



Travel Dispatches

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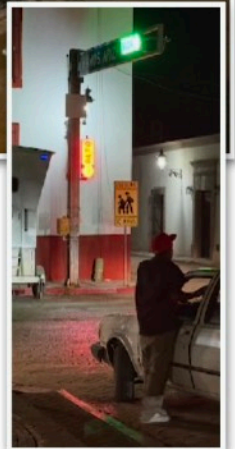
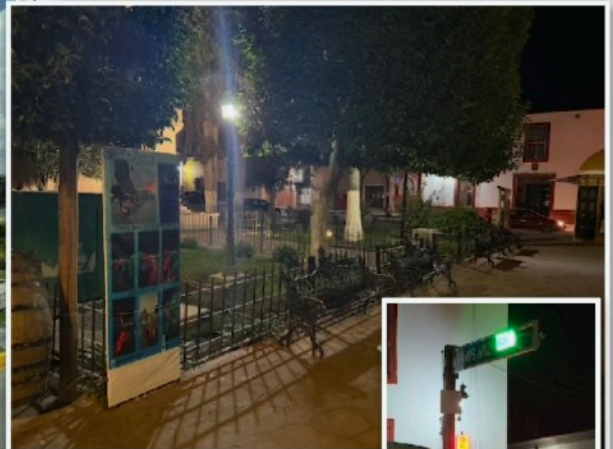
Perry R. Wilkes
&
Carolyn Kinsman

Parras

The bus from Monterrey to Saltillo took about an hour and a half. And the next bus to Parras, about halfway to Torreón, took us through rugged rural lands and past simple villages. We reached the big sign on the highway, but had little idea what to expect from this Pueblo Mágico. We hoped for the best, and we came out lucky again.



We stowed our bags at the beautiful El Farol Inn and went out for an evening walk around the nearby plaza. It was immediately clear that Parras would be a charming place to settle in for a few days – or even a month, if we had the time. The quiet plaza in this old colonial town is a fine place to relax into the warm air of a highland summer – to watch the people who happen by, and who greet us with a friendly “Buenas Tardes.”



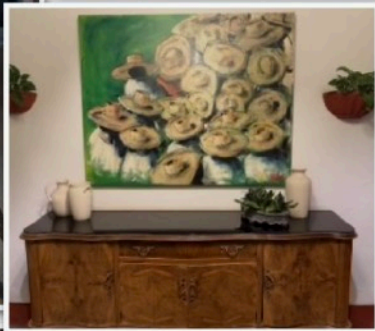
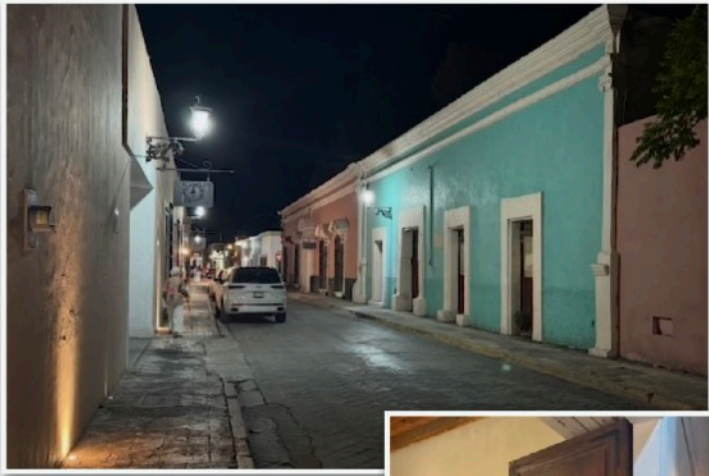
But not all is old in Parras, as the town’s only stoplight changes from a clear red “Alto” to a bright green “Sigue.” I have never seen Stop and Go actually spelled out in brilliant LED colors anywhere in the so-called First World!

Avenida Mar de Cortéz #2645
Bahía de Kino, Sonora
México CP 82240
Tel 52 662 242 0122

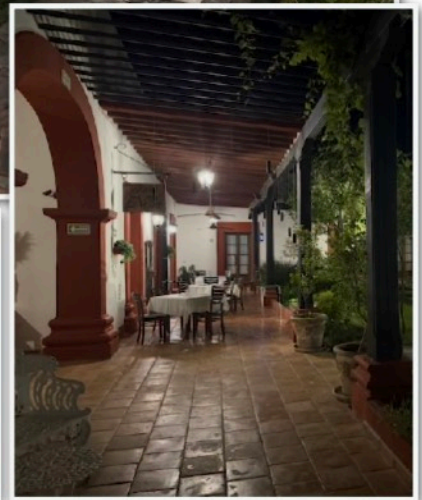
POB 6460
Nogales, AZ 85628

Cell 505 610 4615
carolynjkinsman@aol.com
perrywilkes@aol.com

We returned to the inviting old rustic doorway into gorgeous El Farol, and I started snapping the pictures I'd been too distracted to take on our arrival. And everything became even more beautiful in the soft glow of nighttime.



We relaxed into a quiet evening in the courtyard and realized the kitchen was still open for dinner. And that led to a delicious and leisurely ending to an amazing entry into this little off-the-track village of Parras.

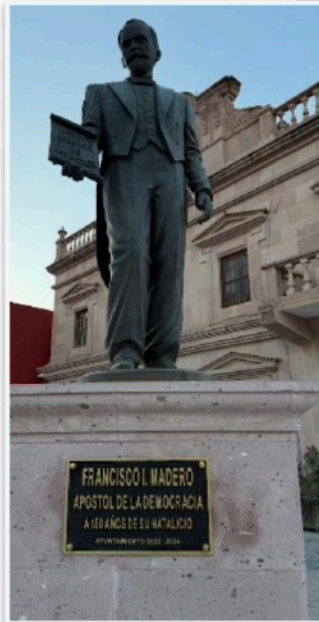


Breakfast on the veranda is another opportunity to revel in the beauty of El Farol, and appreciate these gardens in the daylight. There's a temptation to hang out here and read some important book that I never got around to all those years ago when I should have been

studying. And not daydreaming about escaping to some gorgeous Mexican village – like this one.

