



**Lisa Pinley Covert.** *San Miguel de Allende: Mexicans, Foreigners, and the Making of a World Heritage Site.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 324 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4962-0060-0.

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From its striking cover to its engaging prose, Lisa Pinley Covert's *San Miguel de Allende: Mexicans, Foreigners, and the Making of a World Heritage Site* enriches a growing, and increasingly sophisticated, body of historical scholarship on twentieth-century Mexican tourism development. Following in the tradition of Dina Berger, Andrew Grant Wood, and Jason Ruiz, whose monographs and edited collections ground the evolution of Mexican tourism in the fields of social and cultural history, Covert sketches the singular rise of a global and domestic destination noted for its patrimonial and educational offerings built on private-public partnerships and the fractured legacy of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican past.

Practitioners of the history of travel and tourism face unique challenges in assembling a documentary base for their studies which, as would be expected, shape the contours of their studies. Corporations are largely reluctant to open their files to investigators. Government agencies privilege planning studies over documents enumerating the consequences of large-scale resort complexes. Faced with a paucity of documents in traditional municipal repositories, Covert turned to field interviews, newspapers, and radio transcripts, among other sources, to reconstruct San

Miguel de Allende's anything-but-inevitable rise to global tourism prominence.

Covert grounds her study in the give-and-take of competing visions of San Miguel's economic development and social realities. Contingencies in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution ushered this once agrarian town into the age of the service economy. At the end of the Cristero Revolt (1926-29), the return of peace and debates about the historical importance of the city's architecture gave rise to a mythic narrative of the town's timeless character (a *poblacion tipica*). Foreigners and returning Mexican expatriates, including Stirling Dickinson and Jose Mojica, respectively, seized on these accounts of the town's emblematic quaintness to replicate a touristic appeal similar to that of silver-studded Taxco to the south. The establishment of art schools and renovation of historical architecture quickly attracted prospective students, particularly in the wake of World War II with its legions of GI Bill-carrying ex-soldiers anxious to establish themselves as artists in their own right at schools bordered by cobblestone streets.

In contrast, Covert argues, some Sanmiguenses (residents of San Miguel de Allende) envisioned an industrial-based future for the city, centered around the La Aurora textile factory, which offered more sustainable salaries, not to mention health benefits and an esprit de corps fostered by

sports leagues and blue-collar camaraderie. Local priest Jose Mercadillo Miranda bemoaned the corrupting influences of the foreign newcomers. The conservative legacies of Sanmiguelense sympathy for the Cristeros, as well as the emergence of Cold War concerns about the spread of communism, further fueled debates over the city's future, not to mention the fate of its cultural and philanthropic institutions. Covert concludes that the conservative values shared by many foreigners and long-time residents forged an uneasy alliance, fraught with its own complexities. Some civic institutions, for example, including the city's bilingual library, benefited from grassroots support for a multicultural point of gathering. The constant influx of expatriates, however, priced many locals out of homes near the Jardín (the main square at the center of town) or forced family members to seek more lucrative opportunities for work north of the international border.

One of the strengths of the book is Covert's attention to the social and environmental contexts surrounding the development of tourism in San Miguel. Discussions about the allocation of scarce natural resources, including water, split public opinion between citizens surviving on the margins and expatriates anxious to keep their lawns well groomed. Control of civic discourse often influenced the choices made at the municipal level, which affected the lives of all Sanmiguelenses.

What makes Covert's analysis so striking is her focus on the private-public nexus that gave rise to a socially complex and economically fragile tourism superstructure. She deftly illustrates the precariousness of an economy based exclusively on tourism, tested at times by religious conservatism, Cold War tensions, and the unsettling impact of hippies during the Age of Aquarius. The astonishing incarceration and head-shaving of a score of hirsute Americans in 1969 served as proof of the limits of tolerance in the fledgling city. Yet, lack of federal support throughout the twentieth century fostered greater flexibility in

weathering financial maelstroms, including the 1982 peso devaluation. What had once threatened the community's tenuous reliance on foreign students, art institutes, and language schools, became its strength in the age of neoliberalism. The town attracted residential tourists by touting the advantages of low-cost living, a surfeit of domestic help, and new laws dissolving community based land holdings (*ejidos*).

In essence, Covert makes a compelling case for alternative tourism development narratives. Not all destinations, nor their social, political, and economic trajectories, were of a piece. Said another way, San Miguel de Allende was not Cancún or Los Cabos. Instead, it had its own history, one in which cultural visionaries like Stirling Dickinson and Jose Mojica believed that a colonial setting would prove attractive to aspiring artists. Residents, foreign and domestic, negotiated the meanings of life in the Bajío. Covert's elegantly written book deserves a space in any collection dealing with twentieth-century Mexican history.

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