

# Calendar

## Interesting Chaos

### Tijuana Tour

The phone connection was weak, and there was children's laughter in the background one morning over the Christmas holiday in Mexico City, where tour guide Maria Mitrani of Ensenada had gone with her family. She would return in time to lead an unusual tour of Tijuana, sponsored by the San Diego Museum of Natural History.

Instead of shopping, she said, her charges will learn from a local environmentalist about the Tijuana watershed that spans the border. "We'll start at the dam and follow the river into a little canyon, where we'll hear about that specific microclimate."

#### LOCAL EVENTS

Tijuana is not a place one goes to be charmed by the beauty of unfettered

nature, Mitrani admits.

Mitrani will lead the group on a second part of the tour, a guided walk through old Tijuana, beginning at Avenida Revolución, the main thoroughfare. The focus here is human activities.

"We'll walk four blocks, and I'll point out some of the historical sites. We'll see Banco Bitol, built in the 1920s in the neo-classical style — the first big building in the city. Then we'll see Cinco de Mayo, built by the Aldrete family in 1917 as a big general store. We'll also see the old city hall. It was used from the early 20th Century until 1986, which is strange, because it's rather small. We'll walk by the Hotel St. Francis, originally built in Imperial Beach, then transported to Tijuana in the 1920s. It's wooden, two stories, quite large for the time. It stood out among all the little constructions around it. It's still a hotel today, but not a fancy one anymore."

Nobody would call Mitrani a cheerleader for Tijuana. "Tijuana doesn't have outstanding buildings," said the Italian native, who emigrated to California as a child. "The city never worked on its architecture. But if you're starved... You know."

"I don't think it's a wonderful city," she went on. "It's a border culture, not a Mexican culture. Being so close to the United States, it has lost the flavor of its traditions."

Still, Mitrani detects some authenticity at another place she will bring her group, Mercado Hidalgo, the open-air market, built in the 1930s. "The vendors sell fruit, candies, herbs, magical things — lotions and potions that give you luck. That's a very Mexican thing. It reminds me of



Agua Caliente dog track, Tijuana

markets here in Mexico City — it's like being in Mexico City when you are there — but it's very small."

Mitrani tracks Tijuana's ignominious identity as a border crossing back as far as 1848. "Right after the war, when Mexico lost so much of its territory, that area, which was originally a ranch — Rancho Tia Juana — was divided. Then they right away started to put in the bars. That's how what we know today as Tijuana began, as a city of vice. They had the drinking, the prostitution, the fast divorces and marriages. Then, in the 1930s, it got a boost from Prohibition in the States."

In those years, the city became a destination for Hollywood types and others with money who crossed the border to drink and gamble. "That's when the Agua Caliente Resort and Casino was built, along with the racetrack" — designed by San Diego architect Wayne McAllister, who later designed buildings along the strip in Las Vegas. "It was a very elegant spot, so for a while there was vice and there

was elegance combined."

Participants will see the racetrack, but not the hotel, which was demolished in the 1960s.

After history comes a look at another human enterprise: culture. A third part of the package is a 45-minute guided tour of Centro Cultural de Tijuana, the Cultural Center of Tijuana, i.e., CECUT.

This isn't necessarily a tour for people who have never been to Tijuana, said Mitrani. "But most people who have been there haven't really looked into it deeply. They have crossed the city without noticing. Or they have crossed it scarily." Scarily? "Yes, thinking, 'Oh, this is horrible.' Or they may have passed through only to get to other parts of the peninsula."

Asked if she would avoid certain parts of Tijuana, Mitrani said, "Walking-wise, yes, some of the dangerous areas." But most of the trip is by vehicle anyway. Besides, she has found that some people do want to look at Tijuana's seamy side, if only through a bus or car window.

This time she won't be venturing there, but on another occasion she took a group on a drive past the maquiladoras — assembly plants, post-NAFTA vintage — in the industrial part of the city. "I also showed them the poorer neighborhoods, the sheds, the cardboard houses on the hillside."

They were appalled but fascinated. "How can people live like that?" they wanted to know. And it's true. When it rains, the houses start to fall. Well, that's Tijuana. It's a chaotic city, not gorgeous, but interesting."

— Jeanne Schinto

**All-Day Tour:**  
**"Appreciating Tijuana"**  
**Saturday, January 11,**  
**8:00 a.m.-7:30 p.m.**  
**Cost: \$69 (museum members);**  
**\$79 (nonmembers)**  
**Includes transportation from**  
**museum parking lot,**  
**admission to CECUT,**  
**and lunch at a restaurant**  
**Info: 619-255-0203 or**  
**www.sdnhm.org**

**Local Events**  
*page 77*

**Classical Music**  
*page 89*

**Art Museums  
 & Galleries**  
*page 91*

**Theater**  
*page 92*

**Pop Music**  
*page 95*

**Restaurants**  
*page 126*

**Movies**  
*page 138*