

CULTURAL QUIRKS & TASTY TREASURES: THE TWO LAREDOS

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THIS SELF-PROCLAIMED “GATEWAY TO MEXICO” IS THE BUSIEST LAND PORT OF ENTRY FOR COMMERCE IN THE WHOLE 1,952-MILE BORDER.

BY JENNIFER LUDDERS

ive me the Big Mac con queso, por favor,” says a teenager with pants hanging off his hips.

“La quieres con french fries?” responds the cashier.

“Claro que si, ma’am! And a coca grande, too.”

Welcome to the Texas-Mexico border. Not quite Mexico, not quite the United States, but rather a distinct parallel universe with language, food and traditions that are a fusion of the neighboring nations. Sitting in the central plaza with its pastel colonial facades and wafts of carne asada (grilled beef) from nearby vendors, one sometimes finds it easy to forget just which country you are in.

“Thank goodness for cheap tacos,” you think as you look at the Spanish sign on an adjacent kiosk, before realizing that the “\$2” listed is actually dollars, not pesos, and you’ve got your decimal point mixed up again. You’re no longer on the Mexican side. And when a green-and-white border patrol car cruises past to pull over a rusty Volkswagen van in search of illegal aliens and narcotics, your presence north of the Rio Grande is confirmed.

Jennifer Ludders recently completed her first tour in Nuevo Laredo. She is now in language training for her next assignment in Ho Chi Minh City.

Los Dos Laredos, as the sister cities of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, are collectively known, take pride in superlatives. The self-proclaimed “Gateway to Mexico” is the busiest land port of entry for commerce in the whole 1,952-mile border. With 95 percent of the population claiming Mexican heritage, Laredo recently became the most ethnically homogeneous city in the United States, and it claims to be second only to Las Vegas as the fastest-growing city in the U.S. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why *Men’s Health* magazine recently named Laredo the “happiest” city in the U.S. (El Paso came in second.) Or perhaps the survey, based on a comparison of antidepressants prescribed per capita, simply did not take into account the possibility that U.S. residents were getting their prescription medications in the unregulated market that flourishes just south of the border.

Gorgeous George

Each year Laredo hosts the largest party in the United States honoring President George Washington — or Jorge Washington, as he is called here. The George Washington Birthday Celebration is Anglo-American colonial culture wrapped in a colorful Mexican poncho. It is representative of the bizarre cultural quirks that make the border region unique. The monthlong

festival traces its roots back to 1898, during the Spanish-American War, when a group of Texans sought to demonstrate Laredo's deep commitment to the United States. Rather than fading away, it has become larger and more diverse every year. In fact, the Washington Birthday Celebration Association, which organizes the event, is so busy that it maintains a year-round staff housed in a replica of Mount Vernon. Who would have guessed that the original George W. had such strong ties to Texas?

Among the many featured events are a Princess Pocahontas Pageant, a Comedy Jam for George, and a Jalapeño Festival, which includes a jalapeño-eating contest (the record is 152 in 15 minutes) and a jalapeño-spitting contest. For sophisticates, Laredo's Society of Martha Washington sponsors an elaborate re-enactment of a ball held at the Mount Vernon estate in 1790. The ball features 12 debutantes in extravagant handmade gowns that can take two years of labor each to create, costing up to \$30,000 dollars. Each dress weighs between 70 and 100 pounds — almost as heavy as the young ladies beneath them — and can inflict grisly bruises on their hips and shoulders. But participants consider all that a small price to pay for a coveted spot in the festival's most prestigious event.

As a symbol of the close relationship that the sister cities of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo have always shared, the international highlight of the GW celebration is the abrazo (hug) exchanged between children and officials of the neighboring countries. One of the bridges spanning the Rio Grande between the two cities is closed off to vehicle traffic while groups walk from their respective sides of the river and exchange pleasantries and speeches. Following tradition, the U.S. consulate's principal officer in Nuevo Laredo gives a warm abrazo to the Mexican consul in Laredo.

All this international love is not limited to that one particular day, however. One of the four bridges connecting the two cities is also a symbol of union for hundreds of couples each year. (Marriage is, after all, about meeting each other halfway.)

Typically, one spouse is a Mexican national who, usually because of a visa ineligibility, cannot be physically present in the United States to get married. Once the

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logistics are arranged, the wedding party and the judge meet on the demarcation line where the U.S. and Mexico meet, while the couple joins hands across the international boundary. After a brief ceremony — *voilà* — the couple are officially esposo and esposa. But according to the laws of which

jurisdiction? Mexico? The United States? Texas? No, no and you betcha, partner! A justice of the peace from Laredo says the legitimacy of these marriages has never been challenged under the laws of the great state of Texas. Whatever the true validity of such unions, the practice continues in full swing and adds a touch of romance to otherwise routine bridge traffic.

Thank Heaven for ... Servicar!

Before hitting the bridge on a characteristically steamy day, someone might stop off at one of the three drive-thru Starbucks in Laredo and order an iced frap-puchino from the comfort of an air-conditioned vehicle. But to really spice things up, locals enjoy Nuevo Laredo's version of drive-through refreshment: chilled tequila shots. Not only can you drive, quite literally, into one of the many bar/mini-marts called "Servicars," but you can enjoy happy hour right at the wheel. Or if it's a whiskey or a Corona you prefer to drink while you drive, no hay problema: the Servicars cater to every open-container dream. Just pull into the store, roll down the window and order your margarita in a to-go cup. Make sure you buy an extra bag of chile and limon chips to fend off the munchies, though — and hope that your insurance covers any damage to Servicar walls that may be grazed while exiting.

In fact, most residents of Nuevo Laredo drive as if they've made far too many trips to their neighborhood Servicar. Vehicles resurrected from the junk yard compete with flashy Suburbans to overtake each other down one-way streets, undeterred by the numerous speed bumps that sprout up like concrete weeds. Those who are fortunate enough to have a visa may be in a hurry to cross the bridge and engage in the border's most beloved pastime: shopping!

Strip malls line Interstate 35, the spine of Laredo, like proud soldiers of American commercialism. The service economy of Laredo is highly dependent on the crowds of

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Mexican shoppers who flock daily to buy everything from diapers to Donna Karan. Because there is a strict limit on the value of goods that can be brought back into Mexico undeclared, it is commonplace to see families in the parking lot at Wal-Mart (the highest-grossing Wal-Mart per square foot in the U.S.) ripping off tags and stuffing items into empty suitcases. That way, if they have the bad luck to be randomly stopped by Mexican Customs, they can claim that the contents had gone with them from home in Mexico for their recent “vacation.”

No trip to the shopping mall in Laredo would be complete without a chair massage offered by one of the many Chinese masseurs and masseuses who, upon finishing their 10 minutes of magic, invariably ask in broken

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turns stereotypical notions of both U.S. and Mexican culture on their head, while preserving the characteristic warmth and charm of the people. No serious fan of the quirky or unpredictable, or of amalgamation as an art form, should miss out on an opportunity to fully experience both sides of the southern border.

Si, muy good indeed. ■

Spanglish, “Muy good, lady?” Chinese buffets (pronounced “Boo-fátes”) around town are also wildly popular with Mexican day-trippers and locals alike. They offer a glut-tonous spread that positions jalapeño-kung pao chicken next to enchiladas, and suggests chipotle salsa as a garnish to the fried egg rolls.

Such is the distinct flavor of the U.S.-Mexican border: totally unexpected and extra-spicy. The region



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