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TESTIMONY

The San Miguel Library: A Bicultural Library in a Bicultural Town

I hadn't expected it to be a busman's holiday. I had run off for a week to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, in hopes of sorting out some personal issues and properly grieving for my recently departed dad. In short, I just needed to get away from it all — to be still and quiet. But I had heard that San Miguel's public library had some spectacular murals on its ceilings and walls. Surely, I thought, it wouldn't upset my serenity to stroll over there and take a peek. I ended up visiting the library three times, spending hours taking photos, and interviewing librarians.



The central courtyard.



A private English class in the open-air portico.

A Unique Design

Although the front of the building says *Biblioteca Pública* ("Public Library"), the library's official, legal name is *Biblioteca Pública de San Miguel de Allende, A.C.* The "A.C." means *Asociación Civil*, meaning a not-for-profit.

The library is situated around a central courtyard where people can sit and read at umbrellaed tables — even on a rainy day, which it was when I first visited. From the courtyard, visitors can stroll through a wide, covered portico — U-shaped and lined with columns — into the book rooms.

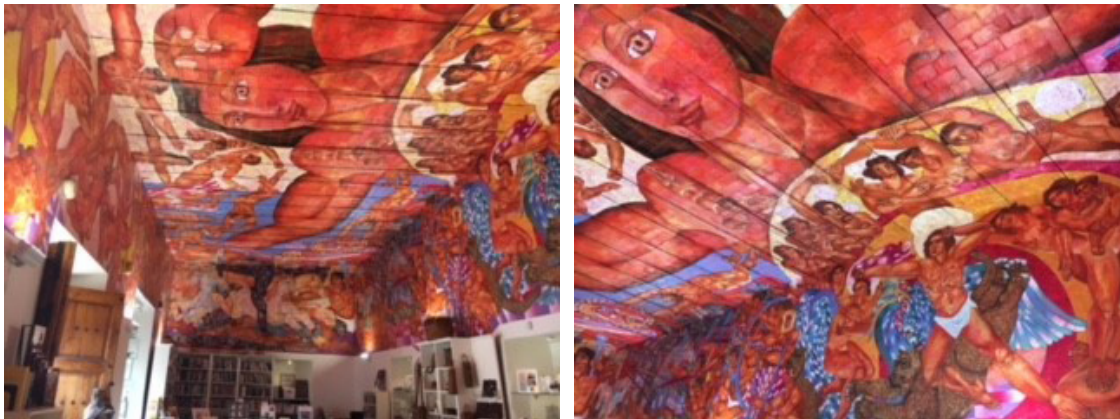
The portico itself functions as a multi-purpose people space with benches, long tables with chairs, and small, two-person tables. Some of the activities going on there on a random summer day were: teenagers chattering animatedly, students studying quietly, a woman teaching English to a middle-aged man, and two artists selling their paintings and handcrafts.

Besides the book rooms, the library has a bookstore, a restaurant, a room for programs and presentations, a theater for performances, and a cut-rate shopping space. It wasn't long before I laid eyes on the much-heralded murals.

Just to the left of the entrance, one's eyes are irresistibly drawn to a luscious palette of reds, oranges, and sepia tones — the ceiling and walls of the bookstore. When the bookstore manager told me the artist's name, I was momentarily confused — was it Jacques-Louis David? or Leonardo da Vinci? In fact, it was Mexican artist David Leonardo, whose murals also adorn the Sala Quetzal, one of the library's presentation spaces.

Expats Open a Library

San Miguel's library reflects its community. The town itself is thoroughly bicultural, with American, Canadian, and European expatriates a part of the local ambience. After World War II, San Miguel's Instituto Allende attracted many former soldiers seeking an education on the GI bill. (It was an approved institution by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.) Many veterans stayed; meanwhile, artists began drifting into San Miguel (including, at various times, Diego Rivera and Frida



Murals by Mexican artist David Leonardo in the library bookstore.



The library in its early days. Source: *Biblioteca Pública de San Miguel de Allende* <http://bibliotecasma.com/our-story/>

Kahlo), eventually establishing the town as an artists' colony. Over the years, foreign retirees and others found San Miguel, with its year-round felicitous climate and low cost of living, an attractive place to sink down roots.

Today, among the roughly 75,000 residents of the city proper, about 10,000 are expats, and they have a great impact on San Miguel's cultural life. A notable example is the public library. It began in 1954 when Helen Wale, a Canadian expat, opened her home as a library for Mexican children. It became so popular, so packed with books and little patrons, that Helen petitioned the state governor to provide her with a space for a public library. Provide it he did — and what a space!

In 1734, in the building where the library now resides, a group of priests opened a shelter home for women. Single, widowed, and abandoned women were welcomed and cared for there until political conditions forced it to close in the 1860s. The building found new life again, if you could call it that, in the early 1900s, when it became San Miguel's slaughterhouse. When that operation moved elsewhere, the building lay dormant until the library took over in 1958. Oh, what a cleanup job the new tenants had to do! Well, just imagine moving into a slaughterhouse that workers had simply vacated. At last, the brand-new library opened its doors. Since then it has grown into a major institution in the city — and one that weaves together San Miguel's Mexican and non-Mexican cultures.



