First Stop in the New World: Mexico City, the Capital of the 21st Century

David Lida
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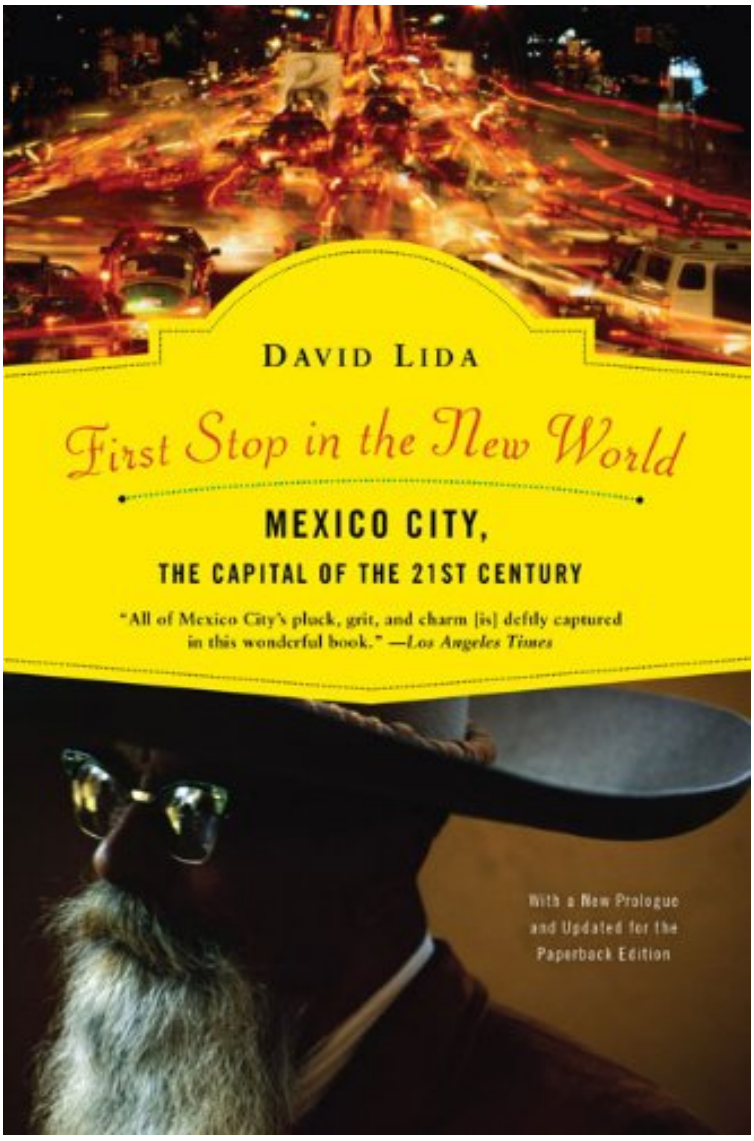

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David Lida : First Stop in the New World: Mexico City, the Capital of the 21st Century before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised First Stop in the New World: Mexico City, the Capital of the 21st Century:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Invigorating, Insightful Introduction to Mexico CityBy Michael J HelquistThe masterful Irish writer Colm Toibin provided a blurb for the cover of this book that is too good not to

repeat: From now on, anyone who goes to Mexico City without David Lidas book is mad. First Stop in the New World is that fascinating. Even someone not travelling to the cultural capital of the Spanish-speaking world will find David Lidas examination of the city he was once too scared to enter challenging and enthralling.This book offers a far better preparation for a visit to Mexico City than any of the tourist guides available. Lida immerses his readers in the everyday lives of Mexicans from the various social divisions in the city, as pronounced, he believes, as any to be found in England or India. He is especially insightful in presenting the citys poor and working class and how they function with so little monthly income and remain seemingly invisible to the upper classes. But Lida spans all facets of city life the mania for wrestling matches among the populace, the preponderance of Wal-Marts, the furtiveness of sex as a cultural reality, the search to obtain the fine dining that many tourists seek, and what makes various neighborhoods distinctive. Especially important is the authors take on the steep difference between reported and real crime in the city (much less than visitors fear).Mexico City can be chaotic and overwhelming, but First Stop in the New World makes it much less so. Reading it allows you to become an insider on some of the forces at play.Michael Helquist, author, MARIE EQUI: Radical Politics and Outlaw Passions3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Excellent to know more about social inequalities and culture in Mexico cityBy Josafat HernandezThis is an excellent book. Very well documented and written. I bought this book because I wanted to learn more about the culture of my country. Because I am Mexican, many behaviors we have in Mexico city are completely "normal" to me. This "normalization" very often hides the specificities of the culture. The view from outside always helps to highlight the differences. David Lidia's book helped me to realize some of these specificities.He has been living in Mexico city for decades. So he knows quite well what he is talking about. I have even learnt some details about my city that I didn't know. He picked up some views of different social classes (rich and poor, also foreigners). The experience of living in this city depends on the social situation in which you are. It is not the same thing to live as a worker (badly paid, living in the east of the city) or as a manager or an incredibly wealthy politician living in Santa Fe. Even foreigners obtain good jobs more easily than natives do.David Lidia has some critical views. He denounced social inequalities (it's a pity that the richest man in earth Carlos Slim- lives here, meanwhile there is a huge