

CANADIAN COUPLE FIRST FOREIGNERS EVER TO STAY IN EL ALGODON

By Kathleen Harris

When Leslie Norrie and Tony Gibson from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, decided to book one of Brad Wollman's Seldom Seen Tours, they knew they were going to see things often missed by tourists visiting the Bay of Banderas, but they didn't know they were going to make history. As it turned out, Leslie and Tony were the first foreigners ever to stay in the small town of El Algodon.

They had told Brad they wanted a tour that would give them a true taste of a working Mexican rancho. Tony himself is a cowboy on a community ranch in Alberta that runs 6,000 head of cattle, and after running cattle in the snow he wanted to see what it was like to do it in the tropics. They wondered if the average Mexican rancher still used the old Vaquero horsemanship techniques and were interested in their roping methods and in what day-to-day chores are like on a remote Mexican ranch.

From his 10 plus years knowledge of local communities, Brad felt that El Algodon would provide Leslie and Tony with the experience they sought, and he made arrangements with Ricardo and Crispina Castillon for the couple to spend three days as guests on their rancho. The Castillon family has lived on that rancho for centuries; Ricardo's father was born on the land and lived there all of his 98 years.

El Algodon is an old and very small ranching town in the Sierra Madre Mountains about a 40 minute drive southeast of El Tuito. Located within the Cabo Corrientes municipality, and part of the Comunidad Indigena



de Chacala, El Algodon is made up of 10 households and 40 residents. When arriving via dirt road, at first glance there doesn't seem to be much "there" there. But that depends on your perspective. The tiny town boasts a church, and a school that currently educates seven of the town's children, and even a clinic that is attended by a doctor once a month.

Along with Ricardo and his children, Betty and Noe, each day during their stay Leslie and Tony rode mules and assisted in the ongoing tasks of running the rancho. Early in the morning they roped cows and milked them, and then they helped feed the cattle in the corrals. After the dew dried in the morning sun, they worked in the pastures - hand harvesting corn and picking bananas, limes and lemons that grow wild in the surrounding forest. With machetes they cut tall (15') forest grass to feed to the cattle, and they collected wood to feed the clay oven on which Crispina was masterfully cooked meals.



The Castillons are world class artisans who create fine braided leather lariats, reins, quirts and ropes. Their hosts gave Leslie and Tony a full description of the process, from stretching and drying the cow hides, to scraping off the hair and cutting the long strips, to the final braiding, and many long hours were spent braiding leather strips.

Life in the village, according to Leslie, was usually a noisy experience. With a multitude of dogs, roosters, mules, pigs and burros, there was some sort of noise almost 24 hours a day. Though they didn't speak Spanish, the pair found the people of El Algodon friendly and happy to make their acquaintance, and they experienced what Leslie describes as "surprising success" in communicating with them using a small Spanish/English dictionary and hand gestures.

Every family member went out of their way to make the pair's stay fun and educational. Crispina taught Leslie how to remove dried corn from the cob for grinding and to make tortillas using



the traditional metate - grinding stone, and she even shared her recipe for her favorite cake. The food at the ranch was described as wonderful, fresh and delicious.

Because they visited El Algodon over Christmas, one of the highlights of the trip was an opportunity to join the majority of the villagers as they attended mass on Christmas Eve. When the Padre drove into the village and rang the church bell, everyone stopped what they were doing and the tiny church filled with joy.

At the end of the trip the Canadian couple could hardly believe how profound their experience had been of deep satisfaction with the simplest of life's pleasures. Three days on that rancho, with no TV or radio for distraction, having an absolute cultural exchange with true, kind-hearted people, was an experience they will never forget.

Kathleen takes every opportunity to leave the predictable holiday behind and enjoy an authentic Mexican experience. See www.seldomseentours.com and connect with her at kopenbrt@sonic.net.