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Mexico beyond the drug violence

By Edith R. Wilson

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When President Obama sits down Thursday with Mexican President Felipe Calderon, they might want to take heart about a part of Mexico that won't be on their agenda. A vibrant, peaceful area in southeastern Mexico underscores why America's southern neighbor has to win its fight against drug traffickers and why Mexican society may be strong enough to do just that.

One million people live in Merida, the capital of Yucatan state, set between the ruins of Chichen Itza and Uxmal. I just spent a month wandering its clean, civilized streets, often by myself, and I've never felt safer or met nicer people. This is the Mexico rich in social capital, tradition and culture that we should cherish and defend, and that is almost blotted out amid news of drug violence.

Like any city, Merida has issues: Public schools are crowded. The acquifiers need attention. In recent weeks, a policeman was bitten by a renegade snake. Taxi drivers went on strike over gas prices. Residents protested fare hikes for public transportation. City officials have struggled to collect property taxes, and preservation of historic buildings and spaces is driving up housing prices.

As to controversy, well, some criticized the cost of [bringing in the handsome young Colombian rock star Juanes](#) for an outdoor concert to end January's cultural festival. Cynics carped that the choice was a platform for the reigning "chicas politicas," as the governor and mayor are women. All I know is that my sister and I enjoyed the show, along with thousands of other people in the streets - families, grandmothers, young couples. No traces of marijuana hung in the air; there were no kids brandishing beer. We wandered home at midnight without incident. There has been little concern about the drug trade, guns or other violence.

Merida - slogan: "city of peace" - is not one of the main routes for drug trafficking. Residents can't take credit for that, but they take pride in their urban culture and the low rate of violent crime. Meridians are deeply proud of their tradition of civility and "tranquilidad." What's dangerous in Merida, residents know and the tourists who come here learn, is eating too many habanero peppers or other good food.

Young people here use Twitter and Facebook, and there's free WiFi in the parks. There are Wal-Mart locations and malls at the edge of town with other "big box" stores. But there is also a deep love of local culture. People aren't addicted to television; they prefer to go out.

Merida has so many dance and music events - many of which are free and outdoors - that it's hard to choose. Boys and girls go to dance academies to learn steps and compete to perform in the central plaza. These gatherings are filled with families, all of whom seem to know the lyrics to songs written by local troubadours decades ago.

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Ernesto, the boyfriend of my 20-something Spanish teacher, Teresa, repairs air-conditioning systems by day but plays in a band at night. He serenades her with "Adoro," a 1967 international hit by Armando Manzanero, after whom the town's restored Art Deco concert hall is named. Many who grow up here never leave. Others, including American and Canadian retirees, move here.

Yucatan has many problems, especially in rural areas, where public services are hard-pressed to meet the needs of the poor, many of them aging. I am sure that the state police are watching the border areas and worry about the violence that is plaguing other parts of Mexico.

Merida, though, embodies the research of Harvard political scientist [Robert Putnam](#) about how social capital bridges different groups. Residents and the local government understand that they have something valuable to nurture and defend here - a city where people feel that the streets are theirs; where the community, rich and poor, gathers in public; and where pride in local culture feeds adherence to values that serve the needs of all.

With public support, the government invests not just in transportation, health care, education and social services but also in art, historic preservation, public music and dance events, and in various clubs and institutions. This is the other Mexico: the one that should inspire us to fight fiercely to return civility and tranquility to families living in border communities too.

The writer, a former adviser on communication and innovation at the World Bank, lives in Arlington. She blogs at www.ediewilson.com. Her e-mail address is wilsoner1017@yahoo.com.

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