poor population living in unworthy conditions), machism (girls and women are victims of harassment), and the double moral (appearances, people who behave in different ways in public and private spaces, e.g. sexual fidelity in public, cheaters in private).A very interesting point he makes is about the sense of insecurity in Mexico city. He claims that the feeling of insecurity in this city is over exaggerated. Chilangos consider everyday very seriously to avoid the possibility of being a victim of murder, robbery, etc. There is a strong lack of trust between unknown people. But the point is that according to statistics the probability of being a victim of murder is higher in LA, Chicago or Washington DC than in Mexico city. But there are some firms who take advantage of this situation (they offer security services). Even the government obtains a piece of cake, as they manage to focus the political debate on these topics the death penalty, a more severe punishment for criminals-, in order to avoid the debate of social problems caused by neoliberalism.At the end of the book Lidia talked about how the mexican working class is living in this chaotic city despite the government (bad urban plans and corruption both in federal and local levels). The shocking point is that this city has not collapsed yet in spite of the chaos. Why? The answer Lidia explores is related to resilience. Mexican people have learnt to deal with uncertainty. The earthquake of 1986 is a case in which people helped each other without the aid of a corrupt government (the political party called PRI). The same story goes with the economic crisis and neoliberalism. Mexican people developed an informal economy which creates jobs, decreases the prices of basic goods and this has helped hitherto the survival of the mexican working class.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. What was the point of this book?By J. MartinFirst off, this book is about 10years of date. Updating the introduction did little to help. The book itself just seemed to be a collections of previously written articles stuffed into a book. It has no focus, no order, and ends up being basically a disaffected journey through various aspects of Mexico City that the author found interestingly quirky but to me it got boring other quickly. I was ready to put it down about 2/3's of the way through but soldiered on- to no good end. Indeed the overall tone of all the articles was disturbingly downcast. I kept wondering why the author lived there for a decade if it was so dissolute and depressing. His presentation did not reflect at all how incredibly fascinating and inspiring the city is and did not reflect at all the city I found it to be on three visits now.

The definitive book on Mexico City: a vibrant, seductive, and paradoxical metropolis-the second-biggest city in the world, and a vision of our urban future.First Stop in the New World is a street-level panorama of Mexico City, the largest metropolis in the western hemisphere and the cultural capital of the Spanish-speaking world. Journalist David Lida expertly captures the kaleidoscopic nature of life in a city defined by pleasure and danger, ecstatic joy and appalling tragedy-hanging in limbo between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. With this literary-journalist account, he establishes himself as the ultimate chronicler of this bustling megalopolis at a key moment in its-and our-history.

