

COLOR

Mexico. Street vendors offer small items spread out on sidewalk blankets. Higher value goods, stamped “Hecho en Mexico,” are found in curio stores, the most common commercial enterprise in tourist districts. These shops range from cubbyholes in artist’s alleys to elegant department stores. Most are smaller stores packed floor to ceiling with goods that traditionally include liquor, glassware,

leatherwear, silver jewelry, wrought-iron furniture, pottery, woodcarvings, blankets, *pinatas*, Cuban cigars, and black velvet paintings. The *turista* market keeps many of these folk arts alive.⁵

Proprietors will often be out front serving as barkers, luring customers in with a variety of creative slants. Once the tourist enters the store, so begins the dance; a unique characteristic of curio stores is that goods seldom have a set price, and if they do, few ever pay it. Bargaining is the requisite dalliance – a theatrical and competitive game that many on both sides of the counter thrive on. After selecting an item, the staging often involves the customer starting to exit the store because the price is too high and/or the merchant putting the merchandise back on display because he can’t sell it for that low a price. Usually, the second act involves the other party making a counter offer. The grand finale is the consummation of the transaction at a price acceptable to both parties.

Pharmacies are an increasingly important retail segment of curio row. Prescription drugs are generally much cheaper in Mexico and one does not require a doctor’s notice to obtain them. Customs officials however, may take a far stricter view of letting certain drugs into the U.S. without a prescription. This market has become so prominent that special bus trips to Mexican border towns now cater to senior citizens wanting to stock up on their medications.

Liquor and Entertainment

During the day, shopping is the predominant tourist expenditure; at night, entertainment is what brings

in the dollars.⁶ Liquor is the link between these major functions of the tourist district. Firewater is big business in border towns, either for purchases by the bottle for later consumption in the U.S. (Figure 12) or by the drink in bars, restaurants, or nightclubs. Varieties made in Mexico such as tequila, mescal, rum, kahlua, triple sec, brandy, and beer can be obtained at discount prices. For the connoisseur, boutique labels are found that are rarely seen north of the border. U.S. border states allow a token bottle of liquor to be brought across free or with a minor tax assessed.



3 – A nighttime view of the risqué nightclub, “The Four Queens” on a side street off curio row (Revolutionary Boulevard) in Tijuana, Baja Norte.



4 - Gringos enjoying the wonders of Mexicoland in Nogales, Sonora.



5 - The border crossing station at El Paso in a mid-century postcard.

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Most visitors won't drink the tap water in a border town, envisioning it teeming with bacteria. In contrast, these same individuals will happily pound ice-filled margaritas all day, claiming, "The alcohol will kill the germs!" Liquor's popularity is only partially explained by generally cheaper drink prices; the real kicker is the "anything goes" atmosphere.

(Figures 13 & 14) Rowdy behavior such as dancing on the bar or leaping over it to mix your own cocktail is not uncommon. Some establishments capitalize on this party mentality by featuring novelties such as a "dentist's chair." For a set price, a customer reclines, mouth open, while the "dentist" pours as much tequila down the throat as the "patient" can handle. (Figure 15)

This party atmosphere attracts young, and especially underage, drinkers since few teens are ever refused drinks in Mexico. Nightly border traffic has increased since the U.S. raised the drinking age in the 1980s. Catering to this new constituency, dance clubs (Figure 16) are likely to feature the latest in house techno or hip-hop music. The droves of underage drinkers crossing the border to carouse has a historical precedent; the initial growth spurts of many border towns occurred during the 1930s when Prohibition resulted in a wave of bars opening for their newfound clientele (Figure 17).⁷ As a result, tourist district entertainment has evolved to include teenybopper hangouts in addition to their traditional role as a sleazy haven for pleasure seekers. However, their



6 – A ghost neon sign near El Centro, Calif., touted tour buses replete with "box lunches" to the border.



7 Juarez Avenue or *curio row* in Juarez, Chihuahua.



8 - Classic postcard of Juarez recalling stereotypes from the past.



10 – “Save Water, Drink Beer” sums up the party mentality of Pancho’s Bar in Ciudad Acuna, Coahuila.

historic reputation as swinging sin cities continues to lure visitors.

