

MEXICO CITY'S 'BLACK' MARKET

Cut-price duds, ripped-off cameras, not-yet released DVDs, sex aids: Tepito offers it all

By Juan Carlos Hernández

Tepito. It's not in your guidebook or "Sights of Mexico City" brochure. But most people in Mexico are aware of this neighborhood. And if it does appear somewhere in travel literature, it is usually blacklisted - "Avoid at all costs. Stay away, stay safe."

Tepito's infamy is not without justification. The barrio conducts business 24 hours a day, seven days a week and operates by its own rules: Hold-ups are frequent, drug trafficking is common, pickpockets prow for targets, stolen merchandise fills market stands.

Everyone who lives and works in Tepito steadfastly (and successfully) resists government and police intervention. "I'm proud to be Mexican, but being from Tepito is a gift from God," is the motto of this hard-nosed, ancient neighborhood located 20 minutes northeast of Mexico City's center.

Tepito's reputation - El Barrio Bravo (The Rough Neighborhood) is just one of its many nicknames - piqued my curiosity on a recent visit to the capital to visit relatives.

I organized a group of six for an expedition to Tepito. Preparations started in my cousin Delia's apartment. Residents of other areas of Mexico City are warned about Tepito from the moment they can walk. They and the media alert the rest of the country. Delia knew the ropes.

"No one carries more than 200 pesos. So let's spread that money around. All of it in your front pockets. No purses. No wallets. No cameras."

She surveyed the group and

Tepito's long history

According to historical documents from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Tepito is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Mexico City. Its birth goes back to the foundation of Tlatelolco - the breakaway rival city/state of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital.

Tlatelolco was eventually absorbed into the city and its famed market and residential areas broken up into several neighborhoods after the fall of Tenochtitlan to Hernan Cortes. Three of those barrios would eventually form what is now known as Tepito. The neighborhood faced more changes and challenges during the coming centuries, but never lost its edge or commercial spirit.

After the war for independence, the newly formed Mexican government handed the land of Tepito to Don B. de Lara, Juan de Violante and Concepcion Paredes. They divided the area further among other wealthy citizens. At the end of the 19th century, many of the rich moved from the north end of the city to the south, leaving or adapting their former homes to accommodate new arrivals. Leather and shoe makers, iron workers, and craftsman of all types opened shop. But thousands of unskilled, illiterate and extremely poor people joined them.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Tepito had become a center for commerce and crime. Garbboards and tin house roofs appeared where no housing was available. Gangs organized themselves to protect the interests of Tepito and many of its residents. Bordellos, garbage dumps, clothes markets, second-

History on 4

turned to me: "Change out of that jersey and put something older on. We don't want to look like prey."

A 15-minute ride on a green and white *pesero* (bus) took us to the center of Tepito and the main street that stretches as far as the eye can see - for two and a half kilometers, we were told.

They say you can buy anything in Tepito at a price you won't believe. The clothes were amazingly cheap: 20 pesos for a blouse, 50 pesos for jeans, 75 pesos for a dress. But there was more.

Other markets don't peddle the latest model cell phones, satellite TV dishes, flat-screen televisions, palm pilots, brand new stereos and

laptops (new and old). Some vendors sold expensive computer programs for as little as 30 pesos - the market was bursting with a dizzying selection of electronic paraphernalia.

My cousin asked about digital cameras. "Over there," said one vendor. We followed his directions and found more surprises.

Sex toys, aphrodisiacs, pornography. CDs yet to be released in stores and DVDs of movies that haven't even premiered. The latest toys, authentic and fake antiques, Guess, DKNY, Gucci and Armani apparel. All of it stolen,

Tepito on 4

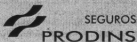
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