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## Mexico World Heritage. Reflections

**Michael Romero Taylor**

Retired U.S. National Park Service



**H**aving been raised along the Mexico/U.S. borderlands, I have always been in love with Mexico and Mexicans. Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, our nine-member family would frequently travel 45 minutes south from Mesilla, New Mexico, in the United States to Ciudad Juarez to shop, visit friends and distant relatives, and see the sites, often stopping at Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe church in the historic center of the city. Built in 1659, this venerable edifice tells many stories of the earliest inhabitants of the region such as the Manso Native Americans – who were joined later by other indigenous populations that fled, or were forcibly brought, from the northern reaches of New Mexico during the 1680 Pueblo Revolt to El Paso del Norte, later renamed Ciudad Juarez. The church is a significant structure on the cultural route called *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, the Mexican portion of which

was listed in 2010 as a serial World Heritage property comprising 55 sites and passing through five existing World Heritage cities.

Tying Spain's colonial capital of Mexico City to its northern frontier in distant New Mexico (USA), *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* spans three centuries, two countries, and 2,500 kilometers. The route was blazed atop a network of ancient trails made by Native Americans that had been used for millennia before the arrival of European colonists/conquerors. Three quarters of the route is located in what is today Mexico with the northern quarter located in the United States. The political border that today bisects the camino was created in 1848 through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. For centuries prior to the creation of the political border, the reciprocal flow of ideas and traditions was unimpeded.



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But this flow did not stop with the creation of the border. Intangible elements continue to evolve that initially helped define the route, despite the attempts by the government of the United States to erect a physical barrier. Many influences that have become part of United States culture can trace their roots to Mexico, Spain, and north Africa using the Camino Real as the conduit. Particularly along the borderlands, these traditions have morphed into new forms, such as the melding of Spanish and English (“Spanglish”), music traditions, food, etc. Cultural routes comprise common heritage that goes beyond national borders, building blocks that are a substantive part of the whole. I have been fortunate to have worked on the northern reaches of this Camino that extends into New Mexico, and have always learned from Mexican counterparts on ways to best preserve, protect, and tell the stories of this international treasure – part of *El Camino Real Intercontinental* that spanned much of the globe through maritime and terrestrial routes during the Spanish colonial era.

I first became aware of this cultural route’s historic significance in 1971 when, at the age of nineteen, I followed its length on a motorcycle along Mexican Federal Highway 45 from Ciudad Juarez to Durango and then on to Mexico D.F and beyond to Guatemala. Ever since then, the Camino Real has meant to me a deep, ever-present connection with Mexico. It was still a very vibrant cultural route then, full of movement and energy, as it is today, continuing to be the corridor along which goods, ideas, customs, music, and gastronomy are carried and exchanged. These intangibles are inseparable from the tangible elements along the route, including the cultural landscapes embodying the richness of Mexico’s various ecosystems through which *El Camino Real de*

*Tierra Adentro* passes. The value of the intangibles associated with world heritage sites is what I am so appreciative of gaining a much better understanding of through working with Mexican colleagues on World Heritage initiatives.

The ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes (2008) underscores the importance of intangible values when identifying and working with cultural routes. Progress has been made in identifying, documenting, and protecting a cultural route’s tangible properties such as buildings (eg. churches, residences, public buildings) and structures (eg. bridges, canals, and the actual roadbed itself). Equally important are the intangibles, and how tangible and intangible values are intertwined. Buildings and landscapes are containers of experiences, and routes are avenues along which these experiences that define the route are expressed. Intangible values that inform a cultural route are infinite, and can comprise such reciprocal influences as “religion, ritual, language, festival, gastronomy, music, literature, architecture, dance, fine arts, handicrafts, scientific advances, technical and technological skills” (ICOMOS Cultural Routes Charter). The Mexico World Heritage Office has been a leader in honoring this aspect of the charter.

The collaborative exchange of knowledge pertaining to our common heritage along *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* between Mexico and the United States has been constant, with many opportunities for interactions through the years at bi-national conferences, workshops, and meetings. Most recently, as part of the activities celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary listing of *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* on the *World Heritage List*, I was honored, along with colleagues from the U.S. National Park Service, to participate in *Los Itinerarios Cul-*



*turales. Perspectivas en el Décimo Aniversario del Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, como Patrimonio Mundial* webinar, organized by the Instituto Regional del Patrimonial Mundial en Zacatecas in 2020 during which we shared information on ways in which the U.S. government is working with Mexico to preserve, protect and tell the stories of our shared cultural route of *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*.

