

San Ignacio: The Town Detroit Built

SAN IGNACIO CERRO GORDO, MEXICO -It's Saturday night in this small Mexican town, and the plaza framed by towering palm trees and manicured evergreens is so jammed the crowd spills over three blocks each way.

Thousands of the revelers have returned to San Ignacio Cerro Gordo from their adopted home in Metro Detroit 2,000 miles away.

SUVs and pickups with Michigan tags share the narrow streets with ranchers on horseback. Tigers caps emerge from the sea of cowboy hats in the plaza.

It's the first night of las fiestas patronales, a centuries-old custom that turns this sleepy village into a 24-7 whirl. The festival honors the town's patron saint, but the revelers also celebrate Detroit, the city that lifted them from poverty.

For 43 years, people from here have worked in Metro Detroit, both legally and illegally. Amateur town historians say about 15,000 people from San Ignacio live in Metro Detroit, more than the town's population of 12,000.

It's a tradition that harkens back to the golden era of Detroit, when its rich blue-collar wages provided tens of thousands of people around the world a chance at a better life.

" Detroit es la fortuna," -- Detroit is the fortune -- says Pedro Martinez, 26, a Detroit construction worker standing outside a florist shop holding a shot of tequila. " Pero aqui es la vida" -- But here is the life.

The money earned in Detroit has paved streets, built homes and renovated churches in San Ignacio. In turn, the emigres have fueled growth of southwest Detroit's Mexicantown by opening restaurants and other businesses.

But the ties that bind Detroit and San Ignacio are being tested. Michigan's sagging job market and tougher enforcement of immigration laws have forced some in San Ignacio to question whether the trek north is still worth it.

But tonight and for the next nine days of las fiestas , the worries about the tenuous future are forgotten amid the frenetic banda

music, the endless toasts and the fireworks that light up the night sky.

Most small towns in Mexico count on U.S. money. Mexican immigrants and their families in the United States sent home \$17 billion last year, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.

Nearby towns like Arandas, Capilla de Guadalupe and Jesus Maria have forged strong links to several U.S. cities. But San Ignacio is unique in that its people overwhelmingly choose one place to make a life -- Detroit.

Michigan workers pumped \$2.5 million into San Ignacio last year, according to a University of Guadalajara study. Servicios Especiales, a money transfer business in southwest Detroit, estimates it helps San Ignacio residents send home \$40,000 a month.

Detroit money

There's a shorthand many use to sum up the impact of Michigan jobs on the families here: Detroit money.

"Detroit money," says Francisco Orozco, a 48-year-old millwright who lives in Livonia, explaining how he helped his father buy a 434-acre dairy farm for \$40,000 nearly 30 years ago. Orozco chipped in \$20,000 by saving almost half the wages he earned at an Eastern Market slaughterhouse over three years.

"Detroit money," says Carlos Gutierrez, 20, explaining how his uncle, an assembly line worker for General Motors Corp., built a gorgeous white home with sweeping views of blue-green agave fields and the "fat hill" that gives the town the second half of its name.

"Detroit money," says Sandra Hernandez, 23, pointing to a two-story office complex with stained-glass windows, white stucco walls and vase-shaped pillars. The recent University of Michigan graduate once lived there in a one-story bungalow. Her father, Javier, worked in Detroit steel plants for more than two decades and used his savings to pay for the conversion.

From his building, Javier Hernandez can gaze down the main street to the soccer field-sized plaza that's the heart of San Ignacio and center of las fiestas.

Just off the plaza is the town's main church. The first Mass begins at 6 a.m., and it's standing room only. A noon parade is followed by the midday siesta, when restaurants and homes fill with family and friends. Another parade cranks up in the early evening, leading into the day's final Mass.

Afterward, church bells ring wildly and the crowds fill the plaza. Revelers begin digging into their pockets to pay for fifths of tequila and to hire one of 23 groups of musicians charging \$100 an hour.

A circle of Metro Detroiters gathers in front of the flower shop, and a 12-piece band begins to play.

Francisco Orozco soaks it in with his brother, Jesus, who routinely travels to Metro Detroit to work as a landscaper. Beside them, Sandra Hernandez and her sister, Araceli, laugh as their brother, Oswaldo, 22, dances with a stunning woman who lives in Southgate. Oswaldo is wearing a black cowboy hat and Western belt inlaid with silver. He bought the outfit that day for \$700. "I needed to cowboy up," he says. He usually wears Pistons jerseys and baggy jeans. The music fills the plaza into the night, until the bands finally refuse money because they're too tired to stand.

The nonstop energy of las fiestas is a break from the tough workaday norm in San Ignacio. The town has sacrificed most of its working-age men to Metro Detroit for three generations now, and on typical evenings it's dead-quiet by 9.

