

GLOBEHOPPING

Exploring football around the world

NO 23: MERIDA, MEXICO



Mike Renouf follows the legendary Diego Maradona as he takes his Mexican second tier side to a league match at Merida



Mexico is the confusing and wonderful country where everything can and does happen and so it came to pass when Diego Armando Maradona was announced as the new manager of second division outfit Dorados de Sinaloa in September 2018. Why would the world's greatest player - if you are of a certain Argentina generation or possibly any Scottish one - or that short fat cheating Argie - if you are English and have not got

over the 1986 World Cup yet - take up the D.T. role, as it is known in Mexico, of this club based in one of the more dangerous parts of the country.

Has he seen potential in a club that previously had Mexican greats such as Jared Borgetti and Cuauhtemoc Blanco - the second and third most prolific goal-scorers for the national team with 46 and 39 strikes respectively, employed on the playing



staff. Blanco is also famous for the Cuauhtemina or bunny hop trick, if you have not seen it, look on YouTube. Or did he hope some of the spirit of current Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola would rub off on him, who finished his playing career for the team also known as Los Dorados - it is commonplace in Mexico for teams to have more than one nickname.

Maradona's charges were playing away



Spelling it out: A colourful welcome to Merida.

Images: Mike Renouf

in the stunningly beautiful colonial city of Merida, so I drove inland from the Caribbean coast which if you take the toll road from either Playa del Carmen or Cancun will take less than three hours. Although the tolls are a little pricey (400-500 pesos each way equivalent to £16 to £20) here it does keep you away from the drivers who think you only stop at a red light if you are looking for a prostitute. I say it will take less than three hours but that depends on who you are travelling with.

I had in tow my girlfriend and stepdaughter who managed to get herself locked in a toilet en-route, so our journey took a little longer - lots of kids do that I know but she is 29 years old! Anyway, once she was released from this smelly slammer, we were on our way again and arrived in the capital of the state of Yucatán on the Thursday night in anticipation of Friday's game.

We decided to spend a couple of nights in the city that was founded in 1542 and is such a different experience to the coastal towns and for my money a cannot miss if you find yourself on the Yucatán peninsula.

One of the highlights of a visit to the city that has twice been voted American capital of culture first in 2000 and most recently in 2017 is the food. On our first night we all ate together. I had two of my favourite regional dishes, sopa de lima (lime soup) of which tortilla strips and shredded chicken are just two of many ingredients to start. I followed this with cochinita pibil - literal translation roasted baby pig which

is so tender and flavoursome thanks to its wonderful marinade and slow cooking time you will never eat a dry pork chop in the UK ever again, as you won't be able to comprehend it comes from the same animal. I also quenched my thirst with margaritas - just to keep with the theme of local produce you understand. This was the last meal we all ate together as I am ashamed to say my jailbird stepdaughter is a vegan and Mexico, Merida, especially is a land of meat eaters, so all other meal times she went off searching for dry lentil burgers and kale salads or whatever other culinary delights our B-12 deficient meat police fill themselves up with.

We then took a horse and carriage ride up the Paseo de Montejo, the gorgeous main tree lined avenue named after Francisco de Montejo the conquistador who founded the city. On the Friday we all made our way to El Gran Museo del Mundo Maya (The Mayan World Museum of Merida) which covers the fascinating history of the region. If you go, I recommend watching the short introductory film at the beginning that is in Spanish, even if like my stepdaughter you don't speak the language as she found it thoroughly engaging thanks to the stunning visuals. While we were visiting, the museum was also housing a temporary dinosaur exhibition, as this is the area that the meteorite struck which wiped out the stars of the Jurassic Park films.

Back at the hotel we got ready to go to the game and found we were a man, or woman down as "The Vegan" was too tired to come so just myself and my girlfriend hopped in



Snack time: A street vendor in Merida.



Bar with a view: Pitcheside pints at Merida.



No messing: Tight security inside the stadium.



Feeling hungry? A snack vendor makes his way through the stand.



the taxi to take us to the completely open to the elements Estadio Carlos Iturralde Stadium. The ground is about three miles out of town of town but taxis in Merida are so cheap, we decided to forgo the busy traffic and battling for a parking space outside the venue. Although I have to say the level of driving here generally was 100 times better than anything, I have experienced along the Mexican Caribbean coast.

