

Finding Kerouac's Mexico

By Tara FitzGerald

One good thing about Mexico, you just get high and dig eternity every day – Jack Kerouac

Cheap wine, cheap women, cheap weed. These may have been the reasons that Beat writer and counter-cultural icon Jack Kerouac was first attracted to Mexico, but it was much more than that kept him coming back time and time again. An initial visit in 1950, narrated in his seminal road-trip novel *On the Road*, sparked a decade-long love affair with the country, which would see him return six more times, culminating in a final trip in 1961.

Forty years ago, on October 21, 1969 in St. Petersburg, Florida Kerouac died from abdominal haemorrhaging brought on by his alcoholism. He was 47 years old. A life cut abruptly short, but a haunting legacy that still inspires youthful rebels, travellers and scribes today.

And unlike many other foreign writers – Malcolm Lowry, D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene -- he seldom seemed disillusioned with Mexico, remaining steadfast to the end in his fascination and idealisation of the country and its people. "Mexico was a country that symbolised this alternative fantasy space for Kerouac and which he used in the process of writing some of his best novels," Jorge Garcia-Robles, author of *El Disfraz de la Inocencia: la Historia de Jack Kerouac en Mexico*, told me in an interview.

In 1949 fellow Beat writer William S. Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*) moved his family to Mexico City following some drug-related legal woes in the United States, and he wrote to Kerouac encouraging him to visit. "I am just back from Mexico City where I have rented an apartment preparatory to moving down there with the family. Mexico is very cheap. A single man could live good for \$2 per day in Mexico City liquor included.... Fabulous warehouses and restaurants... I strongly urge you to visit." Finances were a hefty concern for the struggling writer.

And so it was that in 1950 Kerouac and Neal Cassady – Jack's inspiration, the hero of some of his writing, his sometime best friend and travelling companion -- found themselves planning a road trip to Mexico to visit the Burroughs. This journey, immortalised in Part Four of *On The Road*, with Jack as "Sal Paradise" and Neal as "Dean Moriarty", was to be his first to Mexico and already his fascination with the "other" that he sees in Mexico is clear.

“I looked over the map: a total of over a thousand miles, mostly Texas, to the border at Laredo, and then another 767 miles through all Mexico to the great city near the cracked Isthmus and Oaxacan heights. I couldn’t imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west, but magic *south*.”

This tendency to idealise Mexico, to see it as a magical place where he could escape to and live out his dreams was always present for him. He made frequent references in his letters over the years to different friends about schemes to go and settle in Mexico, or trying to convince them to come with him. However none of these plans ever came to fruition and his trips never lasted more than a few months at most.

In this first Mexican journey Jack and Neal find marijuana and hookers shortly after crossing the border and then continue to Mexico City. “A brief mountain pass took us suddenly to a height from which we saw all of Mexico City stretched out in its volcanic crater below and spewing city smokes and early dusklights. Down to it we zoomed, down Insurgentes Boulevard, straight toward the heart of town at Reforma.” He notes that “the noise was incredible”. Jack fell ill with dysentery – the city literally made him sick --- and ended up staying with the Burroughs in the Colonia Roma at Cerrada de Medellin 37 (today called Jose Alvarado), while Neal headed back north to attend to work and familial duties. The original building can still be seen there to this day.

“He tapped into a spiritual quality in the landscape and in the people of Mexico that was extraordinary, which he described in his last road trip with Neal Cassady in *On The Road*,” said Dr. Ann Charters, author of the biography *Kerouac*. Biographer Gerald Nicosia (*Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*) agreed. “He really captures the flavour of the land, the poverty and the dryness and the desert. He was always very attuned to scenery and landscape and he really captures that in Mexico.”

In the 1950s the Colonia Roma was a lower-middle class neighbourhood, still maintaining some of the grand European-style residences from its glory days at the turn of the 20th century, but alongside cheaper, functional housing. It drew a Bohemian crowd and had also attracted an expatriate American population, many of whom were studying at the nearby Mexico City College. The recently passed G.I. Bill allowed veterans enrolled in a degree programme at the college to receive a subsistence allowance. Burroughs, a Harvard graduate, had signed up to pursue a Master’s in anthropology. “But Kerouac was a very bad influence on Burroughs. Every time he came down to visit Burroughs ended up dropping out or just not going to school,” said Dr. Edward Simmen, the former official historian of the Universidad de Las Americas (previously MCC).