An initiative that emerged along *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* came out of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Conservation of Earthen Architecture –Adobe 90– held in Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA: the trans-border collaboration with Mexico called TICRAT (Taller Internacional de la Conservación y Resaturación de Arquitectura de Tierra). Now in its 27<sup>th</sup> year, this highly successful annual workshop, led by INAH and the U.S. National Park Service, exchanges practical information on common earthen architectural conservation issues facing extant buildings and archaeological sites along the Mexico/U.S. borderlands. This annual tradition, alternating each year between Mexico and the United States, shares technologies, hands-on experience, and lasting friendships. The workshops have taken place at sites such as the World Heritage Site of Paquime and at various earthen sites along the World Heritage designated *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*.

Besides *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, I have been fortunate to have worked with a number of Mexican colleagues on five other World Heritage Sites these past twenty-five years. In 1997, I helped facilitate a World Heritage trans-border comparative field study for the proposed nomination of the Archaeological Zone of Paquime (inscribed 1998) in Chihuahua. Paquime is an extensive earthen archaeological site

of an urban ensemble that played a significant role in the development of trade and commerce in North America during pre-Hispanic times. It is one of just a few World Heritage Sites listed in northern Mexico.

Over the past decade, ICOMOS and IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature), both key organizations in implementation of the *World Heritage Convention*, have been working on *Connecting Practice*, a joint project aimed at developing new methods and conservation strategies that recognize and sustain the interconnected character of the natural, cultural, and social values of World Heritage sites. I was fortunate to have been asked to be part of a team in 2015 that worked with a case study during Phase I of the initiative at Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, listed as a World Heritage site in 1986 for its vast diversity of natural assets, both on the land and the seascape including barrier reefs. It is the largest protected area in the Mexican Caribbean, located in the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Now an integral part of the way in which ICOMOS and IUCN collaborate, the *Connecting Practice* project aims to develop practical strategies for a more integrated conservation approach, and to improve collaboration between cultural and natural entities to improve conservation of World Heritage Sites. The site manager and staff at Sian Ka'an, as well as community members, were very free with their time, knowledge, and hospitality to make our team's contribution an important part of the overall *Connecting Practice* project.

In 2014, I was asked to conduct an evaluation mission at the Aqueduct of Padre Tembleque. This incredible edifice spans 45km (28mi) from Zempoala, Hidalgo to Otumba, Mexico State. Initiated by the Franciscan friar, Padre Tembleque, it was built in the 16th

century with support from local indigenous communities. The aqueduct incorporates the highest single-level arcade ever built in an aqueduct with 145 arches and is an important example of the exchange of influences between Europe and pre-Hispanic culture. As is common with most missions, the days of field work were filled with many site visits and meetings with officials and community members. What was impressive to me was the way in which communities seemed to understand the relevance and complexity of the World heritage nomination process. I will never forget the sincerity and pride in her community that a young lady showed when she handed me a neatly folded hand-written note describing in very emotional terms why she felt it was so important for her and her family and friends to have the aqueduct entered on the *World Heritage List*.

Another aspect of my work with ICOMOS as regards to Mexico World Heritage Sites has been the essential desk reviews and reports that I have prepared pertaining to nominated properties in Mexico, evaluating potential Outstanding Universal Value, and importance and relevance of a particular property compared to other similar sites. These desk reviews are part of the overall evaluation process and form part of the body of information that the World Heritage Committee depends on to make its decisions.

Besides the above cited properties, I also have had the privilege of visiting eleven other World Heritage Sites located throughout Mexico. At each site, whether as a tourist, a U.S. government representative, or an invited ICOMOS collaborator, I have been humbled by and impressed with, the manner in which the World Heritage office at INAH manages its program. It has a stellar reputation among international colleagues, not only within ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre, but also among the millions of visitors a year from all parts of the globe who travel to Mexico to experience these true global treasures. I find that Mexicans are not only incredibly proud and protective of their cultural patrimony- it's in their DNA - but they relish sharing their heritage with international visitors from afar. The most memorable moments of my work in Mexico have been when I have had the privilege to work and interact with Mexican colleagues, whether they be professionals from the highest INAH offices, or workers at the sites who ensure their day-to-day preservation while at the same time making sure that visitors are welcome and have gained from their experience of visiting Mexico's incredible World Heritage treasures. I am truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to collaborate with the highly qualified professionals who work at the Mexico World Heritage office and at the respective World Heritage Sites.