

Keep Calm and Carry On

Use common sense
to stay safe and sound
in Mexico

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If you've been on a tropical vacation, chances are you visited an all-inclusive resort and stayed right there. Or if you left, it was on a tour bus. Travelling around Mexico any other way may sound scary but it's not. Like any Canadian or American city, you need to use logic and everything will be fine.

As regular visitors to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico we constantly explain to people how safe the city is. Filled mostly with Canadians, less Americans and a few people from other countries, one sometimes has to shake their head to remember they are in a foreign country.

And while we've ventured to neighbouring villages in the past, this year we ventured out a bit further to the fishing village of La Penita de Jaltemba. Located about 65 kilometres north of Puerto Vallarta on Highway 200, the village was where we'd agreed to meet up with former Thessalon residents Bill and Nancy Landon.

The Landons, who reside in Sault Ste. Marie – and at their Basswood Lake cottage in the summer – have long been fans of Mexico. Much of their time has been spent on the east coast in small villages near Cancun but the increasing tourist population saw them looking to find a new place this year and so, on the recommendation of a friend, a work cohort of Bill's, they decided to try La Penita.

La Penita is described as a small fishing village. The population is estimated at 20,000 and unlike neighbouring towns to the south, you don't see any resorts or big hotels or high rises. Not yet anyway.

And although the town has everything one needs, it still feels small and – Mexican.

We'd only travelled as far as the local Puerto Vallarta busses would take us in the past but for this journey we needed to take a bus to the airport neighbourhood where we'd find the autobus station. It was there we purchased tickets for the pacific bus to La Penita. Cost \$304 pesos return—that's about \$21 each. Besides comfy fabric seats, this bus showed movies—though the driver turned it off and played Mexican music instead.

Though La Penita is relatively undiscovered, it's right next door to the more popular Rincon de Guayabitos. Though it's La Penita that's best known for its Thursday market. Tianguis (open-air) Market. Where it's estimated as many as 100 vendors come to



Gerry tastes ceviche near the La Penita beach.



Gerry and Pauline Clark at La Penita with Bill and Nancy Landon.



Fishing boats parked on the sand near the Malecon.



A street in downtown La Penita.

PHOTOS BY PAULINE CLARK/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

dissembled. Rides and games of chance. the beach.

We admire the immenseness of

At the beach, we watch a policia get out of his truck and head to

someone gives him some coins. Before we leave, we walk up to

sell their wares. Everything from fruits and vegetables to traditional handicrafts. A large community of Canadians lives in the town. The annual Carnaval was held in February.

Located on Jaltemba Bay next to Rincón de Guayabitos

Palm trees and benches in the centre median.

Had to set watches back an hour as this is different state than Puerto Vallarta and is on Mountain time.

There's no big grocery chains — yes, places like Puerto Vallarta have chain stores. And Walmart. In la Penita, people shop in the local stores along La Avenida (Main Street) where everything is fresh. The area is known for its fruit, particularly mango, bananas and pineapple. There's a fish market. Fruit and vegetable stores, a tiny hole in the wall where a woman sells chicken and a butcher counter. There are tiny stores selling a wide variety of household items ranging from dishes and utensils to storage containers and towels. There are also ATMS, banks, doctors and clinics and just about anything else one would need so despite looking a little less "Americanized" than some of the towns before it (Sayulita and Bucerias), it's quite comfy.

Another attraction in the area are "El Santuario," the petroglyphs archeological site that's not far away. It's there that remains of petroglyphs that were chipped into the volcanic rock by an Aztec tribe some 2000 years ago.

Around the corner, there's the plaza — every Mexican town has one, a gathering place for the locals where it's common to see vendors, families, musicians. Today there are the remains of a carnival being

"It was fun to see the Mexican families enjoying it," says Bill.

And at the end of the street, there's a short Malecon. Bill says he's heard the Malecon will be expanding in the future but they hope not so much that the fishing boats on shore are no longer parked there.

When we walk the beach, we admire the view. There is endless beach in both directions. An island in the distance. The pelicans swoop and dive in the water and a nearby tree is filled with (what kind of birds). "Be careful walking," warns Bill. "They're dirty." We step away from the branches as we tread through the sand.

We look at the RV campground, a place for rent. In the distance, a villa we presume is privately owned towers at the end of the beach. It's not the end though. The beach goes on for miles. I'd walk it if I were staying here.