Still it meant that the Colonia Roma became Kerouac’s home from home, and he did some of his most prolific writing in two neighbouring apartments located on Orizaba, between Cerrada de Orizaba and Coahuila. These days the original

pink-tiled building at Orizaba 210 has been torn down and replaced by a non-descript, red-brick apartment building, while Orizaba 212 is semi-abandoned but may still be the same building where he feverishly scribbled by candlelight on the rooftop and listened to companion Bill Garver's morphine-fuelled ramblings in the room below. In any case, not even a plaque remains today to remind us that this is where Kerouac, often under the influence of marijuana, sometimes morphine and almost always litres of booze, wrote *Doctor Sax*, *Tristessa*, *Mexico City Blues* and at least parts of *Desolation Angels*. In his *Book of Blues* there is even a poem entitled '210 Orizaba Blues'.

By the time of his second visit in May 1952, Burroughs was living in Orizaba 210 and catastrophe had struck in Mexico City. In September of the previous year Burroughs had shot and killed his wife Joan, apparently in a drunken game of 'William Tell' using a glass placed on her head instead of an apple. He was arrested and imprisoned, but later let out on bail. During his stay, Kerouac finished writing his fantastical childhood memoir *Doctor Sax*. He was running out of money, Burroughs was growing tired of feeding him indefinitely, and they argued over Kerouac's plan to store marijuana and peyote in the apartment. Burroughs was sick of Kerouac and sick of Mexico.

On a return trip in December 1952, Kerouac wrote to Neal and Carolyn Cassady saying "Bill just finally left Mexico, last night, how sad." In the same letter he describes his living arrangements. "I took a little dobe block up on Bill's roof, 2 rooms, lots of sun and old Indian women doing the wash. Will stay here awhile even though \$12 a month is high rent. But perfect place to write, blast, think, fresh air, sun, moon, stars, the Roof of the City." While he also details some of his day-to-day living in Mexico: "Tonight I'm buying 3 dozen oysters for 35 cents equivalent (expensive) and frying them in butter, with imported Chianti for a chaser, & French bread. Every morning it's steak & eggs which I buy for 30 cents and cook up."

Kerouac spent a large proportion of his time in Mexico City in and around the Colonia Roma, as well as wandering the backstreets and markets of the *centro historico*, often in search of whores or generally seedy experiences in *los bajos fondos mexicanos*. And because his books are autobiographical to a large extent, the references to Mexico give us a pretty good idea of what he did and where he went in the city. He would often spend his days writing on the rooftop and then get cheap steak dinners and go out drinking in the evenings. He also mentions rowing on the lake and picnics in Chapultepec Park in his letters.

In his novella *Tristessa* he narrates a drugged stroll from the *centro* through rainy Roma streets to get home that appears to take him along Alvaro Obregon, up Orizaba and through the Plaza Luis Cabrera. "I come up gorgeous Orizaba Street (after crossing wide muddy parks near Cine Mexico and the dismal trolley street called after the dismal General Obregon in the rainy night, with roses in his mother's hair--) Orizaba Street has a magnificent fountain and pool in a green

park at a round O-turn in residential splendid shape of stone and glass and old grills and scrolly worly lovely majesties that when looked at by the moon blend with magic inner Spanish gardens of an architecture (if architecture you will) designed for lovely nights at home. Andalusian in intent.”

Mexico also represented an escape from middle-class America for Kerouac, and for all of the Beat writers for that matter. Kerouac was the first to describe his generation as *beat*, playing on a double meaning of ‘beat up’ or tired by life (it was not long after the end of the Second World War) and the spiritual ‘beatific’. But it was renowned San Francisco columnist Herb Caen who coined the term *beatnik* (by fusing beat and sputnik – the world’s first artificial satellite, launched by the Soviet Union and much in the news at the time) to refer to these writers.

“The whole Beat movement was very disenchanting with cookie-cutter America. In the 40s and 50s America was a very homogenous place,” noted biographer Nicosia. “Mexico as representative of a third world culture was very attractive to Jack, the so-called Fellaheen. He saw similar things there to the things that were precious to him in working-class Lowell [Massachusetts – where he grew up]. In those places away from the commercial mainstream, there was a space for intellectual freedom.” Kerouac saw Mexico as a “fellaheen” civilization as derived from Spengler’s *Decline of the West*. In other words, a “primitive” society that existed on the edges of a fallen civilisation, waiting for its eventual recreation. He also had a tendency to idealise what he called the ‘indian’ in Mexico, much as he romanticised the black under-class in America.

