitchens and bathrooms, and many rooms had small fireplaces desperately needed on cold nights. Most of the houses had large collections of books and art depicting life in Mexico, and the owners were knowledgeable about the history as well as appreciative of the culture of the indigenous people.

On our way back to the resort, I stopped by the junior high school, next to Santos, and visited with the principal. His English was limited, and my Spanish was questionable, so he called in a teacher to translate. With permission, I visited several classrooms and took pictures of students and the principal. The classrooms are quaint, but there was a remarkable computer lab with students hovering over each other, very much on task, with no teacher to be found. I spoke with some students in the courtyard; they were playful, congenial and respectful as I continued to butcher what little Spanish I contributed to the conversation. But, their smiles told me all I wanted to know! They are content human beings.

After lunch, I ventured back to the salon for a full body massage. I'm getting used to this lifestyle, but I wasn't quite sure what was involved. I went in on blind trust and found it to be a very professional experience with the same masseuse I had the day before. In fact, later in the day, I saw her cleaning the suite next door to ours.

At 2:30 p.m., Phil and four others went to the Casino, next to the Cantina, for the "Texas Holdum." Out to earn the "big bucks," they were pleased that

Jamie and Roberto also joined. The players took the game seriously you could tell. The look of their poker faces didn't match their 25 cent chips plopped on the table. They could have fooled me; I thought they were playing with hundred dollar chips. An experienced dealer, quite a nice guy and particularly not reminiscent of the ones found in Vegas, kept the game lively and enjoyable. Congratulations John Slais, who was the big winner! He took home the bacon, so to speak, with the whooping winnings of US\$80. Others spent the day swimming, sun bathing, reading, walking the town, relaxing and shopping.

After cocktail time and lively group pictures, we ambled into the Cantina for a wonderful evening of "Noche Mexicana" Fiesta. What a gala event! With a Mexican buffet served by the resort's chef with delicious filet mignon (some of the best we've ever tasted, by the way) or grilled boneless chicken breast and traditional Mexican dishes, it was definitely appealing to our senses. For entertainment, we smiled as fingers flitted over guitars and danced on the bongo drums with Roberto's musicians. What beautiful, soulful sounds! Since we've been home, we have played Roberto's CD over and over. These musicians have remarkable talent!

After our feast, we moved on to the pool area for another delightful event with the famous dancers of the Itson Ballet Folkorico accompanied by harp, guitars, drums and fantastic vocals. The highlight was seeing Jamie and Roberto dance for us beneath the stars. It was incredibly melodic and romantic; we didn't want the evening, or our stay at Santos, to end. We'll be back! But, before we do come back, we want to say thank you to Nancy, Jim, Jamie and Roberto and staff for a wonderful time and best wishes for a speedy recovery, Jim. We missed both you and Nancy. Thanks Steve and Kathie for coordinating such a memorable trip!

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Roberto's CD: Te Digo Adios- Los Hacendados
available from the resort (several were available)

Sonora website: www.sonoraturismo.gob.mx
Information about Alamos