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Youall want to read "First Stop in the New World" for the unvarnished off- the-grid tour Lida provides; for the singers and hustlers and artists you'll meet; and for the insight you'll develop into an ancient, booming but seriously ailing metropolis.a aMary DaAmbrosio, "San Francisco Chronicle" aStreetwise and up-to-date a] a charmingly idiosyncratic, yet remarkably comprehensive portrait of one of the planet's most misinterpreted urban spaces.a aReed Johnson, "Los Angeles Times" aA bumper crop of travelogues and anthologies about Mexico have been appeared in the last few years. David Lidaas low-life tour of Mexico City, its sex clubs as well as its food stalls, not only belongs on this list, it shoots to the top. a] To test the quality of a travel book, it helps to ask: Would you like to share a meal or a drink with the writer? On the evidence of his book, which reveals him to be an expansive soul with big eyes and an even bigger heart, Mr. Lida should expect calls from a lot of newly arrived strangers, including me.a aRichard B. Woodward, The "New York Times" aA fast-paced account of daily life in a city that defies descriptiona] Lida finds far more to marvel over and enjoy than to fret about.a aJeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "Wall Street Journal" aMexico City is a sprawling, throbbing stew of 20 millionpeople, but David Lida, in his new book, cuts through the chaos with an array of verbal snapshots that aim to paint the city's soul.a a"Chicago Tribune" aA hip-smart tour through a baroque society a] probing and witty.a aJason Berry, "New Orleans Times Picayune" aA terrifically entertaining guide, displaying both intimate familiarity with the city and an outsider's eye for its quirks and weirdness.a aFritz Lanham, "Houston Chronicle" aA gritty, nostalgic ode to the city a] a fundamentally human collection of stories and reflections, a reminder that any city is about its people, their constant clash and coexistence.a aTheresa Bradley, "Associated Press" aLida offers a thought-provoking account of current-day Mexico City by letting its citizens, known as chilangos, tell their own stories of everyday struggles and triumphs.a aVincent Bosquez, "San Antonio Express News" aA wonderful trip through Mexico City, from its last cabaret to "puerco profundo" tacos to "Ooorale!," a magazine that makes Star look downright prudish.a a"New York Magazine" aA unique and penetrating analysis of contemporary Mexico City a] cleverly organized in enigmatically titled vignettes that delve headlong into Mexico Cityas improbable mysteries a] a book as audacious as the strategies for survival and advancement adopted by the everyday folk who live there.a aVictor Lugo, "Hispanic Magazine" aA series of deftly written vignettes about city life a] Lida's affection for the much-maligned metropolis shines through in chapter after chapter a] a welcome respite from the usual depictions of Mexico City as a menacing hellhole of corruption and violent crime.a a"Newsweek" aa]thought-provoking and educational but also a satisfying read.a a"Library Journal" aDavid Lida shows us a Mexico City thatas not in the guidebooks, but, like a subversive code-breaker, he has pointed out the pathways to its delectably seamy soul. 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All rights reserved.Introduction: The HypermetropolisFrom my first visit as a tourist, Mexico enchanted me. I kept returning, but for four years didn't dare set foot in Mexico City. I was afraid of the capital, influenced by the propaganda dismissing it as a teeming, overpopulated, polluted bedlam, full of horrific testimonies of insuperable poverty. I imagined the armless beggars of Calcutta brandishing their stumps in tourists' faces, hoping the display would result in a handout.Then, during one holiday in 1987, I had a layover in Mexico City. In the hour-long taxi ride from the airport to the hotel, I fell in love. I was astonished by the streets of the centro histrico, lined with massive stone buildings constructed by the Spanish conquerors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I was captivated by the contrast between the grandiosity of those structures and the humility of the office workers wending their way through the sidewalks the smiling shoeshine man at his electric-orange post, thedoughy matron in the blue skirt and white apron beseeching me tobuy tacos sudados"sweaty tacos," so called because they aresteamed in a basket.That afternoon I sipped coffee on a hotel balcony overlookingthe zcalo, the city's enormous central square. A crowd began togather in support of a teachers' strike. By twilight they would beone hundred thousand strong, yet an hour later everyone was gone,the plaza empty, as if it had been a hallucination.At night I wandered along those streets dense with history, litso dimly