As well as being an escape from the homogeneity of American culture, Mexico gave Kerouac the space and freedom to write outside the pressures of the New York literary establishment and the financial strains of the United States. Even though he made the majority of his trips to Mexico City before his fame truly exploded (*On The Road* was published in September 1957, and from then on his life was not really his own), he always seemed to sense that the pressure was closing in on him. “He liked the freedom and leisure, the slower pace and more privacy there [in Mexico City],” said Carolyn Cassady, second wife to Neal Cassady and also Kerouac’s sometime lover.

“I think Mexico had a great impact on his writing in the end and his writing would not have been the same without it,” said biographer Nicosia. ““For one thing Mexico provides a necessary climax to *On The Road*, finding this land where they can finally express themselves freely.”

Part of this freedom of expression was found in legal prostitution, with frequent visits to the ‘whore district’ of Panama Street, in the centre of Mexico City. And in Jack’s case he often picked the younger girls. Kerouac cut a dashing figure before the drinking took its toll. He had wavy black hair and piercing blue eyes and a soft, somewhat nervous voice when he wasn’t too drunk. In many ways he was the stereotypical handsome, clean-cut, all-American boy -- with his football

scholarship to Columbia University et al -- much more so than others of his fellow Beat writers. And you would think that as a young man with movie star good looks – the thinking woman’s James Dean – he would have no trouble attracting the ladies. So why the prostitutes?

Well on the one hand, his escapes to Mexico were also escapes from broken or unstable relationships (he married three times), but on the other his recourse to prostitution was a product of his Roman Catholic guilt about sex. “He felt more comfortable sexually with prostitutes. As a devout Catholic and a guilty sinner, he had a Madonna/Whore complex,” Carolyn Cassady said. “He always seemed apologetic when having sex with “respectable” women.” His novella *Tristessa* is, at its most basic level, an account of his relationship in 1955-56 with a morphine-addicted, Mexican prostitute, whom he refers to by her real name of Esperanza Villanueva in his letters.

Kerouac’s novella *Tristessa* is the only the only one of his books that focuses exclusively on Mexico, and indeed the only piece of Beat literature that does so. Interestingly enough it was only translated into Spanish 10 years ago, while the English version was published in 1960, possibly reflecting a reluctance in Mexico to glorify the lower strata of society. “Literarily speaking, for me *Tristessa* is his best book on Mexico. *Tristessa* does not necessarily depict real Mexico but it does give his vision, which is very interesting, of how Mexico was at that time,” reflected Garcia-Robles, who finally translated *Tristessa* into Spanish.

Despite the religious guilt, he also identified with Mexico’s Catholicism, which reminded him of his strict upbringing in a French-Canadian family in Lowell, Massachusetts. While in Mexico he often visited little churches, said prayers and lit candles. The hooker-religion contrast is most starkly portrayed in *Tristessa* when he describes seeing the candlelit icon of the Virgin Mary in the prostitute’s raggedy bedroom.

“He loved the people in Mexico and he felt they were in touch with the basic joys of life, such as eating, drinking, dancing, loving, making music and art etc,” said biographer Nicosia. But despite Kerouac’s admiration for Mexico as a “Fellaheen” society, he didn’t really spend a huge amount of time with Mexicans, aside from *Tristessa*/Esperanza. He lived a pretty solitary life in Mexico City and he barely learned to speak Spanish. What he did do, almost naively, was stumble into sketchy situations with shady characters in the search for material for his writing; and consequently ended up getting robbed several times for his trouble.

In both his 1955 and 1956 visits, he stayed on the rooftop at Orizaba 212 where Bill Garver (Old Bull Gaines in *Tristessa*), a morphine addict and friend of Burroughs from New York, also lived. His abode (most probably a *cuarto de servicio*) was reached by a winding, rickety iron staircase to a slippery rooftop filled with puddles, where washing flapped in the breeze and the children made him nervous by playing near the edges of the roof. During this time Kerouac was

also deep into an exploration of Buddhism, and the texts he wrote in Mexico City then -- *Tristessa* and *Mexico City Blues* -- are both immersed in the religion.

This is one area, though, where his texts do diverge from reality. In the book of *Tristessa* he never sleeps with her... "I have sworn off lust with women, -- sworn off lust for lust's sake, -- sworn off sexuality and the inhibiting impulse..." However in a later *Paris Review* interview, he described how he finally "nailed" her. It is possible he was also editing the content of his books knowing that his mother and sister might read them.

