

ELEANOR DIMES YOUNG WAITER OF THE YEAR
ANNUAL AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE 2020 MEXICO CITY/ LOS CABOS TRIP.

Day 1.

Excitement for this trip was growing massively on the way to the airport and, after checking in and meeting up with the rest of the group, we went to the lounge in the airport and met our amazing host for the week, Manuel Díaz Cebrián who worked for the Mexico Ministry of Tourism and now represents Los Cabos through his company 110PERCEB Ltd. If he was anything to go by we were in for a fabulous week. He was very passionate and proud of his country and what it has to offer. So we boarded our overnight 11.5-hour flight to Mexico City, and to be honest I cannot say I remember much about the flight as I did sleep a lot. After arriving in Mexico City we travelled to our first hotel. We checked in and had about 15 mins to freshen up before having to depart for our first destination. We headed for a drive through Mexico City which was very busy – all of our senses were bombarded. We met Elsie who was joining us a tour guide as well for the first few days of the trip. We headed to Xochimilco which are canals with a vestige of the Aztec agricultural techniques of using chinampas to extend arable land in wetland areas. We went to one of La Chinampa and saw how Mesoamerican agriculture uses small areas of fertile land to grow crops on the shallow lake beds. We had breakfast and had a tour to see how they grow their products and filter the water. After returning from our boat tour we headed into town, got a coffee had a took a walk down their version of Oxford Street, having a good look around, and ended up outside Pujol Restaurant which is run by Chef Enrique Olvera. We had an awesome show of the kitchen and the restaurant and I was fascinated to see the level of detail and the amount of staff they had around. We were shown the garden area and offered hibiscus water (which is a staple offering when you arrive at any establishment or water anyway). We were then invited to taste their most famous signature dish which was unreal. Back into our little van, we headed for our actual lunch at Nico, by Chef Gerardo Vazquez Lugo which is a very comfortable establishment serving incredible food. When you first arrive they bring over a margarita trolley with many different varieties of tequila and mezcal and different flavourings. So after making our first one, they then arrived with the homemade guacamole and chilli pastes made in front of you. It was the best guacamole that I have ever tasted. After a 10 course lunch including cured fish, lasagne, crispy beef and rabbit, all of which was amazing and packed with so much flavour. By this point, I think the flight and travelling had caught up with us so it was time to go back to the hotel to relax and get ready for dinner. On arrival in our rooms, we found little welcome cakes which looked delicious, but at this time my tummy was very full. We then headed out to Raiz by Israel Montero and Alfredo Chavez, where we had their private dining room to ourselves - a chefs table, and it was an exceptional experience. We had the head sommelier serving a wine flight and everything we had was truly exceptional. It was awesome being able to watch them cook. Trying some really interesting wines from Mexico as well as much tequila. But after this was time to have a rest and head to bed.

Day 2.

After a very good night's sleep, it was time to pack up and leave the hotel, after a coffee breakfast as I was still full from the night before! We checked out of the hotel and headed

back into the centre of Mexico City and visited the Jamaica market which is one of the biggest markets in Mexico City, selling everything from flowers to meat and all types of vegetables. This is where most of the local restaurants come to pick out their fresh flowers to decorate the restaurants. It's amazing to see they use so much local produce. We went to a small stall that sold the best crispy pork skin - it was incredible and they produced it in front of us. 8am in the morning is never too early for delicious street food. We had a good walk around trying the odd thing here and there, for example, many types of Mole. Looking at the different variety of fresh flowers and the price was just incredible compared to the UK. Just before leaving the market, we went to try three different varieties of baked corn, one very plain, one slightly spicy and one that had meat within it. The texture of this local dish was very interesting. We then visited a tortilla factory (small factory) called Maizajo. Here they showed us how they make them and the concept behind the food. There are three different types of corn used and only one can be grown in Mexico. It was interesting to find out that a human couldn't digest it without the addition of limestone. We all got to try making our own. They then made us lunch which was a selection of tortilla dips and corn. Then it was time to head to the airport for our flight to Los Cabos. We arrived at the hotel to check-in then it was time for more food! We went to Anica, one of the hotel's restaurants (Grand Solmar at Rancho San Lucas Resort) and we were presented with a tasting menu, after a well-deserved, and thoroughly delicious cocktail. A large amount of food was consumed and my favourite was a soft-shell crab taco, which was off the scale amazing. After 8 courses it was time to have a rest and go to bed.