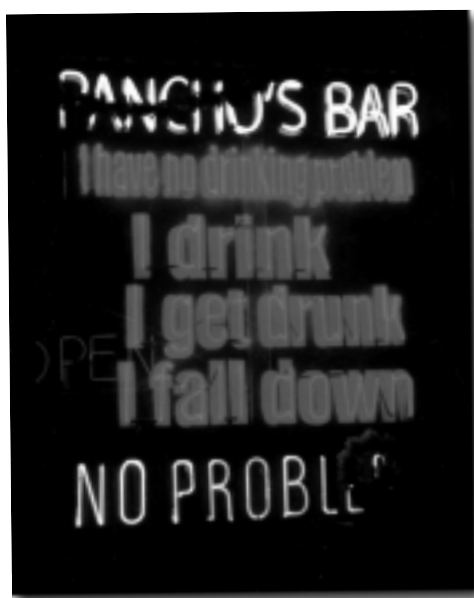
Go-go joints found on the margins of tourist districts are easily identified by signage designed to arouse testosterone (Figure 18). Some clubs are relatively tame, featuring bar girls that dance and converse with patrons in return for kickbacks on the customer’s overpriced drinks.⁸ Others are strip clubs, which may double as brothels, working in conjunction with nearby “by the hour” hotels. Hotels may also operate independently, with ladies advertising their presence by seductively prancing on street balconies. *Caveat emptor!* In the age of AIDS, this can be rough territory in many ways. And some are old-fashioned clip joints; after money is paid for services, steroid-laden bouncers appear to “86” the patron.⁹

In some towns, go-go joints have diminished in both numbers and glamour, with surviving establishments often rundown. Others have moved from the tourist



13 & 14 - Neon signs in Pancho’s Bar encourage tourists *not* to drink responsibly.

12 - Border researcher LeAnn Baugh has found her niche in a Ciudad Acuna liquor store.



11 – See page 18.

15 – The author undergoing the rigors of academic research.





16 - The *Up & Down Country Disco's* classic neon sign along *curio row* in Ciudad Acuna.



17 - A classic postcard of a Juarez nightclub.

18 - The sign for a go-go joint on a Juarez *curio row* side street informs pedestrians not to bring these ladies home to mom.



district to isolated parts of town rarely otherwise visited by Americans.¹⁰ Yet in some towns, many new establishments have opened, exemplifying the cyclical nature of many border enterprises.

Conclusions

Outliving the Berlin Wall, the U.S.-Mexico border has been called the most potent political demarcation of our time.¹¹ Like Route 66, it is part of our culture and psyche, a place beyond America's prevailing morality and law. It has been celebrated in song and literature as both paradise and hellhole. Artists as diverse as Sinatra, Kerouac, and Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass touted this region as a place of frolic and personal liberation. The region's dark side has been admonished by Bob Dylan (*Just Like Tom Thumbs Blues*), the Souther-Hillman-Furay Band (*Border Town*), and the Grateful Dead (*Mexicali Blues*). The sometimes-uneasy mixing of cultures was nicely captured in *Wall of Voodoo's*, *Mexican Radio*.

Tourists contribute to the love/hate relationship. Despite the huge daily tourist influx to cities such as Tijuana, travel literature and word-of-mouth generally decry or ignore it. The same goes other border towns which are characterized as dirty, sleazy, garish, and corrupt.¹² The border is seen as a transient, dangerous, and crass region with the American side depressed by the poverty and filth of Mexico, while destitute peasants overrun the Mexican side that is roiled by American values.¹³

Despite this, tourist districts remain exotic, yet convenient, playgrounds for Americans. Visitors want to shop, drink, be entertained, and perhaps even enjoy a meal in an idealized, relatively safe "Old Mexico" that still possesses a fiesta atmosphere tinged with a faint sense of dangerous, foreign intrigue.

For roadside enthusiasts, these tourist districts might be the best available substitute to experience the raucous excitement that two-lane highways such as Route 66 generated in their heyday. The unusual is the norm, rules can be bent, excitement is rampant, action is nonstop, and almost anything is available for a price. ●

¹ Arreola, Daniel D. and James R. Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1993).

² Oles, James, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1993).

³ Harvill, George G., *A Newcomer's Guide to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona, 1968).

⁴ Arreola and Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities*.

⁵ Oles, *South of the Border*.

⁶ Arreola and Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Longewiesche, William, *Cutting For Sign* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1993).

¹² Arreola and Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities*.

¹³ Longewiesche, *Cutting For Sign*.