they appeared to be in black-and-white. In a crowded cafeteria,I ate tamales wrapped in banana leaves and stuffed withspicy pork. I drank tequila in a dark bar, where a round man withslick hair and a pencil mustache sang romantic songs, backed bythree guitar players dexterously crowding notes into each phrase.I stumbled upon Plaza Garibaldi, the rowdy nocturnal soul ofthe city. Squadrons of musicians, mostly mariachis in skintight,tin-studded black suits, trawled for customers willing to pay a fewpesos for a melody. When they found temporary patrons, throngsgathered, and the most boisterous revelers sang along. It was acrowded Friday night, and the result was the most singular cacophonyI'd everheard.In Garibaldi's most humble cantina, La Hermosa Hortensiawhich dispenses pulque, a fermented cactus beverage created bythe Aztecsa staggeringly drunken man offered me his wife. Shedemonstrated her eagerness to consummate the proposition with asqueeze of my thigh and a smile, the seductiveness of which wasundercut by the absence of several crucial teeth. I refused with asmuch courtesy as possible, after which the man removed from hisneck, and gave me, a string that held an emblem of Mexico's patronsaint, the Virgin ofGuadalupe.Before I went to bed, half-drunk in the wee hours, I watched alonely group of soldiers in ill-fitting uniforms on drill in the otherwiseempty zcalo. Unfortunately, I had to leave the next day. Ihad been utterly seduced by the constant sensations of contrast,surprise, even tumult. Within three years I would be livingthere.That Mexico City was such a beguiling place came as a complete surprise.The 1980s were surely the worst moment in its history. Threemillion autos, the thin air of its 7,300-foot altitude, and the thirteenthousand factories that ringed the valley in which it is situatedcreated an ecological nightmare with toxic levels ofpollution.The pumping of a billion gallons of water per day from as faraway as fifty miles caused the city to sink 3.5 inches a year, and thelack of adequate plumbing and drainage made it a nightmare formany of itsresidents.Said to be the biggest city in the world, by the early 1980s MexicoCity had a population of seventeen million, and the governmentpredicted that there would be thirty-six million by the year 2000.Most of the new inhabitants were squatters, streaming in from theimpoverished countryside at a rate of a couple of thousand per day,creating slapdash shantytowns on the ever-expandingoutskirts.In

the immediate aftermath of a devastating earthquake in 1985the government seemed to disappear into thin air, and it was up tothe citizens to rescue one another from under the rubble. Not onlywas there a lack of viable leadership, but politicians and policechiefs were noted more for how much they stole from the publictrough than for any constructive projects they carriedout.If Mexico City today is still a challenging and sometimesexhausting place to live, with permanent service problems (principallyin drainage, water pumping, and distribution) and a continued resistance to urban planning, it is worth pointing out that theworst predictions from the 1980s did not come topass.While pollution levels may still be unacceptably high, the situationis no longer a noxious horror. Since 1991, all new cars herehave come with catalytic converters, and although four million orso make traffic a nightmare, they are not causing as much lethaldamage as they did twenty years ago. Most of the factories in thevalley have closed down, making way for a greater service economyand cleaner air. Plumbing has reached virtually 100 percent ofthe city, even in the most impoverishedoutskirts.Mexico's is the second most dynamic economy in Latin America,after Brazil's, but its wealth is scandalously distributed. WhileMexico City's gross domestic product is over seventeen thousanddollars U.S. per capita, half of the capital's residents live at or nearthe poverty level, and about 15 percent beneath it. At the sametime, virtually everyone has a roof over his or her head, electricity,running water, and a TV set. More than half have cell phones. Ifsomeone starves to death in the capital, it is an anomaly. (This is incontrast to other parts of Mexico, mainly rural, that the UnitedNations has compared to Africa for theirdestitution.)That effectively everyone in Mexico City eats goes a long wayin explaining why the population has held fairly steady since theearly 1990s, increasing by only a few million souls. Word finallyreached those rural Mexicans who flooded the city for decades thatthe capital was no longer providing survival or sustenance as it hadbefore. Those same Mexicans began to stream across the borderinto the United States, and continue to do so, despite mountingpolitical pressure from the U.S. government to stop theirflow.It is no longer "the biggest city on earth," if it ever could havebeen