

# Welcome to Mexico North

## Prospect of work, safe streets lure wave of educated, wealthy immigrants

KATHARINE HAMER

Special to The Globe and Mail

VANCOUVER -- Luis Batiz is used to dealing with one or two work-permit applications a month from Mexicans wanting to relocate to Canada.

But by the end of March, the immigration lawyer is expecting at least 10 applications to have crossed his desk -- and other lawyers "are doing 20, 50," he said.

"This year, there's going to be a flood of people coming. There's a shortage of skilled workers," he said, adding that small companies that never thought about hiring foreign workers see their business friends doing it and are now also bringing in workers.

Driven by concerns about security in their home country, highly educated and well-to-do Mexicans are making a beeline for the Lower Mainland.

### Print Edition - Section Front



[Enlarge Image](#)



Among them are lawyers, doctors, accountants, architects and mining company bosses. Many have chosen to settle on the North Shore, which is perceived as the most desirable location in Greater Vancouver.

"Most people who come here are people who can afford it," said Mr. Batiz, who moved to Vancouver seven years ago. "They have education, businesses, they can afford to not work for a year when they come here. And they prefer to have a low-paying job here than to be in Mexico City, where they can be kidnapped at any time or be assaulted at any time. People with young families, too, they say, 'You know what? This is not getting better, so we'll go somewhere else for our children.' "

"The Mexicans who are coming to start a life here, yeah, you can see those guys more and more and more," said Miguel Bertello, president of the local Mexican Business Association, "and you can see also companies that are promoting that. In Mexico, they put ads in the newspaper. They say, 'I will arrange for you to come and live here -- as long as you have the money, I will take care of the legal side; I will tell you how to apply.'"

"They're doing that and they're really successful. The focus for them is not just the poor guy, but the guy who is actually really wealthy and they're bringing wealthy people here."

That influx will mean a visible addition to Vancouver's Mexican expatriate community -- a community that, right now, you'd have to search pretty hard to find.

"We don't really have a place," said Elsa Gleeson, whose two food stores, La Mexicana, in North Vancouver, and El Comal, in Burnaby, are nonetheless like a home away from home for recent immigrants.

La Mexicana's interior is like a little slice of Mexico City; its burnished orange and blue-tiled walls lined with colour-co-ordinated cans of chipotle, packets of flan and guava soda. Ms. Gleeson is quick to offer a visitor a taste of her cooking: black beans, rice and homemade tortillas, warmed on her kitchen's cast-iron grills.

"I have a Mexican factory [in Burnaby that supplies the two stores], and 99.9 per cent of my customers are Mexican," she said. "All the people that come, they become not only your customer, but your friend. We are very friendly people -- we are very warm and passionate. We like music; we talk a lot. We're very noisy."

That raucousness is apparent at communal celebrations for Mexican Independence Day and for Cinco de Mayo, when the whole community gathers to eat, dance and listen to mariachi music. On Independence Day, "no matter where we are, if we go to Surrey and we are playing in a garage or a warehouse, we'll fill that place," said mariachi band leader Octavio Carillo. "They have to celebrate that evening. Even if they are in the North Pole, they will celebrate."

But in general, "I think that Mexicans, we are funny," Ms. Gleeson observed. "We miss Mexico a lot -- we miss a lot of things about our culture. But when we come here, we try right away to meld with the Canadian population -- we want to be part of the Canadian people, the community."

Mr. Carillo said that when he first moved here with his wife and two young children, "there were only about 500 Mexican families. And now, that number has really increased. In the 17 years that I have been here, that number has gone to the sky. I think it is more than four times [the number]. And there are 3,000 students coming here every six months. So this community comes and goes: One is leaving, one is coming."

He remembers vividly the way Vancouverites won his heart on his first visit in 1989.

"I was walking on the street," he recalled, "and people, without knowing me -- I wasn't wearing my charro [mariachi] costume, of course, because when I wear my costume, everybody goes 'Ahhh!' -- [but] they noticed that I wasn't Canadian immediately, and they said hello to me. And that was so nice, I fell in love with that, and I said, 'This is the city that I want to be in.' "

## THE NUMBERS

According to statistics from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Mexico was the No. 1 source country for foreign workers coming to Canada last year. More than 10,000 Mexican workers came here, compared to 8,000 from the second-biggest source country, the United States. More foreign students -- many of them Mexican -- come to British Columbia than to any other province. Mexican immigration to the Vancouver area has been steadily increasing over the past three years. In 2003, 289 Mexicans applied for landed-immigrant status here; by the first quarter of 2006, the number was close to 350.