And then we come to cemetery of forgotten graves. It's a strange site, this crumbling and dilapidated cemetery, given how truly respectful Mexican people are of their dead. We've heard it was damaged by hurricanes. We walk through, unsure if we should do so but it draws us. Crumbling ruins, broken stones and yet remains of artificial flowers and candles that look as though they could have been placed here yesterday. In fact, it's said that locals still go in to tidy the graves during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) in November. The graves, like many Mexican cemeteries are like shrines. Much of the destruction occurred back in 2002 when Hurricane Kenna barrelled through the Jaltemba Bay area. It's at the north end of

a termite's nest in a tree where you can follow the lines of the creepy crawlers from the base up the limbs to the nest. No wonder cement is the material of choice here.

As we exit the cemetery to the street, we notice homes that are noticeably new and yet still maintaining the historic style of the town.

We look at the curved roofs of the buildings and Bill explains that he's learned they were built like that to withstand potential hurricane strength winds.

There are tourists here. And seasonal residents. The Landons have met people already even though they themselves have only been here for a week. Their apartment is in a new building, they found it during a visit to check out the area in November. The building is new and not huge, only 6 units? But the layout provides a cross breeze from the nearby ocean. No air conditioning is needed.

The couple had worried the unit wouldn't be ready, having just been under construction in November but it's complete and they've settled in to life in this town of 20,000.

Not only do they love Mexico, the Landons have a deep appreciation for Mexico, evident as Bill stops to chat with a local at ceviche stand where he ends up having us all taste the spicy lime shrimp on a taco chip. Later Nancy stops to admire a new baby, smiling at Mom who can't speak English.

On the way to La Penita, we pass Mexican homes that look as though they are a set for an old Western movie. We pass by jungles and then vendors. Rows and rows of copper pots catch my eye as the bus rolls past the beach town of Sayulita.

the beach, gun in hand. We are not alarmed. More curious as to what they are looking for. A minute later, they are back in their truck driving away. Once we were told they believe the guns make tourists feel safer, like we are being protected.

We see an old hotel. The exterior has symbols for WIFI, air conditioning, TV. We ask the rates. \$20 for a night. And we wonder what they look like.

We head for lunch. The restaurant is old Mexican, dusty exterior, plastic chairs and tablecloths and an all-white clientele. A big screen TV is showing the Brier. We order in English, stammering out the occasional Spanish word — gracias, por favor, si — the waitress, in turn stumbles I broken English to us. The restaurants here appear to be more authentic, more Mexican than in Puerto Vallarta. Especially if you're in the touristy areas closer to the Malecon and the ocean. The menu here is authentic. But then there are burgers and fries alongside the tacos. A beer costs about 25 pesos (that's \$1.70 Canadian) — that's slightly cheaper than in Puerto Vallarta.

Quesadillas (3), a fish taco, a tostado and two beer cost \$120 pesos — that's about \$9 Canadian.

We watch an older Mexican man come into the restaurant, fill an old jug from a tap under the sink outside the washroom, then leave. He does this twice. Bill watched this man fill the jug previously and decides to follow him. When he comes back, he's smiling. "He's watering the flowers," he explains. The fellow fills the jug a final time, wipes up the water he's splashed on the floor with his ball cap, and exits. Then he goes to the counter where

the coffee shop. It's la Penita coffee roasters. It looks like it's on fire as we approach but it's the beans being roasted at the entrance. The intense aroma greets us. I imagine the coffee will be thick and strong. But it's not too much so. It's rich and dark and well-flavoured. We agree it's amazing. I purchase a pound for just over \$5.00. It's still warm. Later, on the bus, I think I can smell the coffee and I realized the smell is on me.

We walk back to the corner where we wait for the return bus to Puerto Vallarta. These busses run every 20 minutes. We are at the highway and we can see the town extends beyond the highway up into the hills. Nancy says they've been told of a great restaurant up there and they plan to explore the area as they spend the coming weeks finding out about the town.

Like most who visit Mexico regularly, the Landons scoff at rumours of danger. After all, Toronto is not so safe either these days. Like us, they agree, there may be cities or states that are unsafe but knowing where you are, and using common sense go along ways.

One of the missing things so far is the availability of books. They are worrying they may run out before their visit ends. "We'll find some somewhere," says Nancy.

Bright pink and yellow neon signs in the farmacia name all the generic drugs available — over the counter for cheap.

For the Landons, Mexico is a wonderful reprieve from Northern Ontario winters. But they admit, they look forward to summer when they return to Basswood Lake cottage and once again become immersed in Thessalon.