

JOURNALS | THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY

# A little red house in Mexico

Falling in love with the city of Guanajuato

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STRANGE things can happen when you have your soul to a stranger. I am sitting under a manicured laurel tree in my plaza in the UNESCO heritage-listed city of Guanajuato in the north-central highlands of Mexico, four hours by road from Mexico City.

Schoolchildren, delighted by their playground freedom, race around a fountain. I turn to my bench neighbour, an American expatriate. "My soul feels right here," I tell her. I catch myself, did I really say that? What a cliché.

But with this revelation, my adventure begins.

On the corner of a tiny laneway off the plaza, a small two-storey house catches my eye. It's slender, painted red and white, with a Juliet balcony. The front spans barely a couple of arms' lengths. It's quirky, like a wedge of cheese with the tip cut off. It is irresistible. What if...

But the house is not for sale and I am not in the market. With Scottish ancestry, I'm about as Mexican as I hags, but I'm starting to believe that perhaps I was Latin in a former life as I feel inexplicably at home here in Guanajuato.

I have been falling for this place for some time. As a contributor to Lonely Planet's Mexico guide, and already a Spanish speaker, Guanajuato is my "patch". I've got to know some of the students at the university. I can map the networks of underground tunnels (the main transport thoroughfares) and the twisting alleyways lined with colonial mansions. I can identify the city's landmarks, including the many churches, plazas and the pink, blue and yellow houses that tumble down the otherwise arid Diego Rivera Museum, birthplace of Mexico's favourite painter, and the mummy museum, a bizarre collection of preserved bodies first excavated from ultra-dry crypts in 1866.

On this visit, guidebook research over, my partner, Chris, joins me at his first time here. "There's our casta," I joke, as we pass through the plaza. He gives me a bemused smile.

Over a week, however, Guanajuato casts its spell on Chris, too. We amble through Jardin Union, a stunning, elongated triangle of clipped trees, under which linger marach players, who smoke and strum their guitars. We put our way up to the awe-inspiring giant statue, La Epitafial, which affords incredible vistas.

We spend hours at a hole-in-the-wall coffee spot chatting with locals, including Felipe, an artist of *mojigangas* (giant papier-mâché figures), and Greg, an American who plays French horn in Guanajuato's symphony orchestra. Our holiday over, we must return to Australia, but we are restless. We miss Mexico's colour and festivals; we long for our eccentric friends and *gorditas* (street food) and even miss the loud pops of fireworks.

We try to make magic out of our nostalgia but Mexico has us by the pastimes.

A month passes and I receive an email from the American woman I met in the red house. Her news is incredible: the owners of the little red house are interested in selling. I feel like a character in a Mexican *telenovela* (soap opera).

I squeal in disbelief at such a coincidence, ting the owners and put in an offer. This process severely tests both my Spanish and my negotiation skills. The owners scoff one minute (have I omitted a zero?), and accept our offer the next (have I added a zero?). We seal the deal. We are the slightly stunned but very happy owners of a five-room Mexican casta. We let our loud whoops of joy, but there's just one detail we've overlooked—we've never

set foot inside. Smitten by the exterior, we know nothing of the lack of downpipes, water dribbling down a side wall and an asbestos water tank.

Really his. We panic. We ask friends to email us photos of the interior. The tenants, university students, still live there. The rooms are crammed with furniture, the downstairs living areas is a makeshift bedroom. Judging by overflowing baskets in the toilet, the plumbing is basic. The walls are covered in flattened cigarette packets, the students' post-modern artworks.

A jumble of hanging wires is connected to an old-fashioned telephone mouthpiece; it's an illegal phone. Nevertheless, just as all parents love the newborns, we can see the potential in our modest casta. Our friends are not so sure but my mother is more optimistic: "You'll be like that man in *A Year in Provence*," she exclaims excitedly. I cringe. Mum (bless her) has pointed towards at least 12 months of renovations.

It's two months before we can return to Guanajuato to formally claim the casta. Our old-fashioned bespectacled notary hands us the keys and shakes our hands (this is in lieu of the ceremony that should have been performed with the owners, the Martinez family, had we been here earlier to follow Mexican protocol). We giggle nervously as we shove open the warped front door. A bare cavern stares back at us. The former owners have not just cleaned up but cleaned out the house. In Mexico, we discover, a house sale doesn't necessarily include fittings.

A few days later, Señor and Señora Martinez invite us to meet them, clearly, they want to check us out. It's a joy-rat occasion. They lead us around the plaza and introduce us to its residents—the dentists, the proprietors of the mill shop and the internet place. The local butcher, directing a worker who is hauling a huge carcass across the plaza, calls out, "I'm your butcher" as he calms instant customer rights. The introductions are old-fashioned, subtle indications to the locals that we *gringos* are acceptable. We feel humbled.

Our jobs beckon, unfortunately, we must return to Australia. We have little choice but to direct the casta's design and renovations via remote control. To date, the project is proceeding *poco a poco* (little by little). And as many have predicted, we're frustrated by delays, that internal word *manana* and the telecommunications bps than time "has become part of our daily conversations. We are not even sure how long we can live in Guanajuato each year, but that is irrelevant. Once it's finished, just to open La Casta Raja to friends so they, too, can experience the city's magic, even if they want nothing more than to wear a sombrero, drink margaritas on the terrace and do some soul-searching.

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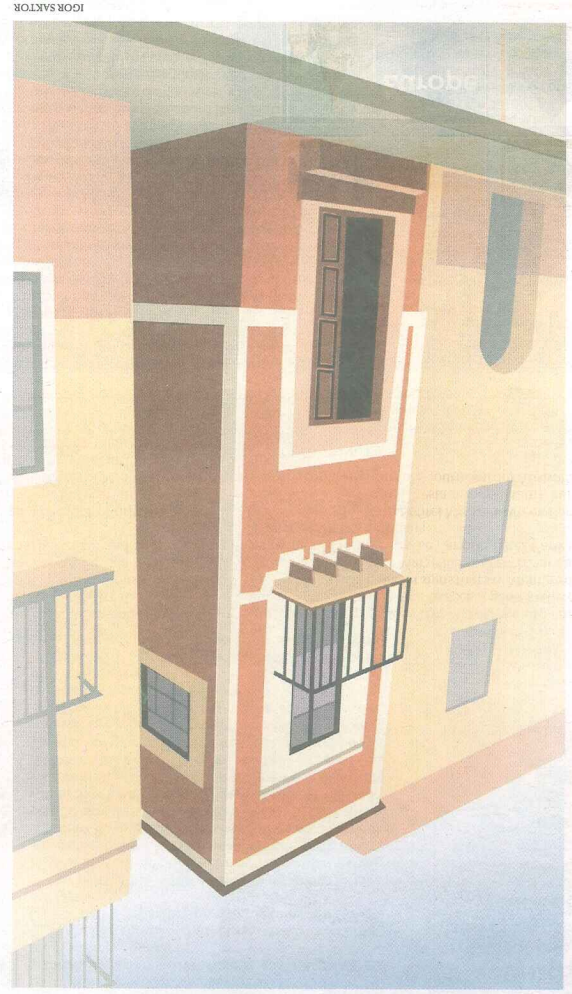
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