The mariachi connection

This San Ignacio-Detroit connection started with a random meeting and the love of mariachi music. In June 1962, Jesus Mercado arrived at the Michigan Central Depot carrying his trumpet. Mercado was an accomplished musician who toured central Mexico with a mariachi troupe. He was invited to Detroit by Francisco Hernandez, an assembly line worker at General Motors' Fleetwood Fisher Body plant. Hernandez wanted the musician to teach his sons to play. Mercado didn't need much convincing. He'd heard of the Motor City's riches from friends in nearby cities recruited to work in Ford Motor Co. plants. In 1962, Detroit was a big, bustling city that created unrivaled comfort for working-class people. At the same time, San Ignacio was still reeling from bloody revolutions. Electricity remained a rare luxury. Most homes wouldn't get indoor plumbing for another decade. Work often meant backbreaking labor on a ranch in the torrid sun. Many went hungry. In 1964, Mercado wrote a letter to his brother Luis describing Detroit as "the richest place you can ever dream about." Luis eagerly packed his harp and jumped aboard a bus for the three-day trip north. Pulling into town, he was awed by the skyscrapers, the freeways and big factories. "Detroit must be the biggest city in the world," he recalls thinking. It didn't take long for word of "Detroit money" to spread. By 1967, 200 people from San Ignacio had traveled to Michigan.

The trailblazer

For many, the chance at a new life meant breaking immigration laws. Tomas Martinez arrived in Detroit in the winter of 1968 after securing a tourist visa by telling authorities he had to attend a funeral. He stayed more than 20 years. Martinez had three job offers the week he arrived. Any of the jobs would pay him more in a year than he could make in six years in San Ignacio. He took a job in a Downriver steel plant. "When you learn a little English and mind your own business -- not going out and causing trouble -- it's no problem," says Martinez, who moved back to San Ignacio in 1990. Today, the 68-year-old spends his days sitting in a white plastic chair in front of the tiny, disheveled hat store he owns on San Ignacio's main street. Behind him are two sloppy stacks of books, each as tall as a 4-year-old. He claims to have read them all. During las fiestas, Martinez was reading a yellowed paperback novel about Argentine gauchos and a thick history book of Judaism. Many in San Ignacio have Jewish roots, Martinez said. He theorizes the town's Spaniard forefathers were Jews who fled to Mexico during the

Spanish Inquisition in the late 16th century, about the time San Ignacio was originally formed by a rich landowner.

'Most guys live like mice'

Martinez has a perfectly round stomach matched by a perfectly round face. With his small eyes and thinning hair that he slicks back, he looks Buddha-like as he sits reading and dispensing history about San Ignacio and Detroit to anyone who will listen.

When the men from San Ignacio go to Detroit, "there are some guys who go out and get drunk and all that, but let me tell you, most guys who go there, they live like mice.

"I never bought a car. I didn't eat out much."

He tucked \$150 in his wallet just in case he got deported and had to make his way back to San Ignacio, and kept a constant eye out for U.S. immigration officials.

"Sometimes I would get kind of nervous. I would read the newspaper and put a tiny hole in the middle. I put the newspaper up like this," he says, holding it in front of his face, "to hide and I could still see what's going on through the little hole."

Living like a mouse on wages of \$7.50 to \$10.50 an hour helped him save up to \$10,000 almost every year, which he sent to his wife and children back in San Ignacio.

He's glad to be back home now.

"If you stay too long, something happens to you. You forget who you are."

'The coolest thing'

Many here spend half their lives in Michigan. They start out with the intention of coming back and dutifully send money home. But as the years go by, they start asking why they should come back.

Francisco Orozco left for Detroit at age 17 in 1974.

A neighbor working in Detroit came to visit San Ignacio wearing a shiny vinyl Ford Mustang Cobra racing jacket, the kind with the white stripe that goes down the left front and a patch of a hissing Cobra on the breast. The jacket is still a hip accessory in Detroit's rock scene.

"That was the coolest thing I had ever seen," Orozco recalls.

When Orozco arrived at his parents' house in San Ignacio for las fiestas, he brought two Army duffel bags full of T-shirts, socks, underwear and jackets that he bought from the Sears near his house. He will leave it all behind for family and friends, as well as most of the clothes he wears during las fiestas.

"A lot of my American friends say, 'Frank, that's impossible. Nobody can save half their income for three years,'" Orozco says. His hands are covered with tiny scars from his meat-cutting days at Eastern Market.

"I guess you have to understand poverty," he says. "There is no Social Security or welfare here. If you don't get a piece of land and help your family, you got nothing, man."

'Here and there ...'

Orozco's parents' house has been expanded several times, a common sight here. On each side of the home, his two brothers, Jesus and

David, have built separate houses. Both brothers travel to Detroit during the warm months to find work in landscaping and return to San Ignacio in winter. They earn up to \$20,000 each year, enough for them to raise a family and live comfortably back home. Most people here are lucky to make \$13,000 a year.

