

Mañana
(Mah-NYAH-nah)

“Que Sera Sera!”

It has been said that North Americans live for the future without much thought of the past, while Mexicans live for the present and their past is always with them.

Mexicans have never been obsessed with planning for the future. Historically, theirs was a world in which getting through each day was enough of a challenge. There were no guarantees on what was going to happen the following day – or even that they would be alive.

For more Mexicans, there were few if any changes they could make in their lives. The seasons changed, people and things aged and died, or perished in some kind of violence. Each day and each season was practically the same, so there were few reasons for anticipating that things were going to be better.

Much of this attitude was a legacy of Mexico's Indian past. The early Indians of Mexico were master astronomers and created calendars for keeping track of the seasons. But they did not segment time into hours, minutes or seconds, or look upon it as something that was continuously moving at great speed. They didn't have the contemporary outlook that time would pass them by if they didn't move fast enough to keep up with it.

The Spaniards who invaded and occupied Mexico in 1519-1521 also came from a society whose lifestyle was based on the slow passage of time and a variety of rituals that required a sedate pace. The mechanization that followed the industrial revolution in Europe was barred from Mexico until the 19th century, so Mexicans were not forced to learn how to keep up with the machines.

Most of Mexico was still not mechanized and not “on European time” in the latter decades of the 20th century; thus the cultural view of time in Mexico has remained quite different from what it is in North America, Europe and many other countries.

North Americans think of time as moving in a straight line at a constant speed which is literally measured in seconds ticking off inexorably. They plan their work, play and other activities to happen in sequence, and are concerned about filling every bit of time to prevent it from being wasted.

Mexicans do not look upon “idle” time as wasted, but as something to be enjoyed; it has its own place in life and is its own reward. In other words, doing nothing is doing something. It nurtures the spirit and the soul.

Traditionally, Mexicans have never attempted to keep activities or events separate, in their own precise time slots. Exact schedules were not part of their lifestyle. There were time frames, but they were flexible.

Because time was not measured in tiny increments and the length of time it took to do things was not qualified, there was no sense of being late or of time being wasted.

Some of the areas where *la hora Mexicana*, or “Mexican time”, most often clashes conspicuously with precise time-keepers are business appointments and invitations to social events.

While there are exceptions among businesspeople to schedule more than one appointment at the same time (because it is common for people not to show up), and to make appointments for times they know they are not going to be in their offices.

Where social events are concerned, particularly at private homes, being on time generally means arriving at least one hour and often up to two hours after the set time, unless a *la gringa* time has been specifically agreed upon.

Given this loose view and use of time, it is not surprising that Mexicans spend a great deal of time standing in lines, particularly at government offices. Bureaucrats are notorious not only for keeping “Mexican time”, but for adding an additional dimension that takes the slow, leisurely use of time to new heights.

Saying that things are going to be done – or are going to happen- by a specific time or date is more of a polite reply than a commitment, which brings us to *mañana* (mah-NYAH-nah).

Spanish language dictionaries say that *mañana* means “tomorrow”, and that is the meaning taught to foreign students of the language. But “tomorrow” is a literal translation, not the true cultural meaning of the word.

In its normal cultural context *mañana* means “sometime in the near future, maybe”. Behind the term are such unspoken things as “If I feel like it”, or “If I have the time” or “If nothing unexpected happens”.

About the only way around inconveniences caused by unadorned *mañana* responses is to diplomatically qualify how the word is being used; to specify, with a smile, *tiempo Americano* or “American time”.

Anthropologists add that the Mexican way of using time derives, at least in part, from the fact that they have traditionally had so little control over their lives. Disregarding those normal expectations where time was concerned was one of the few things they could do that gave them a sense of power.

Forcing people to wait for appointments is one of the ways that Mexicans demonstrate their power and gain “face”. By the same token, being forced to wait for an extended period of time results in loss of face, and how long people are forced to wait is a measure of their status as far as the other party is concerned.

Interestingly enough, Mexicans themselves prefer that things that impact on them be done in a timely fashion. And, as the psychology of Mexicans changes from viewing time as an unending circle and doing things “when they want to be done”, to using time and getting the most out of it, more and more people are adopting the American sense of time.

When requesting appointments it is important to keep the long midafternoon siesta custom in mind. The best hours for appointments are usually between 10 A.M. and noon, and between 4 and 6 P.M.