

ON THE BORDER | TIJUANA AND SAN DIEGO



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# Through a Turnstile to a Taco Lover’s Paradise

Tijuana, San Diego’s southern neighbor, offers an onslaught of delectable street food.

By SARAH KHAN

“You’re trying to kill me.”

It wasn’t an accusation, or even a question; just a matter-of-fact observation. My friend Shyema may never have actually been at risk of death, but I was about to find out if it was possible to lose a friend by over-feeding her.

I hadn’t intended to test the limits of a 12-year friendship when I proposed a weekend in Tijuana. “It’ll be fun,” I promised. “We’ll catch up. We’ll eat tacos.”

I neglected to put a number on how many tacos. Few friendships, or waistlines, can emerge unscathed from Tijuana’s relentless onslaught of delectable street food. While many people remain wary of the city because of fears about crime — a grim legacy of the drug wars from the 1990s to the early 2010s — violent crime is down significantly.

And so Shyema and I focused on our taco crawl. I’d spent weeks researching places to go in the border town, looking for landmarks, historic quarters, museums or pre-colonial ruins to cross off my tourist checklist. But instead, every tip yielded by my Google searches and interrogations of frequent Baja-goers came laden with calories. In Tijuana, the long lines are for taco stands, not monuments. So Shyema and I stepped through a turnstile in San Diego on a Friday afternoon and, with an official’s quick glance at our passports, walked into Mexico.

“The truth is, there’s nothing to do but eat and drink,” said Bill Esparza, a James Beard Award-winning writer in Los Angeles, who heads south of the border at least once a month. He’s also a co-owner of Club Tengo Hambre, which arranges culinary day trips throughout Baja California, the state in which Tijuana is located. “For me, it’s a place to relax.”

That might come as news to people who still associate Tijuana with cartel clashes and mass executions. But as crime has gone down, tourism has gone up in recent years, and its proximity to Southern California makes it a popular jaunt for Los Angeles and San Diego residents who want to eat and drink well — and affordably — for a weekend, or even an afternoon. It’s also a quick stop on the way to the wine lands of Valle de Guadalupe and the coastal town of Ensenada.

Hopping between TJ — as it is commonly known by locals in Mexico and California — and San Diego is a way of life, as residents on both sides of the border crisscross for work, school, medical appointments and night life. Pursuits range from the divey to the thrifty in TJ: American teenagers partying on Avenida Revolución; families stocking up on cheap groceries. If you live in the suburbs south of San Diego and have a Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection pass, which gives preapproved travelers expedited passage, it can be quicker to drive to Tijuana than to downtown San Diego. This frequent back-and-forth makes this border crossing the busiest in the world, open 24 hours with 300,000 people passing through each day.

My plan was something like this: Walk across the border. Eat. Walk around. Eat. Take an Uber. Eat. Sleep. Wake up. Eat. Re-

peat. But first, Shyema and I checked into One Bunk, an ultrahip micro-hotel from a bi-national brand with branches on both sides of the border. This outpost opened last spring in the heart of Avenida Revolución, Tijuana’s notorious main drag. There, above a boisterous strip lined with bars, souvenir shops and “zonkeys” — donkeys painted with stripes to resemble zebras, something of a TJ mascot — we found a sleek nine-room respite filled with retro design references: vintage suitcases, neon signs, a chandelier made from tennis rackets and a painting of Pancho Villa.

I eased us into our epicurean explorations with a salad. But not just any salad: Caesar’s, a Tijuana institution since 1927, purports to be where the Caesar salad was invented, and between that claim to fame and its location at the heart of Revolución, it sees its share of tourists. Our server prepped the dressing tableside, tossing egg yolk, cotija cheese, mayonnaise, garlic, olive oil, and barbecue, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauces in a wooden bowl. He bathed a handful of lettuce and shrimp in the dressing before showering it with more cotija, and Shyema and I shared a plate while watching the madness unfold on Revolución from our sidewalk table.