Day 3.

We were left to have a leisurely morning so I took great advantage of the facilities and went for a morning swim and a walk by the beach in the hot sunshine (much better than the cold rain we left in the UK). I even decided to indulge in waffles for breakfast. We then left the hotel and headed to a beach club called SUR. On arrival, we went to the roof terrace and looked at the incredible view. Then we were taken to enjoy a hibiscus drink where they theatrically burnt the lime on top. We were then given [even though was only 11:30] crispy pork, with slow-cooked pork tacos with amazing chips (corn obviously) and dips, including a beetroot dip which was so flavoursome. Then we were given one more cocktail before heading off to our next destination. La Lupta is one of the best taco restaurants in Mexico. On arrival, we were given mezcal margarita and we were told about corn and the making of tortillas which was interesting as they were made a slightly different way. We were then treated to three of his most delicious signature tacos, one of which was made from crispy melted cheese, which was the first we had tried. It was nice to be joined by the chefs while we enjoyed the tacos so we got full explanations of all the dishes. We then went to visit another hotel where the main restaurant looked right over the sea with a Champagne bar to start. It was interesting to hear how many non-residents they had dinning here as well as they had to close if it started to rain. It was then a very quick change and onto our dinner destination which was at the sister hotel of the one, we were staying in. The Executive Chef met us at the door and took us on a tour. We stopped at their Japanese restaurant where we started with a cocktail and a small tasting on the raw fish selection and got a very good view of the sunset over to the water, which was so pretty. We had a tour of the kitchen and the restaurant which was very interesting to see, because of the volume and size of these hotels. But it was finally dinner time where we were joined by some of the top chefs around the area,

as well as the Executive Chef who joined us too. We had a very enjoyable evening, including many courses and wines to go with each course, and some of these were very interesting Mexican wines, which were amazing to taste and understand the process behind it.

Day 4.

Up bright and early and onto our next hotel destination. What can I say?

It was my favourite hotel and was called the Cape. It was beautiful and very modern with a quirky theme. We checked in to the most beautiful rooms which huge swing chairs looking out over the sea. Arrival bottle of personalised tequila and little sweet treats to enjoy later awaited. After check-in, it was time for the next meal which was in their hotel restaurant called Munta. With a nice balcony looking out over the sea and the rocks, which in the evening with the sunset, I can imagine is beautiful. We got involved with helping prepare and cook some of the courses we were going to indulge in later. Watching the way they work was insane and they showed us some skills too, for example, we had chocolate clams which they showed us how to prepare. (As I am not a chef, I wasn't exactly sure about much of it, but it was interesting watching them work). Then we sat down and ate some of the food we had just cooked, and we were joined by the Managing Director and the chef. It was really good to chat to him. We again had another wine flight from their Head Sommelier and were given a nice tour of the wine cellar and the storage system they had for their bottles. My favourite course was the octopus which had the most amazing flavour with its matching wine pairing perfectly. The hospitality there was so well received. As you probably have gathered from this trip, it was a lot about indulging in food, but everywhere we went they were so hospitable, it was amazing. It was then time for a quick change and a coffee from the hotel coffee bar before we then took a trip to Tamarindos. This is an organic farm and restaurant. It has very fertile soil and it has become one of the region's most important farms. The ethos behind it is that this is where they grow everything they cook, and they even had the animals that they serve. We had a great tour of the farm by the Head Chef, Enrique. We had an informative presentation about the sustainability of farming and of fishing, in which we learned about the farming techniques and about which fish they caught and how they fished sustainably. After this information, it was time for dinner and that evening we were joined by many people from the local area. I believe there were about 12/14 of us dining, including chefs, farmers and friends, and it was great to get to know locals. This meal was family style and included quail, chicken, salad and clams (these clams seem to become a staple of the trip). After what seemed like a lot of wine and food later it was getting darker and colder. It was a very enjoyable evening and so nice to see a different style of food and service, with all the staff being fantastically friendly.