Orozco turns the corner from his parents' house onto a street, Justo Serra, which has all the charm of small-town Mexico -- and a lot of money from Detroit, right down to the paved street that replaced one of ragged cobblestones.

Small trees with red flowers line the street. Houses, mostly bungalows, are different colors. Some have tile on their sidewalks, and the tiles are kept shiny clean. The white spires of the church in the plaza two blocks away can be seen at one end of the street.

"Detroit money," Orozco says. "Every house on this street, except, maybe one or two, has been done over by Detroit money."

Two sisters living in Detroit, one a factory worker and the other a waitress, own a three-story pale yellow structure with a beauty salon on the ground floor. The steps are made of imported Spanish tile. The kitchen has a stainless steel refrigerator and cedar cabinets.

A purple house is owned by the Chaves family, which counts some 20 relatives working in Metro Detroit. The Hernandez family in the red house on the corner has more than 200 relatives from three generations in Metro Detroit.

Enrique Llanas, who married into the Chaves family, was among the thousands of Mexican immigrants, including scores from San Ignacio, who came to Detroit during the 1990s. Like many, he moved from California; others came from Chicago and Texas.

"I used to make \$6 in Oakland, and in Detroit I make \$21 an hour for the same job," says the 36-year-old construction worker. "I don't care about the cold, mainly because I come back to San Ignacio. I love Detroit, man."

"I got two children, and I'm thinking if they can stay out of trouble, they have good colleges in Michigan. I want them to know how to take care of the money we all make now."

Orozco also has two children, a son and a daughter. His son graduated from college three years ago and sells commercial real estate in Las Vegas. His daughter is about to graduate from Central Michigan University. Both children struggle with Spanish.

"Why would they come back here? The U.S. is their country," Orozco says.

"We all go away with the dream of making enough money to buy a house in San Ignacio, get married and live here. But, I don't know, nowadays. I'm an American citizen now. My wife is not from here. My kids are in Detroit. Here and there. I guess that's the way it's going to be for me."

Not everyone has found the right balance of being here and there. A clampdown on illegal immigration since Sept. 11, 2001, has meant dozens have been deported and are now back in San Ignacio scrambling for work. Orozco's sister and brother have been waiting for years to get a tourist visa.

Many legal migrants have lost jobs because of Michigan's sagging economy, which in turn slows the flow of money sent here. Orozco has worked for three companies that shut down, and two weeks ago he was

laid off from another job. That elaborate office building built by the Hernandez family has no tenant. Some houses remain half-finished because Detroit money ran dry.

Others from San Ignacio have left Detroit after the violence of the city and freezing, gray winters became too much to bear.

'Absent children'

None of these challenges stops the townspeople from celebrating Detroit on the final Sunday of las fiestas.

The noon parade is dedicated to those who have migrated, the town's "absent children."

There will be a group from California, one from Guadalajara, another from Mexico City and another from Detroit.

By 11:30 a.m., there are at least a hundred people lined up behind the Detroit banner. Once again, the sky is cloudless and a brilliant shade of blue.

By noon, the Detroit contingent leading the parade swells to 250 people.

Carrying the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe is University of Michigan graduate Sandra Hernandez; her husband, Josue Gutierrez; and her sister, Faviola Lopez, who owns Favi's nail shop in southwest Detroit.

The parade begins under the massive peach-colored arch at the start of the town. The procession marches down San Ignacio's main street, Calle Morelos.

Detroit money can be seen on every block.

There's the home built by Jesus Mercado, the original Detroit immigrant. There's the cab driver whose sons all work in construction in Detroit. There's the hat store owned by Tomas Martinez, who is sitting in his white plastic chair and smiling. There's the flower shop, where two brothers do odd jobs after leaving Detroit because it was too hard to find work, they said. There's the elaborate business complex owned by Sandra's father, Javier Hernandez.

By the middle of the route, another hundred people have joined the Detroit group. Only a handful of "absent children" are marching for other cities.

Members of the crowd wave and laugh as they see family and friends. Little girls throw confetti on the marchers as they enter the plaza. Some people clap and cheer as the Metro Detroiters file into the church. Detroit money helped pay for its renovation and expansion. Later, Sandra Hernandez explains why she will stay in Michigan. "I want to help Mexican immigrants and Spanish-speaking people in Detroit with their money.

"Here, there will always be family. But Detroit is where my life is at."

On the map

San Ignacio is being put on the map next year -- literally. The steady stream of Detroit money has created enough hope of an independent economy that the Mexican government will make San Ignacio an official municipality. "Detroit is very important in getting us to this step," says Jose Luis Orozco, the president of the town delegation to make San Ignacio official.

"Soon, we want to become an official sister city with Detroit. We think we have a strong connection, don't you agree?"