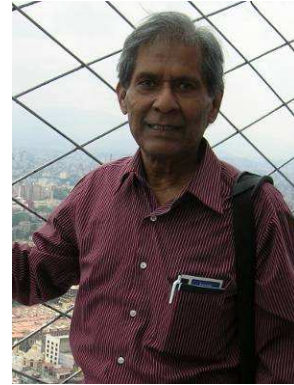


MEXICO CITY: A TRANSPORT PARADISE – A. N. 'Shen' Sengupta

This travelogue is based on a two-week stay in 'la Ciudad de Mexico'. My wife and I arrived there by flying in from Atlanta by a non-stop flight to the ultra-modern Benito Juarez International Airport. We were forewarned not to take a taxi since taxi-drivers would supposedly cheat, rob or even worse. Luckily for us, two young sisters, with whom we became 'amigos' at the 'aeropuerto' thanks to our broken 'español', almost adopted us, the helpless 'gringos', and led us to our hotel near the 'Centro', by way of 'El Metro'. They even carried our bags along the corridors and the staircases and eventually along the sidewalks. There was some problem with obtaining our hotel room, owing to over-booking. The two sisters, later joined by one's fiancé, stayed with us for ten long hours to make sure that we settle down without any problems. What a beautiful way to know the all-out hospitality of a country! But that is another long story.



The author in Mexico City
(photo by Arati Sengupta)



'Amigos'

During the two weeks, we used to spend about ten hours a day away from the hotel and on the road, so to say, without ever being behind the wheels of an automobile! The transportation system was so much fun, so inexpensive, so user-friendly and so all-encompassing that in no time we were using it as though we lived in 'la ciudad' all our life. We walked for hours every day. All over 'la ciudad' there are wide and well-landscaped sidewalks and pedestrian malls, which often adjoin major parks, which in turn provide convenient pedestrian links. Pedestrians are treated like royalty. All that is needed for making a walk eventful, pleasant, safe and exhilarating are provided with much thoughtfulness and care. Pedestrian over-passes and under-passes are provided wherever needed. Street-level pedestrian crossings are safe to use. There are flowering trees and shrubs, shaded seating areas, gazebos, fountains, sculptures, paintings and ready access to metro stations and bus stations and stops and also both public and private buildings including cathedrals. There are lots of people-friendly kiosks and activities like band-playing. Music is everywhere and at all times. One can easily day-dream while walking. The year-round temperate climate of this 'ciudad' at an altitude of 7349 feet only helps the ever-present relaxed mood. Naturally, walking in 'la ciudad' is not tiring. And we walked for miles at a stretch every day.



A Thoroughly Pedestrian World

One finds very polite and helpful young police officers of both sexes. Since we are evergreens, they looked like boys and girls to us. They seemingly reciprocated the sentiments and would even offer their cell phones to these 'gringos' to make enquiring calls. They are mostly on foot, even though I have seen them using automobiles, but mostly at night. They also use the 'Segway Personal Transporters' every now and then. All together, they appeared to be most friendly.



On Segway Personal Transporters

There are buses of all sizes, capacities, comfort, convenience levels and frequencies. Mini-buses and regular-size buses ply not only all over the city but also between far-away locations and the conveniently placed four mammoth bus terminals. These terminals are also served by metro stations. From these terminals one can travel in deluxe air-conditioned buses to near and far-away

places within the country as well as distant cities well within the neighbouring countries. Whereas the fares for the local buses is extremely low, the charges for the deluxe buses are much higher but reasonable. The terminals are spacious and well-designed and full of eating places and other shops. Information is easy to find, even for ‘gringos’ and the atmosphere is relaxed and festive. We looked forward to using these facilities to make side trips to major tourist destinations, like the world-famous ‘Teotihuacan’, in the vicinity of ‘la Ciudad de Mexico’.