In 1956, his close friend and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (*Howl*), along with Ginsberg's lover Peter Orlovsky, Orlovsky's brother Lafcadio and the poet Gregory Corso (*Gasoline*) paid Jack a visit in Mexico City. He described how he sat on his rooftop looking down on the street and waiting for the "Four Marx Brothers to come walking down Orizaba". This time Jack played the tourist in Mexico City and the group visited the UNAM (Mexico City's main university), headed out to the pyramids and smoked joints at Teotihuacan, went boating in Xochimilco and even watched fireworks on the Zocalo central square. It was during this trip that a street photographer snapped the now-famous shot of the five of them on the Alameda boulevard -- a close group, gazing confidently into the camera. It is thought to be the only photo of Kerouac in Mexico.

In *Desolation Angels* Kerouac describes the moment. "[W]e had our picture taken by a photographer in the park downtown... We all stand there proud, me and Irwin [Allen] and Simon [Peter] standing (today I'm amazed to see I had broad shoulders then), and Raphael [Gregory] and Laz [Lafcadio] kneeling in front of us, like a Team." Peter Orlovsky is the only one of that Mexico City gang still alive today.

Later in the trip the boys hit up some hooker bars. "In the Club Bombay are a dozen crazy Mexican girls dancing at a peso a throw with their pelvics tossed right into the men, sometimes holding the men by their pants, as an unbelievably melancholy orchestra trumpets out blue songs from the bandstand of sorrows."

Jack and Peter decided to pay the hookers outside the Bombay a visit and Kerouac picked "the youngest one, fourteen" for three pesos (24 cents). Orlovsky chose an older lady, while Ginsberg waited outside. "A week later poor Simon [Peter] had gonorrhoea and had to get penicillin shots. He hadn't bothered to clean up with the special salve medicine, as I had."

The Bombay is a rough-looking hooker bar (or 'table' in Mexico City slang) that is still open to this day. Located on a dark corner just beyond the mariachi-filled Plaza Garibaldi, it was *clausurado* (shut down by the local government for some licensing violation) when I tried to visit recently. A local cantina manager was slightly horrified when I asked where it was, and insisted on sending one of his

security guards with me to go and take a look. Apparently business is expected to resume soon.

The boys left Mexico City in a rowdy gang, hitching a lift with a language teacher heading back to the States, and leaving poor old Bill Garver behind begging for morphine. When Kerouac returns to Mexico City in 1957 – on the cusp of fame as *On The Road* is a month away from being published -- things are somewhat dismal there. Garver is dead, Esperanza has disappeared and Jack rents a room in the Hotel Luis Moya in the *centro*, only to be caught in an earthquake. “[W]oke up from a deep sleep to what I wordlessly thought was the natural end of the world, then I said “it’s a giant earthquake!” and waited as the bed heaved up & down, the ceiling creaked deeply, the loose dresser doors moansqueaked back & forth, the deep rumble and SILENCE of it in my Eternity Room...,” he wrote in a letter to Ginsberg. And then to top it all, his favourite whores on Panama Street had been driven away by the “spreading Cancer of Americanism”. Enough is enough, and he leaves. “The earthquake scared him a lot and showed him that death and misery could catch him in Mexico too. He had created this idyllic vision of Mexico as a haven, a retreat from the rest of the world,” said biographer Nicosia.

In the summer of 1961 he made his final trip to Mexico City, but at that stage the pressures of fame were already getting to him. He wrote to his literary agent, Sterling Lord, prior to the trip saying: “I hope to go to Mexico City...for 2 months, to think, walk, write, alone in a lil apt. Because that’s one thing I haven’t done in 3 years is sit alone & think for months and work out the next novel.” Once in Mexico City he bought supplies of Mexican Benzedrine and phenobarbital and wrote 50,000 words of Part Two of his novel *Desolation Angels*. He stayed in an apartment at Cerrada de Medellin 37, the location of his first Mexico City stay, thereby neatly closing the Mexico City circle. He was never to travel south of the border again.

Often described as the King of the Beats, Kerouac later rejected this legacy. “The Beats were the first generation to choose an alternative way of life, not form families, enjoy sexual liberty and open homosexuality, look for answers in Eastern religions and experiment with drugs in a recreational way,” Garcia-Robles noted. And ironically, although these ideals were adopted by the hippy movement of the 1960s, Kerouac never identified with them. “Kerouac locked himself away with his wife and his mother in his last years, stopped seeing his friends and descended into alcoholism. He was the prophet of a movement which he never truly identified with,” Garcia-Robles added.

But to this day Kerouac’s novels still remain handbooks for rebellious youth searching for a ‘road’ of their own... and occasionally one leading to Mexico.