

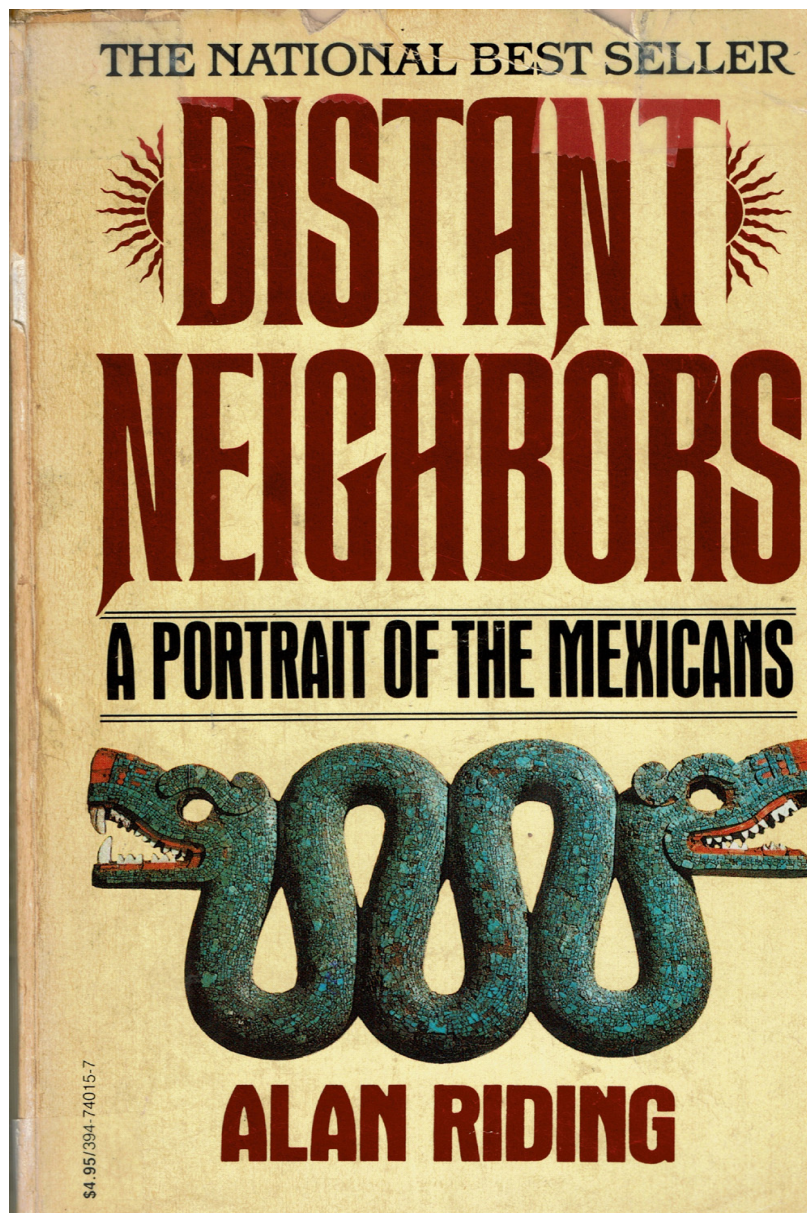
April 22, 2026

## **Distant Neighbors** by Max Millard

If you have ever been to Mexico, see if you agree with the following statement:

“Probably nowhere in the world do two countries as different as Mexico and the United States live side by side. The contrast is shocking – from wealth to poverty, from organization to improvisation ... the two countries are separated by language, religion, race, philosophy and history.”

Those are the opening words of the book “Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans” by Alan Riding, published in 1985.



I recently returned from two weeks in Cancún, a city of 1.1 million on the Yucatán peninsula, facing the Caribbean Sea. Cancún is an artificial city, created by the Mexican government in 1970 as a magnet for tourism. It has been a financial bonanza since the beginning, known for its gargantuan luxury hotels stretching along miles of fine white sand.



### **Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone), Cancún**

It's had occasional setbacks, such as Hurricane Wilma in 2005, which severely damaged or destroyed 110 hotels in Cancún alone and left 300,000 homeless. But the city keeps growing, and there is always work for anyone who wants it.

To test whether the distant neighbors theory is true today, I'd like to compare Cancún with my home city of San Francisco, California.