accurately counted as such. Others such as Los Angeles havea far greater land mass, and several years ago the Tokyo-Yokahamacorridor replaced Mexico City as the world's most populousmetropolis. Numerous other cities, although with fewer residents,have far greater population density. Mexico City has eighty-fourhundred people per square kilometer, while Mumbai, Lagos, Karachi,and Seoul have more than double that figure. Bogot, Shanghai,Lima, and Taipei also are significantly morejam-packed.If Mexico City is a demanding place to live, it is also an extremelyrewarding one. The hypercity, the ur-urb of the American continent,it is improving all the time as a cultural capital, with offeringsmore along the lines of First World cities than any other in LatinAmerica. Its scores of museums and galleries have produced artistswho exhibit around the world. On any given night there is an extensiveselection of theater (classical, contemporary, experimental),film (mostly from Hollywood, but also from France, Japan, Romania,or Argentina), music (from the local symphony orchestra, to anavant-garde jazz combo from New York, to touring rappers fromBeirut), and public presentations of just-publishedbooks.There are limitless choices of food and drink. Mexican cuisineis unique; its play of colors, textures, temperatures, and flavorsmakes it the culinary jewel of the continent. One can sit in thecocoon of an elegant restaurant (choices include not only Mexicanfood, but the cookery of Poland, Lebanon, Japan, France, or Catalonia)or else be tempted by the open air; in Mexico City there is acomplex street theater to the food stalls, enticing passersby withassorted aromas andhues.Paradoxically, given its population of twenty million, there aremany tree-lined neighborhoods with the quiet sociability of smalltowns, while others have the generic international-hip vibe onefinds around the Bastille in Paris, Williamsburg in New York, orSoho in Hong Kong.Its citizens may be savages when behind the wheels of their cars,but on the street there is a level of courtesy today found in few citiesin prosperous countries. In the capital, waiters in cantinas shakehands with their familiar customers, and after your food has beenserved at a restaurant, people at the next table are likely to saybuen provecho (the local equivalent to bon apptit). People holddoors open for each other, say good morning when they walk intoan elevator, kiss each other's cheeks when they are introduced. Ifyou sneeze in public, a chorus of voices says salud. It sometimestakes five minutes to get out of a taxi until all of the ritual phrasesof "At your service" and "Have a good day" and "Take care ofyourself" have beenexchanged.Mexico City was founded by the Aztecs in 1325 as Tenochtitln.Built on an island in Lake Texcoco, within the next two centuries,through an inspired system of man-made islands, canals, andcauseways, it grew into the seat of the Aztec empire. By the timethe Spaniards arrived in 1519, Tenochtitln was one of the world'slargest cities, with a population of about two hundred thousand.It was a city of pyramids and palaces, the majesty of whichstunned the conquerors. Nonetheless, the Spanish promptly destroyedthat city and built their own stone citadels atop the ruins. MexicoCity became New Spain's headquarters. Much of the colony's CentralAmerican and Caribbean assets were administered from the capital.The colony lasted nearly three hundredyears.The capital's history in the nineteenth century was marked byviolence. After the War of Independence liberated the country fromSpain in 1810, the battles were internal, but in 1847 the UnitedStates invaded Mexico City, and the upshot of the resultant occupationwas the sale of half of its territory at bargain-basementprices to its northern neighbor. From 1864 to 1867, Mexico wasoccupied by Maximilian of Hapsburg, who built the splendidChapultepec Castle in the heart of the capital. The last decades ofthe century were marked by the dictatorship of Porfirio Daz,whose governing style was known as pan o palo (bread or thestick) : those who marched in line for him received sustenance,while those who disobeyed were met with brutality. Mexico'sentrance into the modern era was also turbulent, with carnagerocking the capital not only

