

ÁLAMOS

By Allen Cox, Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.

According to local legend, the city of Álamos was once so prosperous due to the silver mines that the daughter of a wealthy silver baron, on her wedding day, walked from her home to the church on a path made of silver bars.

In the mountains of the northern state of Sonora, the moguls of Mexico's silver industry left behind a legacy that they called Álamos. In the 18th century, its mines produced more silver than any other Spanish colonial mining project.

Up sprang a graceful *pueblo*, with its central church, its commerce, and its mansions as fine as silver fortunes could buy. Soon, Álamos blossomed into a provincial oasis of high society tucked in the wilds of the Sierra Madre. It became the northernmost jewel in a necklace of "Silver Cities" that spread throughout Mexico's interior.

Despite a few slightly less glamorous distractions in the form of floods, rebellions, and the occasional epidemic, Álamos managed to maintain its general prosperity until the early 20th century, when the Mexican Revolution swept the country like a

raging wildfire. The mines closed, the economy declined, and Álamos was all but abandoned.

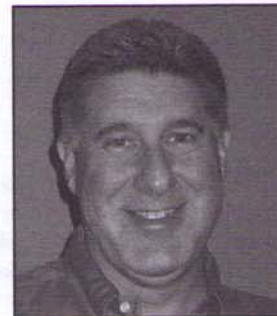
But not for long—someone soon rediscovered this diamond in the rough. In the latter half of the 20th century, dust flew as ruined colonial mansions were meticulously restored, cobbles in the streets repaired and the infrastructure upgraded.

Today, Álamos is a *pueblo* of 10,000 people that shines with civic pride. In 2000, it earned the distinction of National Historical Monument (more precisely, 188 individual structures within the *pueblo* earned that distinction). Álamos was subsequently crowned with the title of *Pueblo Mágico*, one of only a handful in Mexico. Its history, its impressive collection of restored colonial architecture, its rich natural setting in a rare tropical deciduous forest (the home of the famed *brincador*,

or Mexican Jumping Bean), and its easygoing people combine in a formula that defines its magic.

Once there, a good place to begin an exploration is *El Museo Costumbrista de Sonora* on the Plaza de Armas in the hub of the historic district. This regional museum provides an excellent orientation and, from there, all the historic structures are within walking distance, making touring the *pueblo's* colonial heart a simple pleasure.

When I mention Álamos, most people return a blank stare. "Where's that?" they reply, which is precisely what makes the place so appealing. Because getting there requires some special effort (it lacks a commercial airport), Álamos tends to attract visitors who prefer to bush bash off the beaten path.



Allen Cox is a freelance writer from Tacoma, WA. His first loves are: traveling to destinations off the beaten path, primarily in Mexico; hiking in his own backyard—the spectacular Pacific Northwest; and, of course, writing. Besides travel writing, he writes fiction and is currently working on a novel set in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from City University, has retired from a career in the telecommunications industry, and is a member of Pacific Northwest Writer's Association.

When Allen is not traveling, he volunteers his time tutoring English language skills at a Latino community center in his hometown. When asked about his most bizarre cultural experience, he says: "I suppose standing on the shoulder of a remote highway in southern Mexico, nervously watching my tour guide's van being torn apart by some scary-looking plainclothes drug police in search of contraband could be considered a cultural experience. It was a false alarm; we were squeaky clean."

MEXICAN JUMPING BEANS

By Dr. Crit Minster

"Mexican Jumping Bean" is sort of a misnomer. They're not really a bean, but a seed pod from a hardy shrub (*sebastiania pavoniana*). Although they're common in Mexico, they can also be found in parts of the American southwest. And they don't really jump, but rather roll and wobble.

All the same, they're a part of pop culture: Mexican kids sell them as "pets" to tourists, and they're a staple of novelty shops all over the southwest. The "jumping" is caused by the larval form of a moth (*carpocasca saltitans*), which lays its eggs in the seed pods. When the eggs hatch, the moth grub eats the seeds but remains in the seed pod.

Once the seed is gone, the moth larva lives and develops inside the seed pod, and has the odd habit of moving around inside. Not unlike a hamster inside a plastic ball rolling all over the place, the grub causes the seed pod to roll about. Several hundred seed pods under the parent tree, all moving about randomly, looks quite startling!

In late summer, the larvae have matured and are ready to leave the seed pods. They "hatch" from the seed pod and fly off, to begin the cycle again!