

GLOBEHOPPING

Exploring football around the world

NO 16: CANCUN, MEXICO



Michael Renouf experiences Mexican mayhem at an Atlante match in the popular seaside resort of Cancun

So, there I am on a balmy February evening, hearing Spanish all around me and then the two teams come out side by side, the home team in their blue and garnet and the away in their striking all white affair and favourites to win this year's title. However, I am not at El Clasico in Spain but in the Mexican holiday resort of Cancun. Tonight, Atlante will be hosting Alebrijes from Oaxaca in the second tier. Oaxaca is the foodie capital of Mexico and is pronounced 'Wahaca' as in Thomasina Miers' anglicised version of the name in her successful chain of Mexican restaurants in the UK.

Mexico have competed in 15 World Cup Finals yet their best performance to date has twice been a run to the quarter finals (1970 and 1986) both occasions coinciding with them hosting the tournament. For a country with a population in excess of 127 million – who love football and have totally embraced the beautiful game unlike their neighbours to the north – this is a huge disappointment.

I did not hold out much hope for them getting beyond the Round of 16 this year and so it came to pass. Russia 2018 was the seventh tournament in a row El Tri have exited at this hurdle.

Days in the Mexican Caribbean are idyllic. On the day of the game I decide to get up early and take some pictures of the stunning sunrise around 7am. I headed back to my casa to have a breakfast of fresh fruits and then after checking my emails, had a leisurely swim in the communal pool. I then had a siesta (when in Rome!) before getting ready and leaving for the game with my good friend Alfredo who is originally from Venezuela



Tuck in: Hot dogs on sale at Atlante.

Images: Michael Renouf

but has lived for the last year in the beautiful Mexican beach town of Playa del Carmen and whose last experience of a live football match was watching New York Cosmos, Pele et al, play a game in Canada.

The drive, or should I say race, from Playa to Cancun takes less than an hour. Mexican people are incredibly warm and friendly, but if you put them behind a wheel, they would run over their own grandmother to get in front of you on the road.



We arrived at the stadium around an hour before the fortnightly Friday night 8pm kick off. Home teams in Mexico have a set time and day for their league games. Tickets range from the cheapest 50 pesos (£2) standing behind the goal, to the VIP seats which cost 200 pesos (£8). With myself and Alfredo having a combined age of 110 we decided on the seated option. To purchase the tickets in Playa del Carmen you need to visit the Ahorra pharmacy at the corner of 35th and Constituyentes, in Cancun



Happy fans: All smiles among the home fans.

itself you can buy them from the ticket office at the ground where they go on sale from the Monday prior to the match.

Many people as with many events in Mexico decide to purchase the tickets on the day - I normally accredit this to the Mexican mañana attitude, but on this occasion, it may be something far more sensible - the 17,000 capacity Estadio Olimpico Andres Quintana Roo is completely open to the elements with no cover whatsoever for the spectators. Now although the weather in Mexico is generally fantastic, when it does rain it is akin to being in a car wash in a convertible with a roof that has been fitted by Jeremy Clarkson.

Before the game we had a walk round and found the food vendors who are not employed by the club but pay a rent for the privilege of selling their wares, game by game. You do not have to go looking for food as all throughout the game the Mexican Del Boys are walking amongst the seats selling their offerings.

The food and drinks are very reasonably priced; for example three hot dogs will cost you the same price as the cheapest ticket, water 20 pesos (a necessity in this region of Mexico to stop you dehydrating) and beer 30 pesos. Food is very important at gatherings and events in the country that was once part of New Spain. As

well as hot dogs you can buy tacos, candy floss and esquites (a typical delicious sweetcorn and cheese street-food) to name but a few of the treats on offer at very reasonable prices.

On the way to our seats we passed the club shop- in what appears to be a mobile catering unit without the cooking equipment. The good thing about the stadium is although there is a running track between the spectators and the pitch you will get a decent view from anywhere within the Estadio Olimpico Andres Quintana Roo.

AS WELL AS HOT DOGS THERE ARE TACOS, CANDY FLOSS AND ESQUITES

The season in Mexico is split into two halves: the Apertura (Opening) and Clausura (Closing). The second division is called the Ascenso (Going up), you're getting the hang of this aren't you? The top eight teams after the regular season go into the play offs to determine the winners of the Apertura and then all the teams start again from zero and repeat the same format to see who will win the Clausura. These two teams then play off to determine who will 'ascend' to the top flight of Mexican football (Liga Mx). If one team wins both the opening and the closing, they automatically get promoted. Tonight's visitors won this season's Apertura so are through to the play off final at the very least.