First the similarities: San Francisco is just a little smaller than Cancún, with a population of 800,000. Both cities depend heavily on tourism and are popular stops for cruise ships. Both have strict laws against cigarette smoking.

Now the differences.

In Cancún, you rarely see anyone who is homeless. But in San Francisco, about 8000 people, or 1 percent of the population, are defined as homeless. In some neighborhoods you'll find them lying on sidewalks because they have nowhere to go. Several years ago the city allowed them to have tents, but these have now been confiscated by order of the mayor.

Here's what it was like in 2023.



**Tents in San Francisco**

And here's the situation today.



### **homeless man in San Francisco**

In San Francisco you'll often see older people scrounging through trash cans for empty soda cans and plastic bottles, which they can redeem at recycling centers for a little cash. They carry huge bags of them on the bus.



**recycler on San Francisco bus**

But Cancún has virtually no recycling, and trash cans overflow with discarded cans and bottles. This was the only recycling bin I saw.



**recycling bin in Cancún**

In Cancún, you can get an Uber within a few minutes and ride almost anywhere in the central city for 3 or 4 dollars. In San Francisco, you'd be charged at least quadruple for a similar ride.

Crossing the street is much more dangerous in Cancún. San Francisco has stop signs and traffic lights everywhere. Cancún has very few traffic lights, and instead has speed bumps called topes, which force cars to slow down and to stop for pedestrians. But where there's not a tope, you have to run across the street and pray.



**tope in Cancún**

Cancún has strict laws against marijuana and hard drugs. In San Francisco, you can buy and smoke marijuana openly, and even get it delivered to your home.



**billboard in California**

In some neighborhoods of San Francisco, you can see drug users lying on the sidewalk, smoking crack and injecting themselves in public.



### **drug users in San Francisco**

In San Francisco, all residents get mail delivered to their home six days a week. The city has at least 1000 mailboxes where you can mail a letter, and it will arrive anywhere in the U.S. within a few days. Cancún has no mailboxes on the street, just a handful of post offices, and no home delivery. The postal system is so slow that a postcard sent to the U.S. takes months to arrive. Instead, Mexicans who want to send a letter or package use the services of Fedex, an American company with a Mexican branch.

Cancún has a byzantine system of addresses. For example, the address of my hotel was: Avenida Carlos J. Nader, SM-2, MZ-1, Lote 1, 77500 Cancún.

Let me unpack that: SM is Super Manzana. All of Cancún is divided into Super Manzanas, which means areas of multiple blocks. MZ is Manzana, which is roughly equivalent to a city block. Lote is the specific plot of land or the individual building within a Manzana. In San Francisco, the address of a home or business is just a number and a street, such as 1312 Jackson Street.

In Cancún, riders on city buses must pay the driver in cash before entering, and intercity buses, such as the 80-minute express to Playa del Carmen, have a screen in the front where a movie is continuously playing. In San Francisco, many passengers cheat and don't pay when they board a bus, and no intercity buses show movies.



**intercity bus in Cancún**



**movie screen on Cancún bus**

In San Francisco, the stores always have cash for giving change. But in Cancún, it seems that almost every business has a coin shortage. I bought a mug for 60 pesos and tried to pay with a 100-peso banknote. The vendor had to go to another merchant to change it.

In Cancún, you see hardly any dogs. But In San Francisco, tens of thousands of people have dogs, and they bring them everywhere – on the sidewalk, in parks, on the bus, and in restaurants and supermarkets.



**passengers on San Francisco bus**

In San Francisco, hundreds of storefronts are boarded up and abandoned because the rent is too high. In Cancún, you also see a lot of closed storefronts, but it's because they were taken over by drug gangs or forced out of business because of threats of extortion.