The library's Café Santa Ana

San Miguel's public library is now the largest bilingual library in Mexico outside of the capital city, providing library services to both the Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking communities. For adults, there is an English room with English-language books and a Spanish room with Spanish-language books. Interestingly, books in the children's room are all in Spanish, while the young-adult room houses both Spanish and English books.

Fundraising

Besides buying books and paying salaries, the library offers many services to the community. It has a scholarship program, a rural libraries program, and free educational programs for young people, such as creative writing workshops, art and music classes, and computer classes. The rural libraries project is particularly impressive. The municipality of San Miguel, covering the city and a large swath of the surrounding countryside, is home to more than 172,000 people — many living in rural villages of fewer than 50 residents. With a mission of widespread literacy, the main library has set up rural libraries throughout this area.

How does the library pay for all this? With a plethora of creative income-generating programs. The most popular of these is the weekly House and Garden Tour. San Miguel's beautifully restored historic homes date as far back as the 1700s, and many are surrounded by lush formal gardens. Every Sunday at noon, a bus picks up that week's group and takes them on a tour of luxurious homes, including interiors, for 300 pesos or US\$20 per person.

Another fundraising venue is the library's Café Santa Ana, with its own open-air mini-courtyard, complete with waterfall. Menu selections include indigenous dishes from different regions of Mexico. For example, I enjoyed Caldo Tlalpeño, a chicken-and-vegetable soup of the Tlalpan region of Mexico City.

The library's Teatro Santa Ana shows two movies every afternoon and presents concerts, plays, and lectures. Another space, the Sala Quetzal, is home to the library's Latin American collection. It holds programs related to Mexican history and culture. The bookstore, of course, generates income as well. It sells books by local and regional authors, travel guides, stationery, souvenirs, and local crafts.

Every Thursday, shoppers crowd into the library's Bodega de Sorpresas (Warehouse of Surprises). There they find second-hand books, CDs, and DVDs, as well as second-hand clothing and furniture. The library also publishes *Atención San Miguel*, the town's only weekly bilingual newspaper. Its advertising revenue generates substantial income for the library. Besides these programs, the library holds gala fundraising events.



The Thursday sale at the Bodega de Sorpresas. Source: Biblioteca Pública de San Miguel de Allende <http://bibliotecasma.com/bodega-de-sorpresas/>

Cataloging

Being a cataloger, I was curious about the library's cataloging workflow, so I hunted down some catalogers to interview them. I learned that the Mexican librarians catalog Spanish-language books, and the expat librarians catalog the English-language books.

First I spoke with a librarian named Monica, a Spanish-language cataloger. Since we barely spoke each other's language, we could not speak at length or in depth. However, I did learn from Monica that they catalog using MARC 21. They also use the Dewey Decimal System and Library of Congress subject headings. Monica explained that the Spanish subject headings are the same as the English ones, only in translation, and that a search of one classification number yields both English- and Spanish-language headings.

Although the library has a [website](#), there is no online catalog. Monica said they had trouble setting up a catalog on their website, so they have a computer in the Spanish room for books in Spanish and a computer in the English room for books in English.

On another afternoon I spoke with Pat, one of the English-language catalogers. Pat is an expat from Canada who has lived in San Miguel for years. She had never worked in a library before, but showed up as a volunteer and learned to catalog on the job. (That made me wonder for a moment about the value of my debt-ridden stint as an MLIS student!)

Pat explained that their ILS is Absys, a system widely used in Spain and Latin American countries. With Absys they can import records from the Library of Congress, the University of San Francisco, and several other libraries. Then they plump up the subject headings if needed. For original cataloging, she creates the record in Absys. Their catalog records remain within their library; holdings information and original records are not uploaded to a larger database.

"If you want to know if the Biblioteca holds a certain book," said Pat, "email the librarian and ask. Then you can come in and check it out."

"What about interlibrary loan?"

That elicited a hearty laugh.

Volunteers

Much of the library staff consists of volunteers. Pat explained that all the Mexican library workers are paid, while all the expat workers are volunteers. Some of the volunteers' activities are maintaining the New Book Shelf, sorting donated books and magazines, and shelf reading. Volunteers also manage the weekly sale of books and second-hand clothes and furniture.

I asked if they have too many volunteers, or not enough. Pat said they usually have enough to handle business year round, although the supply fluctuates. They get an influx of volunteers during "the season," from November through April. These are the snowbirds who come down for the winter. Once the warmer weather arrives, the temporary population — and the surplus volunteers — fly off again.

My San Miguel getaway was indeed a time of serenity. I took long, aimless walks, strolled through botanical gardens, and relaxed on park benches. I stopped in to churches — a church is a stone's throw away from anywhere! — for meditation and peace. And I napped shamelessly. After my visits to the library, my head was filled with daydreamy thoughts. If I ran away to San Miguel for good — if I became an expat in San Miguel — I could keep my role as a cataloger. I'd just stroll over to the Biblioteca and present myself!

Submitted by

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