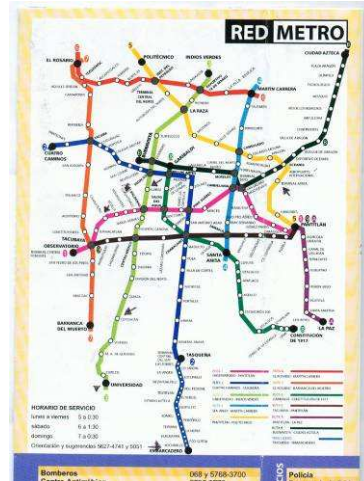


Mini-Bus Station & Pedestrian Bridge over the Bus Lanes



Bus Terminal

‘El Metro’ is the king of the metropolitan area’s multiple transportation modes. It serves a metropolitan area population of 20 million, extends some 207 km, or 128 miles, has 11 lines which run north-south and east-west and 175 stations and carries some 4.5 million people each day. One can find a station within an easy walking distance of almost any place in ‘la ciudad’. From our hotel we could walk to about 3 nearby stations, which would give us alternative ways to reach our destinations! The fare at only two pesos or twenty cents is extremely low and as a result, the system is widely used and the necessity to use a car for commuting or daily necessities is virtually zero. We were stunned to see the number of small shops selling food and many other necessities within and around the stations and started using them before long. We were also impressed by the cleanliness of the stations, station areas and sidewalks and little evidence of pushing and shoving. To the contrary, young people offered seats to us on the trains quite often. Others, including the ‘policia’ guided us whenever we asked for directions. As vendors play CDs to sell them to the passengers, one can hear good music while on the trains and also on the streets. As if to aid the music on the trains, the use of rubber tires made the rides smooth and quiet.



'El Metro' & 'La Mapa'

To supplement 'El Metro' there are also 'ligero tren's (light trains), which take over at the ends of metro lines, and go for substantial distances. There are also 'metro buses', which are basically trams, which run in the dedicated medians of major arterial routes, with more frequent stops than 'El Metro'. We used both 'ligero tren' and 'metro buses'. Because they run above ground, on street levels, they allowed us to see the 'ciudad' while riding very comfortably.



'Ligero Tren' and 'Metro Bus' Stations

There is even a section of 'la ciudad', in which the primary mode of transportation, believe it or not, consists of colourful manually-plyed boats. In fact the City of Mexico has been built on an enormous lake bed which used to cover most parts of a valley surrounded by mountains on all sides. It appears that 'Little Venice' or 'Xochimilco' is the only remainder of the watery world.



‘Little Venice’

Are there cars and freeways? Yes there are; but for most people, including us, they almost did not exist. There are no parking lots: there are only mostly-small garages and discreetly hidden parking courtyards, which are hardly visible. There is automobile traffic on the wide and beautifully landscaped arteries with wide sidewalks and user-friendly shops and other businesses, but we have never seen any traffic jams or gridlocks. The freeways are generally elevated and thus do not interrupt the city-fabric. We took a taxi to ‘el aeropuerto’, because we had to leave our hotel at 4.00 a.m. to catch our flight. The ride took twenty minutes. The driver, an educated person, spoke English fluently, was very polite, helped with our bags and charged us as per normal day rate. What a contrast it was to what we were led to believe about taxis in Mexico!



Landscaped Arteries

There is a saying, “Going there is half the fun”. In ‘la Ciudad de Mexico’, it is so very true. An all-important by-product of this phenomenally well-thought-out and well-nurtured urban transportation system is that ‘la ciudad’ remains unusually compact, cost-efficient, largely pollution-free and highly liveable for a population which seemingly enjoys life and is happy, healthy and relaxed.



Happy, healthy and relaxed

Note: The author is an expert in the field of urban transportation and has planned and designed numerous transit systems and transportation facilities in Canada, U.S.A. and India. However, this article is not meant to be a technical exercise. The observations are made from the point of view of any city-dweller anywhere in the world. All photos utilized in this article were taken by the author himself (except the author's own photo).