

México: One Journalist's View

my
The



By Linda Ellerbee

Sometimes I've been called a maverick because I don't always agree with colleagues, but then, only dead fish swim with the stream all the time. stream here is Mexico .

You would have to be living on another planet to avoid hearing how dangerous Mexico has become, and, yes, its true drug wars have escalated violence in Mexico , causing collateral damage, a phrase I hate.

Collateral damage is a cheap way of saying that innocent people, some of them tourists, have been robbed, hurt or killed.

But that's not the whole story. Neither is this. This is my story.

I'm a journalist who lives in New York City , but has spent considerable time in Mexico , specifically Puerto Vallarta , for the last four years. I'm in Vallarta now. And despite what I'm getting from the U.S. media, the 24-hour news networks in particular, I feel as safe here as I do at home in New York , possibly safer. I walk the streets of my Vallarta neighborhood alone day or night. And I don't live in a gated community, or any other All-Gringo neighborhood. I live in Mexico . Among Mexicans. I go where I want –which does not happen to include bars where prostitution and drugs are the basic products–, and take no more precautions than I would at home in New York; which is to say I don't wave money around, I don't act the Ugly American, I do keep my eyes open, I'm aware of my surroundings, and I try not to behave like a fool.

I've not always been successful at that last one. One evening a friend left the house I was renting in Vallarta at that time, and, unbeknownst to me, did not slam the automatically-locking door on her way out. Sure enough, less than an hour later a stranger did come into my house. A burglar? Robber? Kidnapper? Killer? Drug lord?

No, it was a local police officer, the beat cop for our neighborhood! who, on seeing my unlatched door, entered to make sure everything (including me) was okay. He insisted on walking with me around the house, opening closets, looking behind doors and, yes, even under beds, to be certain no one else had wandered in, and that nothing was missing. He was polite, smart and kind, but before he left, he lectured me on having not checked to see that my friend had locked the door behind her. In other words, he told me to use my common sense.

Do bad things happen here? Of course they do. Bad things happen everywhere, but the murder rate here is much lower than, say, New Orleans , and if there are bars on many of the ground floor windows of houses here, well, the same is true where I live, in Greenwich

Village, which is considered a swell neighborhood — house prices start at about \$4 million – including the bars on the ground floor windows.

There are good reasons thousands of people from the United States are moving to Mexico every month, and it's not just the lower cost of living, a hefty tax break and less snow to shovel... Mexico is a beautiful country, a special place. The climate varies, but is plentifully mild, the culture is ancient and revered, the young are loved unconditionally, the old are respected, and I have yet to hear anyone mention Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, or Madonna's attempt to adopt a second African child, even though, with such a late start, she cannot possibly begin to keep up with Angelina Jolie.

And then there are the people. Generalization is risky, but— in general — Mexicans are warm, friendly, generous and welcoming. If you smile at them, they smile back. If you greet a passing stranger on the street, they greet you back. If you try to speak even a little

Spanish, they tend to treat you as though you were fluent. Or at least not an idiot. I have had taxi drivers track me down after leaving my wallet or cell phone in their cab. I have had someone run out of a store to catch me because I have overpaid by twenty cents. I have been introduced to and come to love a people who celebrate a day dedicated to the dead as a recognition of the cycles of birth and death and birth — and the 15th birthday of a girl, an important rite in becoming a woman — with the same joy.

Too much of the noise you're hearing about how dangerous it is to come to Mexico is just that — noise. But the media love noise, and too many journalists currently making it don't live here. Some have never even been here. They just like to be photographed at night, standing near a spotlighted border crossing, pointing across the line to some imaginary country from hell. It looks good on TV.

Another thing. The U.S. media tend to lump all of Mexico into one big bad bowl. Talking about drug violence in Mexico without naming a state or city where this is taking place is rather like looking at the horror of Katrina and saying: Damn! Did you know the U.S. is under water? or reporting on the shootings at Columbine or the bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City by saying that kids all over the U.S. are shooting their classmates and all the grownups are blowing up buildings. The recent rise in violence in Mexico has mostly occurred in a few states, and especially along the border. It is real, but it does not describe an entire country.

It would be nice if we could put what's going on in Mexico in perspective, geographically and emotionally. It would be nice if we could remember that, as has been noted more than once, these drug wars wouldn't be going on if people in the United States didn't want the drugs, or if other people in the United States weren't selling Mexican drug lords the guns. Most of all, it would be nice if more people in the United States actually came to this part of America — Mexico is also North America— , y, you will recall) to see for themselves what a fine place Mexico really is, and how good a vacation —or a life— here can be.

So come on down and get to know your southern neighbors. I think you'll like it here.

Especially the people.

LINDA ELLERBEE