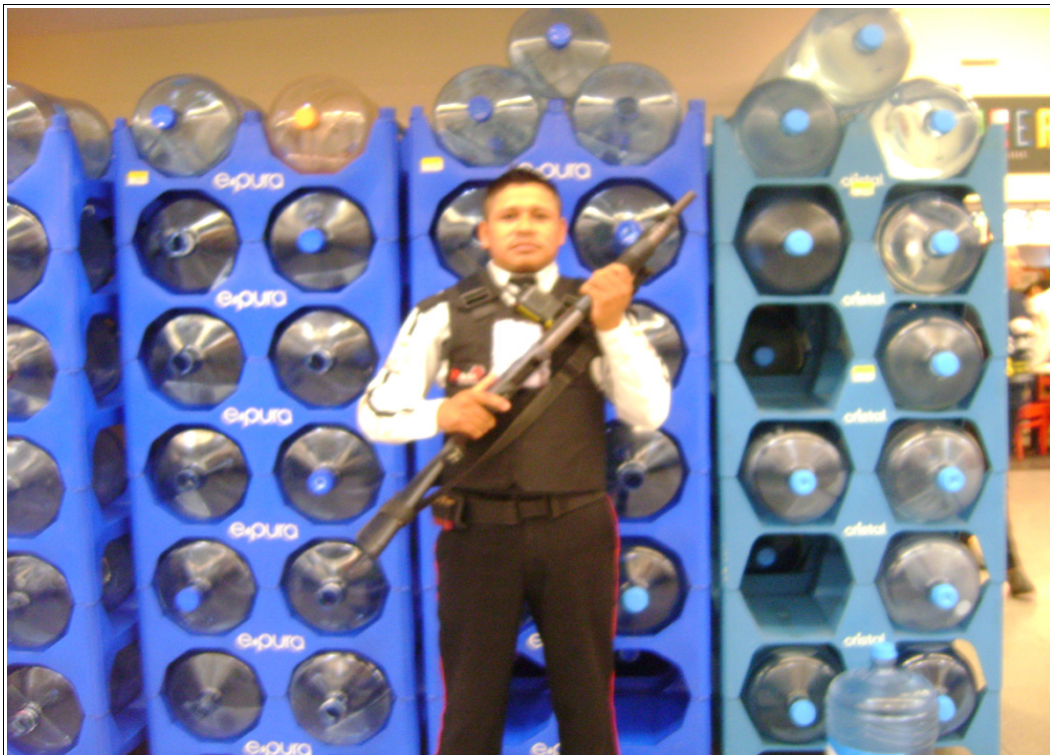
In Cancún, nothing on the store shelves is locked up because theft is not a major problem. In San Francisco, especially in drugstores, most items are locked up behind thick plastic. To purchase something, you need to press a button to

summon a clerk to unlock the case for you. Many people in San Francisco steal things openly and just walk out the door. The clerk doesn't restrain the thief, and no one calls the police.



**locked display case in Walgreens store, San Francisco**

And here's one reason why the stores in Cancún don't have much petty theft. I took this photo in their Walmart store.



**security guard at Walmart, Cancún**

In San Francisco, everything except groceries has a sales tax of almost 9 percent. Cancún has no sales tax, and in the markets you can bargain for a lower price. Bargaining is practically unknown in San Francisco.

In Cancún very few buildings can accommodate wheelchairs. But San Francisco has thousands of wheelchair users. All public buildings have ramps to give access to wheelchairs, most restrooms are wheelchair-accessible, and the city buses are designed to carry both manual and electric wheelchairs.



**electric wheelchair boarding city bus, San Francisco**

San Francisco has dozens of museums, including some that are world-class. Cancún has very museums. Even its best-known one, the Maya Museum, has just three rooms of artifacts and a mini-pyramid outside.



**mini pyramid at Museo Maya, Cancún**

Cancún, like all of Mexico, charges a soda tax of about 15 cents per liter of sugar-sweetened beverages to discourage their consumption and to fund public health programs. Mexico places black warning labels on pre-packaged food to inform the consumer of excessive calories, sugar, sodium, and saturated fats. The U.S. has no soda tax and no warning labels on junk food.



**warning labels on candy bar, Cancún**

And finally, the minimum wage in Cancún is 315 pesos for an 8-hour day. That's about \$19 U.S. At the Adhara Cancún Hotel, where I stayed, that would buy you a hamburger and french fries. If the minimum wage were calculated in hours, it would be two dollars and 38 cents per hour. In San Francisco the minimum wage is almost \$20 per hour.



But I didn't encounter anyone in Cancún who expressed a desire to live in the U.S. When I talked with the security guard at the Maya Museum, I was surprised that he spoke English fluently. It turned out that he used to live in Southern California and could legally stay there. I asked why he moved back to Mexico. He smiled and said, "This is the happiest place on Earth. Better than Disneyland."