Next, we walked to the kitschy restaurant La Corriente Cevichería Nais and tried the Taco Kalifornia, shrimp and cheese stuffed in a pepper and shrouded in a tortilla, and a Pacifica Tostada, a ceviche of tuna, lemon juice, hot sauce, serrano peppers and onions. Both were fiery and bright, with flavors hitting my tongue in unexpected places long after I’d taken a bite.

Light, flavorful, seafood-focused cuisine is Baja California’s calling card. While the wall between Tijuana and San Diego — an imposing part of the landscape of this corner of the continent long before President Trump made it an issue in his campaign — clearly delineates a separation between the two countries, on the plate, lines are blurred and flavors are fluid. “Baja cuisine is very much like California cuisine,” Mr. Esparza said. “It’s a cooking style that doesn’t adhere to any kind of tradition. It’s 100 percent Mexican, just not bound by any rules.”

Cooks in Baja often eschew lard in favor of olive oil from area farms; wines from Valle de Guadalupe and oysters, sea urchin and the large clam geoduck from the ocean are on the menus. And the back-and-forth north to California has inspired chefs on both sides of the wall. San Diego has some of the best Mexican food outside Mexico, and the California city’s booming craft brewery scene has spread south of the border.

“The people who have restaurants in Baja, a lot of them grew up going between San Diego and Tijuana,” Mr. Esparza said. “There’s definitely that relationship between these two places.”

A Tijuanan culinary stalwart who exemplifies that relationship is Javier Plascencia, whose dining empire has included restaurants on both sides of the border. Shyema and I Ubered from Zona Centro to Zona Rio to eat at Plascencia’s Mision 19, Tijuana’s most elegant restaurant, all white tablecloths and dim lighting in a nondescript office building. Mr. Plascencia grew up in both San Diego and Tijuana and sometimes crosses two or three times a day.

“I opened Mision 19 seven years ago, when the city was not in good shape, when everything was happening,” Mr. Plascencia said. “We thought if we open this restaurant, people will want to come and see that Tijuana is not going away, it’s not going to die. It’s going to get better.”



Above, duck breast with mezcalsauce at Mision 19. Clockwise from top left: musicians near Avenida Revolución; Chicano Park in San Diego, which has a symbiotic relationship with Tijuana; Barrio Logan, a Mexican-American enclave of San Diego that could be an extension of its Mexican partner city; and the Tortas Wash Mobile back across the border.

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The result is a modern celebration of Baja cuisine, the type of place where local residents come to mark a special occasion, perhaps over house-made pasta with octopus, beef fillet picadillo and Mexican chile peppers, or local tuna with cactus, xoconotle (a sour cactus fruit), black mole caramel and short-rib chicharrón. “Baja California is a young cuisine, not very traditional, and very creative,” he said. “Nobody’s telling us how to cook or what to do.”

Over the next day and a half, we raced to sample every place on my list. Throughout the city, tacos were mostly between 20 or 40 pesos apiece (\$1 to \$2); Uber rides were typically 20 to 60 pesos. Saturday’s first breakfast was at Telefónica Gastropark, a new food-truck trailer park where we tucked into chilaquiles and papas de zefe in outsize portions from La Carmelita. It’s the kind of place that you expect would be overrun by gringo hipsters, but we found locals descending in droves. Brunch was the best sandwich of my life, found, unexpectedly, at a carwash a few blocks away: Tortas Wash Mobile has been plying its tortas since 1964, and a crowd of people hungrily tearing into their sandwiches were huddled around the garish yellow stand. I went around the corner to devour mine on the stoop of a nearby building, inhaling the pile of spicy citrusy carne asada swathed in mayo, guacamole and tomato and nestled in pillowy ciabatta-like bread. A few blocks away I tried the cabeza — cow head — tacos at Tijuana’s so-called Taco Alley.

