

Sombreros
Tequila &
Sin

Tourist Districts of
Mexican Border Towns

By Douglas
C. Towne

MORELOS

THE
OLDEN
BRUSH

CURIOS

L
★ A

D

O

D

S

PAICHO'S
MARKET

CROSBY

BAR

LIQUORS

LIQUORS

GLANCING AT A WALL BEARING THE MESSAGE, “HASTA LA VISTA: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE UNITED STATES,” YOUR HEART BEATS FAST WITH BOTH EXCITEMENT AND TREPIDATION.

(Figure 1)

After a brief hesitation, you push through the turnstile, a *turista* in a new world. Instantly, a young boy selling Chicklets gum materializes at your side. Curbside, a driver swings his taxi door open, warmly beckoning you in with a wave of his hand. “*Senor!* I take you to the bullfight or to see some beautiful girls! Anything you want....”

Along the street, eye-catching signs flicker to life. A World War II B-29 bomber (**Figure 2**) seems to erupt from a liquor store’s façade, as though the frenzy for drink was so great that an immediate airdrop was required to replenish stocks. Nearby, a voluptuous Latin lady is perched on the rim of a martini glass (**Figure 3**), kicking up her high heels to entice pedestrians into a nightclub, tinged in crimson light.

A curio store proprietor blocks the sidewalk, greeting you like a long-lost friend. “*Amigo*, a free shot of tequila just for coming in and looking around!” A furious bargaining session soon erupts and you leave toting maracas, tequila, and a garish *sombrero* that will undoubtedly find itself in the Salvation Army pile once you return home. This cargo exposes you as an



1 – This mural is on the pedestrian bridge (spanning the Rio Grande) which links the cities of El Paso and Juarez. — All photos by the author

2 – A neon B-29 bomber advertises a liquor store along *curio row* (Obregon Street) in Nogales, Sonora.



Douglas Towne is an SCA board member and book review editor of the *SCA Journal*. He last wrote for the *SCA Journal* on Arizona motels (Fall 2000). He thanks Maureen Freark for editing assistance, Carol Ahlgren for postcards, and the many friends who have accompanied him on border town explorations – especially the three cohorts who in 1980 braved a savage Rocky Mountain ice storm and a Vega station wagon to explore the wonders of El Paso/Juarez, the seminal roadtrip against which all subsequent journeys have been measured.

easy mark for vendors crowding the sidewalks. You keep pushing through the bedlam, refusing offers of goods and food, as the frantic mix of activity, sights, sounds, and odors threatens to overwhelm the senses.

Then you are stopped in your tracks by something from a carnival sideshow – a burro, adorned with a large purple flower, hooked to an elaborately decorated cart sans wheels. Quickly paying the fee, you climb aboard as the nearby *mariachi* band strikes up your request, the old folk song *Guantanamera*. As the entrepreneur readies his Polaroid, you affect a revolutionary pose emulating Pancho Villa. The resulting photo plainly tells the story. (Figure 4)

Just minutes after crossing the border, you're already loaded down with knick-knacks and carry photographic evidence of having a great time – while probably creating a fool of yourself – in Mexico! A strong case can be made that the most exciting commercial strips designed for the American tourist aren't located in the United States but are found along the border in tourist districts of Mexican towns.

Mexican Border Communities

Stretching along the 1,951-mile boundary with Mexico (see page 23) are approximately two dozen crossings (Figure 5) where sister communities have developed on each side, with the Mexican towns generally larger. The orderly street grid of U.S. cities also contrasts dramatically with the chaotic design of the Mexican communities. But Mexican ambiance extends well into the U.S., with highway signs commonly using the label *Old Mexico*, perhaps in an unconscious effort to get visitors into a south-of-the border mindset. Commercial signs both new and old (Figure 6) add to this orientation process.

On the Mexican side near each crossing is a *tourist district* filled with enterprises offering goods and services

unavailable or more expensive in the U.S., or enhanced by a trip south of the border. Tourist districts range in size from a few businesses in a small town to over a dozen blocks in cities such as Tijuana or Juarez. Not surprisingly, their size reflects the city's volume of for-

ign visitors rather than the size of its native population. The tourist district's boundaries are usually sharply defined by land use changes or by an abrupt halt to signs in English.¹ A curious dichotomy exists: Mexicans rarely visit or shop in these tourist districts, while Americans rarely stray from their boundaries.