Outside the stadium we encountered a veritable mini carnival with food stalls, mascots and football skills challenges - a really buzzing atmosphere. Tickets were available in three price brackets being the big spender I am, I bought two of the top price tickets for the west stand at a combined price of 180 pesos (£7.20). Once inside we climbed the very steep stairs that had no handrail, a common feature in this part of Mexico and chose our spot, no such luxury as individual seating just chose a place on the concrete and park yourself.

The stadium, that has an official capacity of 15,087 and is named after the only Yucatecan to play for



Walk on: The two teams take to the field.

the national side, is normally around a third full for Venados home games I was reliably informed. On this occasion because of the Maradona factor, there were about 6,000 people in attendance, but no official figures are published.

On the far side from us in the 60 peso (£2.40) section were two separate groups of flag waving, drum beating ultras both supporting the hosts - I don't know if they were rivals who didn't get on or they were all supposed to be together but they just did not manage to meet up thanks to the all too common Mexican trait of not being able to organise a bun fight in a bakery.

The two teams came out - the home team in yellow and the away team wearing dark, then I noticed something in this most macho of countries, as well as the officials being bedecked in a pink that would have graced a seven year old girls princess party so were both the managers, The Bucks manager in the form of his shirt and the man who captained Argentina in two World Cup finals with a bib over his 1980's rapper outfit.

AS WITH ANY SOCIAL OCCASION IN MEXICO THE FOOD IS PLENTIFUL, TASTY AND CHEAP. BEFORE THE GAME WE HAD KIBIS

Every time the crowd caught a glimpse of "El Diez" in the first half - which was rare as he mainly stayed in the dugout - the abusive chanting started, which on occasions was more entertaining than a 45 minutes in which neither side looked like they could finish a sentence - let alone a chance, so at the break the score was 0-0.

As with any social occasion in Mexico the food is plentiful, tasty and cheap. Before the game we had eaten kibis - a cheese or meat filled corn snack that you then cut open and add red onions to and if you have the palate - hot chillies - these set us back 25 peso (£1) a go. Then during the first half vendors wandered through the crowd selling everything from beers and soft drinks (30 and 20 pesos respectively) to esquites (delicious sweet corn) to hamburger and chips from Chupetes & Grill which set us back 75 pesos (£3) but which tasted like a gourmet burger that could easily set you back four or five times that in the wrong restaurant.

Half-time arrived along with the entertainment, which I have to say was

a step up from anything we had seen in the first half. Firstly, four scantily dressed cheerleaders started to dance along with the home mascot - a stag. At the same time the parade started - well I say parade when it was just three vans - one from Coca Cola, a second representing a property developer and lastly a local food outlet. They were accompanied by two mascots, the away teams that appeared to all intense purposes to be a Zulu shield which confused me no end as all Dorados nicknames are to do with fish and a random Bob the builder.

Well, this nearly all ended in disaster as our friend Bob was so excited by his 15 minutes of fame he tripped over his own outsized feet and went down easier than Neymar in the 18 yard box, meanwhile the driver of the property developers vehicle came within a yard of two of running young Bob over. Act three topped all of this - four guys had to do the running round the pole with your head down and resting on it 20 times games - you know the one you get in all the best hotels, before trying to take a penalty into an empty net. I have to say when one of them eventually connected with

Under the lights: Action of the game.



the ball it was a better effort than Chris Waddle's at Italia 90, which will forever be seared into my memory.

In the second period things livened up a little and the Argentinian genius/man that "Took the cat's milk" against England to use an expression the hombre who is still hero worshipped in Naples, is fond of using - left his dugout far more frequently to urge his players forward as a victory would qualify his team for the playoffs and in the 72 minute through a scrappy Fernando David Arce Juarez goal they took a deserved lead. Diego now went into full Maradona mode constantly hugging anybody that came within his orbit. Sinaloa held on for a 1-0 victory and as the man from Buenos Aires left the pitch, he gave the

home fans a wave - I wonder if I am the only that noticed it was with his left hand - and in an instant the jeers turned to cheers.

The next day we had a wander round the hub of the city, the main plaza before heading back to the beach resort of Playa del Carmen. If you ever decided the Yucatán Peninsula is somewhere you would like to spend a couple of weeks of your precious vacation time and fancy a shot of culture instead of tequila, I urge you to make your way to Merida, I promise you won't regret it. Just drop any vegans off in Playa del Carmen first! Fw



Star turn: Diego Maradona.