Day 5.

There was time to use the facilities in the hotel, so we went for a beautiful swim and breakfast overlooking the beach and listening to the water while watching the whales in the distance. We then headed to a local ranch where we were milking cows and seeing how they turned this milk into cheese. We tried lots of the cheeses they made including goats and cows and at different stages of setting. We then had a ranch breakfast which included wraps and beans with crispy beef, which was a different style of breakfast to that we were used to. It was great

to see all the different animals, and the way that they looked after them, and watching them being milked was really interesting to learn about, even for someone like me who is scared of cows! Then, after what seemed like a long journey we ended up in the Mexican equivalent of a national trust area, and none of us was even sure where we were! After 10 min walk we saw where we were going to, which was the most beautiful waterfall. It was quite a steep walk down but it was worth it when you got to the bottom. In this beautiful sunshine, I started by dipping my feet in the water and it was so lovely it was time to go for a swim. The freshwater was so lovely and refreshing and we had great fun swimming and jumping in from the rocks on the side. It was a much-needed break after the business of the other days. Then as we headed back up the steep side we were ready for some lunch. It was provided by the national trust place, which consisted of salsa and tortillas and beans with slow-cooked pork. All very homely but very delicious at the same time. On the way, back we stopped at a local shop to buy some cold beers to enjoy on our way to our next destination. We stopped in town to be quickly shown around the clean streets while walking through the centre we walked through a small market smelling amazing of churros, and spicy smells with the local artwork. This was awesome to see and was so pretty. It was then time to head to dinner again, and this time we headed back to Tamarindos where the evening started with a mescal tasting with chips and dips. We learnt the process behind mescal and tasting the difference between that and tequila. We were with a lot of different people- for example, I was sat next to a travel agent from the USA and found out about their travel plans, and we had one of the old school chefs from the UK joining us, which was such a different atmosphere and was interesting to hear about the experiences of so many people. We had a tasting of Mole, so we tried many different types with different proteins, which we had a mezcal tasting with each course. It was a really interesting evening. After that, we headed back to Cape and ended with a lovely glass of bubbles with the group in the rooftop bar.

Day 6.

The trip had come to the end at some point, and this was the day we had to start heading home. However we had time for one last stop before we left, so we went to the Solaz Hotel, which was one of the luxury collection of the Marriott group. After a quick tour of the property we visited one of the restaurants where we were shown a couple of their signature dishes - this included one based on corn naturally. We were joined by the General Manager as well as the Head Chef where we tasted their food. We then had a small interview. This hotel was absolutely stunning and the views were awesome. These hotels were some of the prettiest I have seen in the world. It was then time to head to the beach restaurant for lunch, where we were treated to cocktails. Lots of small dishes arrived, included tacos, nachos followed by two awesome desserts, one based on corn that looked exactly like a corn in the husk. The other one was based on the sea and rocks. They were both very imaginative and so tasty. After all of this, it was time to say our goodbyes and head back to the airport, to start our long journey back to the UK. This trip was an amazing experience and I feel very privileged to have been able to attend; to try some incredible food; to meet some inspirational people and to spend time with the fantastic "UK gang".

I have learned a lot about service during this trip, and what was so impressive to see, was that the common language of high end, luxury service was still the same even in a different country 1000s of miles from the UK. For example, the snake way of service, where all the plates go

down at the same time is still used all over the world. The smiley, hospitable and kind members of staff who served us were amazing to see, especially considering what they were doing was not even in their first language and some of them, not even their second language. Watching them all work was really inspirational. I learned a great deal about the wines and was very impressed by the way they were explained to us. I will take some tips back to my establishment about that, because the way they did it was very informative but not too long or too detailed to people were not experts. Everywhere we went we could see that the fabulous staff were trying to impress us and show us their best, which made us feel so special. I shall be eternally grateful to all of the many people who made this a once in a lifetime experience – both professionally and personally. Mexico has so much to offer to the visitor and certainly understands the luxury travel market. Thank you also to all at The Annual Awards of Excellence for the best work experience ever.