Other stops that weekend included Asadero El Nuevo Tecolete, a stand specializing in carne asada; Taquería Franc, a loud late-night spot where locals and tourists alike spill onto the street; La Cahua del Yeyo for stingray and shrimp tacos; a return to Telefonica Gastropark for the ricotta-draped French toast at Azarosa; and Tras/Horizonte, an upscale eatery where I tried the Chicano, a grilled-octopus taco. Shyema lost her good will toward me somewhere between the papas and the stingray. But if I was indeed trying to kill her, there are surely worse ways to go than death by deliciousness.

Tras/Horizonte is the brainchild of the chef Oso Campos, who, as he said, was

“born and made in TJ” but has traveled extensively throughout Mexico and California. “We serve Mexican border cuisine,” he said. “Us as a people, we are a mix of all different cultures and lenguas. Tijuana is a young city trying to find its identity.”

The city does seem to have a bit of a split personality: Centro, filled with cheap pharmacies and barbershops and street-food stalls, is gritty, but the landscape of the outlying suburbs is studded with shiny outposts of Costco, Office Max, Sears and IHOP, resembling a not-so-far-flung suburb of San Diego. Most businesses accept dollars, and even Uber has two faces: Riders can opt for Uber English, which guarantees English-speaking drivers at the same price as Spanish-speaking ones.

“When I told people I was going to Mexico, they laughed at me,” Shyema said. “They said Tijuana wasn’t Mexico proper.”

It is Mexico proper, of course, but Tijuana and San Diego seem to exist in a nebulous nation all their own, one not so easily defined by walls. Tijuana feels as if it’s on the outskirts of San Diego because, well, it is; some parts of San Diego, like the Mexican-American enclaves of Chula Vista or Barrio Logan, could be an extension of Tijuana.

“They call Chula Vista the nicest neighborhood in TJ,” said Gibran Huerta, a creative director in San Diego whose company has employees in both cities. I’d run into him at One Bunk, which he’d helped design. “When you grow up in San Diego, you grew up with TJ in your life,” he said. “When you live here you don’t really see the border. It’s a crazy cross-border lifestyle for those who aren’t afraid to cross.”

ON SUNDAY, MR. HUERTA invited us to crash his group’s breakfast plans. “Go where the people are,” he said, and according to him, that morning the people would be at an unassuming, unnamed cart at the intersection of Avenida C. Niños Heroes and Calle 4ta, which ladles vats of steaming hot birria, a beef stew from Mexico’s Jalisco province. We weren’t even sure if the stand would be there when we arrived, but there it was, doing brisk business at 10 a.m. on a Sunday. Mr. Huerta jostled through the crowd and ordered a round of tacos: heaps of birria encased in crunchy, flaky tortillas unlike any I’ve ever eaten before.

“Tijuana is not a picturesque place,” Mr. Huerta said. “There’s a lot to eat, not to see.”

Except there is one thing. While the specter of the wall looms large in politics, in Tijuana it’s been a fact of life since the 1990s. The border wall at Playas de Tijuana is not rhetoric but very real, an imposing slatted barrier 18 feet high that extends into the sea, separating Tijuana from San Diego County. On the Mexican side, it’s a lively scene, with people gathering to walk on the beach, eat fresh coconuts and take selfies with a wall covered in colorful murals. “Vive Libre Sin Muros.” “Love Trumps Hate.” “Earth Was Not Meant to Have Walls.” And on each side of the wall, families who are separated by deportations and tenuous visa status gather for teary reunions through the barrier.

“We’ve been living with the wall all of our lives,” Mr. Huerta said. “Trump saying ‘the wall, the wall’ — it doesn’t make a difference to us.”

Shyema and I walked back the way we came, after a 40-minute wait at the pedestrian border crossing — not too bad for a Sunday afternoon. Our stomachs had survived Tijuana, and so had our friendship.

SARAH KHAN is a frequent contributor to the Travel section.