Commercial activity is focused on a single street termed *curio row* because curio stores are the predominant commercial enterprise along them (Figure 7). Liquor stores, pharmacies, money-exchange outlets, restaurants, dance clubs, and bars are also located on curio row, while businesses such as medical and dental offices and go-go joints are usually relegated to its side streets.

Similarities to Route 66

Tourist strips everywhere serve similar functions, whether in a Mexican border town or along an American highway (epitomized by Route 66). Each creates an idealized atmosphere based on regional themes. Caricature and stereotypes often substitute for the authentic to appeal to fun-seeking vacationers who want to avoid the real world's messy ambiguities. In varying proportions, history, myth, reality, fantasy, and whimsy are thrown into the mix.

In tourist districts, visitors encounter a version of an idyllic, rural Old Mexico resembling an aging Hollywood movie set. (Figure 8) Men are often portrayed in a *siesta* pose reclined against a saguaro cactus, knees drawn up to the chest, a *sombrero* tilted over the face, and wearing white cotton *campesino* (peasant) clothing. Women typically have long black hair and wear a low-cut dress highlighting their curvaceous figures. (Figure 9) These images of peacefully

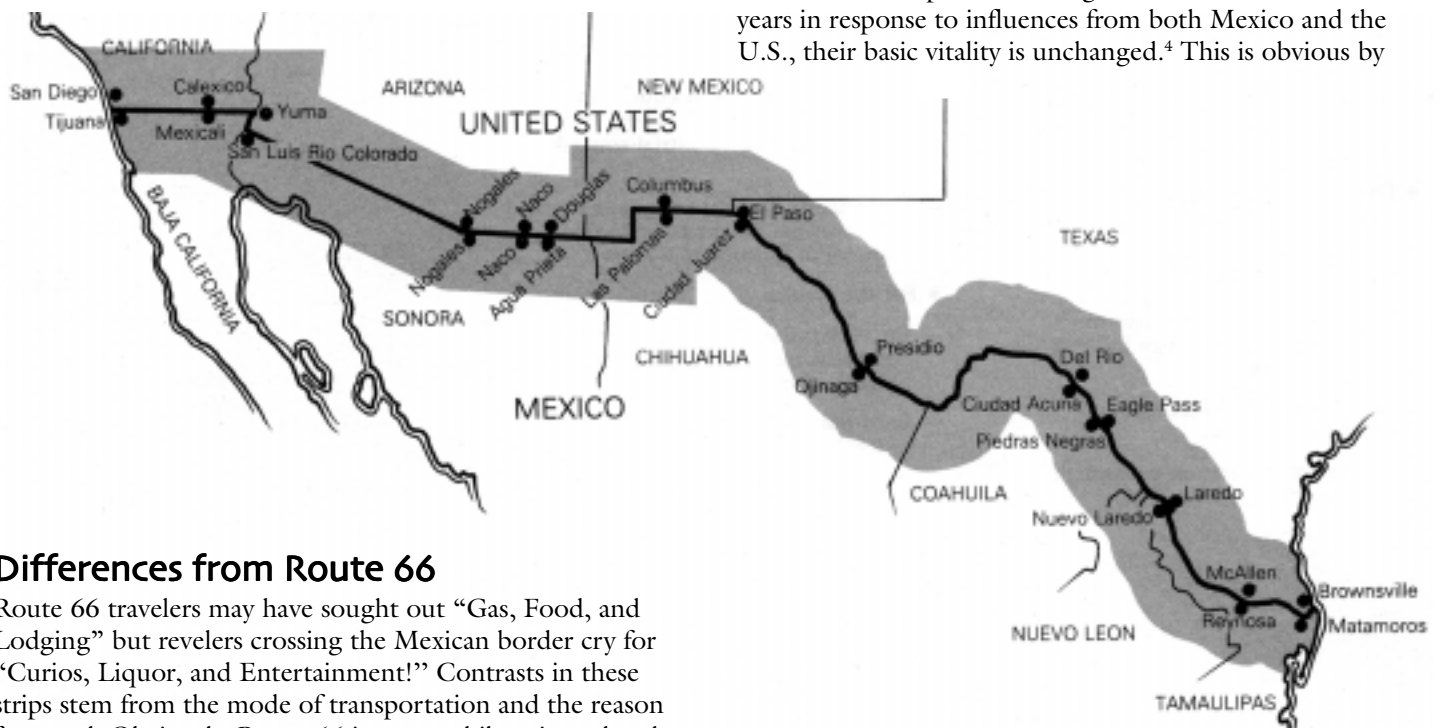


9 - This patriotic *senorita* is from a calendar.

slumbering peasants and vivacious *senoritas* are how Americans like to imagine their neighbors south of the border.

These clichés were originally conceived from travel accounts and posters created after the turbulent Mexican revolution (1910-1917) and appealed to Americans tiring of the pressures of industrialized society.² Their popularity continues today, relatively untouched by changes in Mexican society. In reality, border town residents are more likely adorned in L.A. Laker's T-shirts or the latest fashion trends, and assemble goods in foreign-owned *maquiladores* plants. Like Route 66, the contrived border atmosphere works to please outsiders rather than accurately reflecting local culture.

Neon is used lavishly in tourist districts to help foster the fiesta atmosphere. (Figure 10) Neon's associations in America with tawdry enterprises like go-go joints and flophouse motels intensify the honky-tonk feel of tourist districts. Some, such as Ciudad Acuna across from Del Rio, Texas, have such a plethora of neon that they hearken back to photographs of Route 66 during its halcyon days. (Figure 11) As in the U.S., most of the classic older neon is used outside on large signs. Recent neon creations are found inside the front windows of the business where the glass tubing is protected from both the elements and vandals.