The mobile food merchants were not the only differences to watching a game in any of the major European leagues. About ten minutes into the game I thought I heard a horse neighing over the tannoy, or did I? A few minutes later I heard it again and then put two and two together, Atlante's nickname is The Iron Colts so this was the announcer getting behind his team.

Next was Queen followed by AC/DC, two of my favourite bands as it happens, but a little disconcerting to listen to rock gods Freddie Mercury and Brian Johnson belt out their hits when you are trying to watch the action on the pitch.



Come back! Advertising the next fixture.

For a good half an hour after the game started people were still pouring into the stadium which makes the driving here even more confusing as Mexican people are always late for no visible discernible reason. The crowd at the game was around 6,500, a little up on the average attendance of 5,000 this season so I can only imagine what it would be like if sold out to capacity. In Spanish 'ahora' means now and 'ahorita' means right now throughout Latin America, except for in Mexico it just means sometime in the future! Maybe that's the answer, if you cannot say it - how can anything happen right now!

To the game itself. Alebrijes controlled the game but the home team were looking more likely to score and inside 20 minutes were presented with a golden opportunity when their number 6 Alfonso Luna was scythed down in the box. The referee, who looked about 15, rightly awarded a penalty and cautioned the offending Alebrijes defender. Uscanga wearing 27 on his back duly stepped up to take the spot kick but hit a poor shot to the keeper's right which the away team's custodian easily turned around the post for a corner. We went into the break cero por cero (0-0) hoping for more quality in the second half. Unfortunately, this did not materialise but that did not stop the home standing support behind the goal singing and chanting throughout. With less than five minutes left we were treated to a one-man pitch invasion

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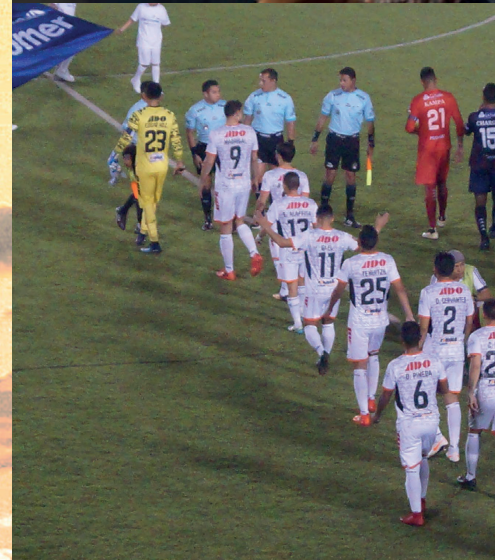
of the friendly variety. The interloper was one of the away fans who just wanted to shake hands with one of his heroes and run back to the stands topless, luckily for all in attendance he was in better physical condition than your average Geordie fan that insists on showing his beer belly to all and sundry.

The game finished 0-0 which was the fourth game in a row that Atlante failed to trouble the scoreboard. After this game they had an upturn in form, winning three of their last five games to secure a play off berth and the chance of another attempt to return to the top flight of Mexican football where they were one of the founding teams. (This was when they were based in Mexico City so that's why they are a lot older than the city they now call home). However their promotion bid ended in the play-offs.

If Atlante do ever get promoted, they will need to up the capacity of their home as new rules in Mexico state that all stadiums in the top flight must have a minimum capacity of 20,000.

If you find yourself in the land of tacos and tequila on its Caribbean coast do haul yourself away from your all-inclusive hotel and go out to experience some of the real Mexico, with locals who always have a smile for a stranger and a taste of the excellent Mexican street food. Where better to do this than watching the world's favourite sport? Hasta Luego Amigos!

Background: Sunrise in Playa del Carmen.



Main: The crowd gathers in the stadium.

FACT FILE

Estadio Olímpico Andrés Quintana Roo
Capacity: 17,200

Getting there: Most people staying in Cancun will be staying in what is called the 'hotel zone' and a taxi to the ground from this area costs about 250 pesos (£10). Or you can get a colectivo. These are the minibuses the locals use and are dirt cheap and cost just a few pesos per journey. They cram as many people in as possible. They have set routes and no timetable but will pick you up or drop you off anywhere on their route. Ask the staff in your hotel the best pick up point close to your hotel to get to the ground which is right next door to Costco.

If you are coming from outside of Cancun you can also get a colectivo from the larger towns such as Tulum or Playa del Carmen, for more comfort try using the ADO. This is more like the coach companies we are used to in the UK. When you get off in Cancun you will be about 1.5 to 2 miles from the ground which is an easy walk. To get from Playa del Carmen to Cancun by ADO is around 60 to 80 pesos each way.

Buying tickets: Ticket prices range from 50 pesos (£2) standing behind the goal, to the VIP seats that cost 200 pesos (£8).



Left: The teams take to the field. Right: Anybody for a snack?