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México City: Before You Arrive and When You Do!

Before you leave for México, please be sure to bring with you the following:

- valid passport (you do not really need it to enter México but more to return to the United States -- however, airlines may ask for proof of your citizenship before issuing you a boarding pass)

an alternative to a passport will be a birth certificate and a picture ID.
- medications and any prescriptions for medications -- although you will find that in México you can purchase many items without a prescription (except narcotic-based items) and at a much lower cost.
- medical insurance card -- telephone numbers in the United States to call in case of personal emergencies.
- Spanish phrase book would be nice.
- non-prescription items and personal grooming items

When you arrive to the International Airport in México City, you may need to prepare yourself for a little culture shock! The language! The hustle and bustle of people! The shouting! Lots of people offering services, e.g., carry your luggage or get you a taxi. By the way, you will soon notice that cigarette smoking is generally the norm in México.

While you do not need to have a visa to enter México, you will need to complete an application for a tourist pass -- which will be given to you on the plane as it begins its descent into the International Airport. Be sure to bring with you a pen to use on the plane. Be sure to be prepared to loan it to someone else who didn't bring one.

After you leave the plane you will need to go through Mexican immigration. There will be signs posted to indicate which line you should use. Avoid the signs that refer to Europe, Central America and Mexican citizens. We are now "*norteamericanos*". As you go through the line, have your passport or other identification, and the application ready for inspection. The immigration officer on duty will speak English. The officer may ask you how long you plan to stay. After that the officer stamps your passport and the application, giving you your passport and the tourist pass. Please carry this pass with you. Do not lose it. You will need to surrender it to Mexican immigration when you leave México.

Now you will need to pass through customs. You are allowed to bring in \$300 of goods into the country other than personal belongings that you will need to use during your visit in México. Bringing in three dozen pairs of jeans for a five-day visit might raise some suspicions.

You will need to complete a form declaring what you are bringing in -- read this carefully (there will be forms available in English).

You will then get a cart, collect your luggage and proceed to the customs (*la aduana*) officer. As you approach the officer you will notice people stopping in front of what appears to be a miniature stop-light. A person will then be asked to approach the stop-light and press a button. If a green light appears it means that you can pass without any further inspection. If a red light appears then the customs officer may ask that you open your luggage. The officer then may decide to do a thorough examination through your luggage and personal belongings. When the officer completes the inspection, he or she will wish you well and permit you to pass through.

Here you will quickly notice that the cart which you had so conveniently been using can no longer fit through the grate causing you to remove and carry your luggage, and to leave the cart. At this point, you should try to look for me. Or else, you can proceed to go to a *casa de cambio* and exchange some of your US currency into Mexican pesos. The Mexican paper money comes in different colors, in the following denominations: 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 pesos. Mexican currency also consist of coins (the larger the coin, greater the value) in the following denominations: 5 centavos, 10 centavos, 50 centavos, 1 peso, and 5 pesos. Hint: if you can learn any Spanish before you arrive, learn how to count in the language.

So today, if one Mexican peso is valued at US\$ 0.17 then 100 Mexican pesos are valued at US\$ 17.00. My suggestion is not to cash all your US currency into Mexican pesos, but to do as needed (like drawing cash from a cash station for the weekend). Of course, many vendors will appreciate US currency and may be willing to accept it. Just be sure that you understand the exchange rate. If you decide not to exchange your money into Mexican currency at the airport, you will have other opportunities to do so: a *casa de cambio* which is located a few doors away from the hotel entrance (closed after 4:00 pm and on Sunday) or at the hotel cashier.

If you find me (or I find you), I will be very happy to welcome you with *un abrazo fuerte*, direct you to the taxi stand, help arrange for your trip to the Hotel Emporio and then check in on you later. Regarding taxis, use the ones that are metered. Also, you do not give the driver a tip (or *la propina*). On the other hand, if you should decide to rent a car (not too smart really) and wish to purchase gasoline then you are expected to tip the person who pumps the gas in the car.

¡Hasta luego!