Differences from Route 66

Route 66 travelers may have sought out “Gas, Food, and Lodging” but revelers crossing the Mexican border cry for “Curios, Liquor, and Entertainment!” Contrasts in these strips stem from the mode of transportation and the reason for travel. Obviously, Route 66 is automobile-oriented and originally was a pathway for travelers rather than a destination in itself. In contrast, tourist districts are largely pedestrian-oriented destinations, which amplifies the experience since the visitors have left behind the relative safety and insulation of their autos.

Enterprises common to Route 66 are largely ancillary features of tourist districts. Visitors typically cross the border on foot for an afternoon or evening of fun. Hence, gas and lodging are rarely needed. Many Americans also eschew food consumption. The unsanitary appearance of taco stands

makes many fearful of a dreaded case of *Montezuma's Revenge*. Others are put off by the exotic food offerings of some establishments. However, clean-looking restaurants whose menus cater to *gringos* are located in most tourist districts. Some even attain legendary status such as La Caverna Restaurant in Nogales where patrons once could enjoy fine dining in a former gold mine carved into a hill overlooking the town.³

Tourist districts also differ from present-day Route 66 in their vitality. As much as road enthusiasts adore Route 66, it can be likened to a museum. One can eat at retro cafes, drink cocktails in ornate art-deco bars, watch movies at a drive-in, and stay in motels with bizarre themes, all in an attempt to recapture the essence of the Mother Road. But this highway was bypassed by interstates long ago. For better or worse, the travel frenzy has moved to the bland, look-alike interstates. The places and characters still encountered on Route 66 are irreplaceable, yet the highway is but a distant echo of its halcyon days. Route 66 can and should be preserved, appreciated, and enjoyed, but it cannot be recreated. Time has passed and the highway and this country have changed.

In contrast, while Mexican tourist districts have emphasized different aspects of their goods and services over the years in response to influences from both Mexico and the U.S., their basic vitality is unchanged.⁴ This is obvious by

how quickly they respond to new opportunities. An excellent example was evident in the Nogales tourist district a few weeks after the anthrax-laden mailings occurred in the U.S. Every pharmacy had a large sign out front that read, “Protect Yourself! CIPRO Antibiotic Available Here. No Prescription Required.”

Shopping on Curio Row

From cheap trinkets to expensive handmade crafts, curios are a popular way for tourists to bring home the foreign flavor of