



Hand-me-downs in paradise

“When the sun sets here, it rises in Japan.”

Carlos is a waiter, cook and part-time greeter at a modest seaside restaurant in the smallish Mexican resort town of Mazatlan. From his station beneath the graying palm-thatched roof he looks down the beach past the large Canadian flag he plants in the sand every morning and smiles as he gazes out over the Pacific Ocean.

“Another beautiful day in paradise,” he likes to say.

Carlos found his paradise as the employee of a fisherman’s daughter — who, incidentally, spends most of the day and every day lounging in the shady part of the restaurant playing cards with idle lifeguards and others who have a few hours to kill and a few pesos to lose or win. Carlos explains the beach where he stands was once the launching place for dozens of small fishing boats that were owned by families who held and still hold claim over small stretches of it. When Mazatlan began to expand in the last couple of decades in response to a growing demand from a growing number of tourists for more services to cater to their desires and appetites, the city government moved the fishing boats, but let the fishing families stay to set up little restaurants and bars. Some families moved with their boats to continue chasing fish, but others, like Carlos’ employers, stayed to chase the tourist dollar.

Of all the tourists he chases for his boss, Carlos is quite happy to admit he mostly has a thing for Canadians. Of all the wanderers he entices into his shady little domain from the beach in front or the sidewalk behind, he says he likes Canucks the most. They’re intelligent and respectful, he says, and also the most generous. When he says that he’s not talking about the tips they leave (for, to be honest, Canadians generally aren’t as well known for the size of their gratuities as others are). What he’s talking about — what he likes to talk about — are all the trucks and buses that make it down from Canada to serve in Mazatlan’s fire, medical and transit services. To illustrate what he means he pulls a recent newspaper out of a cubbyhole hidden beneath the thatch and opens it to a story and some photographs splashed across the centre spread.

Mazatlan, it seems, is twinned with the Alberta town of Grand Prairie, where the members of a service club get together every year to salvage unwanted, but still useful vehicles and they drive them almost three thousand kilometres due south to where they’re recycled as fire trucks, ambulances and urban people-movers.

Mazatlan, however — despite its reliance on hand-me-down cars and trucks — is not a poor city. From where Carlos looks out over the ocean he can also see north along the curve of the beach to where a dozen or so exclusive resorts have been built to wall-off and replace what 30 years earlier was open beach and wild woodland, or “jungle” as Carlos called it. The developments have clearly brought lots of foreign money into the city, some of it American and much of it Canadian, but there’s little sign any of it has been spent on public works that don’t somehow directly benefit tourists — such as the new eight-kilometre beachfront promenade that runs all the way from the rich to the poor end of town.

Carlos, as smart as he is, doesn't seem conscious of the irony of the situation, although he clearly has little liking for the Golden Zone, as the resort district is called. His brother (an affluent-looking, well-dressed businessman who dabbles in real estate) dropped by one afternoon and afterwards Carlos explained that he keeps offering to set him up as a cook in one the fancy resort restaurants. Carlos, however, insists he prefers to work for the fisherman's daughter in the little place on the beach, where he mostly does as he pleases and where he can look out across the sea towards Japan.

"Another beautiful day," he says again.

"Is there ever an ugly day here?" I ask.

"No," he answers. "Never!"(...)

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