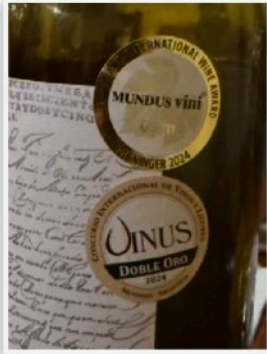


There was a guy at the plaza with an antique bus, and we signed on for a tour that showed us a big chunk of town we otherwise probably would have missed out on, considering our increasingly wobbly legs. He took us way uphill near a perilously-perched hilltop chapel, past the town's appealing swimming hole, and a grand view over everything below. Plus a statue of local boy Francisco Madero



— who later became President of Mexico, and a local dog enjoying his day under a palm tree.

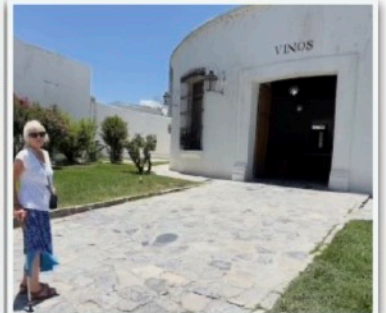
We topped off that day with dinner at Quinta El Capricho, another of the town's fine bistros, and splurged on a good local bottle of Casa Madero 3V. It's one of our favorite Mexican wines, and their most affordable vintage. Later we took another slow wander back through the plaza to El Farol.



There's a Ruta de Vinos tour around the larger area of Parras, and we've enjoyed a few good bottles of Don Leo now and then.



But the main reason we're here in sweet little Parras is to find the heart of New World wines. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, wine grapes were planted at monasteries in Puebla, Zacatecas, and other places. They were planted here in 1597, when the little village was called Santa Maria de las Parras, and by now Casa Madero has become the oldest winery in *all* of the New World. We've come here to find these famous vineyards, at the family home of Francisco Madero, the Mexican President who ousted Porfirio Diaz, and whose assassination in 1913 was instrumental in starting the bloody Mexican Revolution.



We begin with a tour of the grounds, which are probably quite modest compared to many of the world's massive wine factories that masquerade as wineries. From the cactus-edged top of the hill we can actually see over the entire place.



Our guide tells us more about grapes than I'll ever recall, or even much care about, frankly. But it's a fine day to be outside in the vines and the fresh air.



Soon enough we've entered the cellars, and we're embraced by that rich musky smell that seeps through the barrels and is known as The Angels' Share. And it smells very nice.



A fine table is set for us after the tour to do some serious tasting, with a comparison between the various wines and their complementary delectables. And I taste a bit of the subtlety that's being discussed, but not enough to make me qualify as a true enophile.

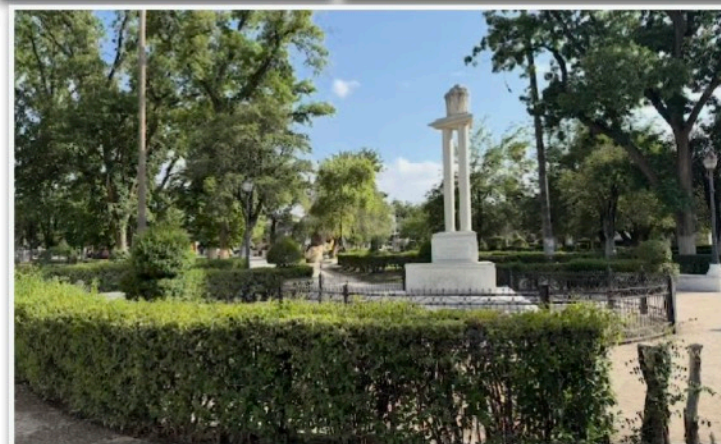


In fact I may be among the worst of people on which to waste a glass of any truly exceptional and expensive wine. I can tell the difference between a rich full-bodied red and one that's lighter or more 'watery.' But I think of the

immortal words of Fred Franzia, who produced millions of bottles of “Two Buck Chuck” at his wine factory in Ceres, California. His simple quote goes, as I vaguely recall from an article I read more than a decade ago, “There’s not a bottle of wine in the world that’s worth more than \$15.” Or something like that. However, the time we spent here at the famous winery of Casa Madero was worth the effort.



We find a nice little coffee shop to quietly begin another day. And then we enjoy wandering more of the narrow streets and parks of Parras, which has been a nice relaxing break from the large city of Monterrey.



I get a picture of Carolyn in front of the local ‘angel wings.’ And right nearby, there’s a beautiful old black Cadillac hearse that’s polished and ready for our ‘last ride.’ Whenever we need it!



We enjoy a final evening dinner at an Argentine restaurant named Angelottis. They even have a sort of shrine, as we might expect, to Diego Armando Maradona, one of the most famous and controversial Fútbol players of all time. Fútbol fans around the world will forever debate the merits of that infamous “hand of God” goal he scored over England to win the 1986 FIFA World Cup. But I don’t have an opinion on that issue, and it’s probably best not to enter the fray in this little piece of Buenos Aires.



There is still so much to see in this hidden treasure called Parras.



But alas, our excellent time in Parras comes to an end and we head off to the local bus station for our next departure. We’ll be going back to Saltillo to spend several days looking around that fine city. See you there! — *PRW*