during the Revolution of 1910, butcontinuing well into the subsequentdecade.After peace was restored, by the middle of the twentieth centuryMexico City was known for its fresh air, clear skies, and for beingLatin America's most cosmopolitan capital. At this point, while thecity's growth was under control, each new neighborhood basicallyimitated the historic center of the city, usually spreading outwardfrom a tree-lined square with the area's most important church andlocal government buildings. Yet in the second half of the twentiethcentury, Mexico City became the poster child of contemporaryurban chaos and overdevelopment. Between 1950 and 2000, itspopulation grew from roughly three million to about twentymillion.The city expanded horizontally in all four directions, swallowingand engulfing other towns, villages, and municipalities in awilly-nilly, ad hoc manner. During those fifty years, what passedfor urban planning allowed for no more than catch-up, reactivemeasures. For example, the inner-city throughways, such as theViaducto and the Perifrico, became obsolete almost as soon asthey were completed, given how quickly the population and its fleetof cars grew during the years they werebuilt.Apart from the obvious problems of traffic and transportation, thegrowth created other confusing complications. Today, out of the city'seighty-five thousand streets, there are about eight hundred fifty calledJurez, seven hundred fifty named Hidalgo, and seven hundredknown as Morelos. Two hundred are called 16 de Septiem bre, while ahundred more are called 16 de Septiembre Avenue, Alley, Mews, orExtension. Nine separate neighborhoods are called La Palma, fourare called Las Palmas, and there are numerous mutations: La Palmita,Las Palmitas, Palmas Inn, La Palma Condominio, Palmas Axotitla,La Palma I y Palma I-II UnidadHabitacional.Today, greater Mexico City is composed of the Federal District,home to approximately eight million residents. The other twelve millionlive in nearly sixty municipalities in Mexico State, which makeup the rest of the urban sprawl to the east, west, and north. The FederalDistrict is divided into sixteen delegations (the equivalent of boroughsin New York, subregions in London, or arrondissements inParis), each with its own somewhat autonomous government. Onlyfour of the delegations are considered the center of the city. Like mostbig metropoli, Mexico City is divided into smaller, sharply contrasting,and mostly self-contained neighborhoods that are called colonias.There are about five thousand in greater MexicoCity.Compounding the city's complications is the fact that the FederalDistrict exists in a political and judicial limbo. It is neither astate nor a territory that belongs to another state. It is not sovereign.For most of its budget, it is dependent on the largesse of the federalgovernment, to which it has had an increasingly antagonistic relationshipin the last decade or so. Although it generates about half ofthe country's federal taxes and close to 25 percent of Mexico's grossdomestic product, the Federal District receives only about sevencentavos for every peso it delivers to the national treasury, asopposed to the states, which receive about double thatamount.It is an architectural eyesore. In any given neighborhood, sometimeswithin a block or two, there can be an elegant nineteenth-centurymansion next to a squat and brightly painted Art Decoapartment house. Close by will be a pink Swiss chalet adjacent to amodernist nightmare that rises from the ground in the form of atube. Around the corner is a gray concrete bunker opposite thehusk of a construction that crumbled in the 1985earthquake.Although it has a few distinctive monuments, such as the statuesof the Angel of Independence and Diana the Huntress on thebroad avenue Paseo de la Reforma (the city's answer to the Champs lyses),Mexico City defies physical description and lacks notableiconography. A few neighborhoods, such as the centro, San ngel,and Coyoacn, have lovely colonial architecture, while quite a fewmore (Condesa, Jurez, Narvarte, Santa Mara la Ribera) have ArtDeco or neo colonial buildings. But the pretty areas are exceptions.Architects describe Mexico City as "short and fat," given the numberof one-, two-, and three-story buildings in its seemingly infiniteland mass. Many of those buildings are unfinished, with rebarsprouting from the top in anticipation of the day its residents canafford to build anotherstory.Much of public space has been raped. Enormous billboards arenot only in your face on the inner-city highways, but also hoverover the main boulevards, and even in residential neighborhoodsare painted on the sides of buildings or hang like banners over bal-conies and terraces. Others are pasted on walls hastily constructedbeside empty lots. In the subway tunnels between certain stations,hologram ads for cars are projected out the windows, as if mockingthe very people who can't afford to buyone.From time to time the city government makes a big noise abouthow it will soon be clamping down on this mostly illegal signage.Rarely does anything happen beyond pasting large signs over theoffending ads that make clear in bold type that they are thereunlawfully. So we are left with blemishes on the cityscape partiallyobstructing otherblemishes.Walter Benjamin called Paris the capital of the nineteenth century,and in Delirious New York Rem Koolhaas posited Manhattan as theurban Rosetta stone of the twentieth. Mexico City will play a similarrole in the twenty-first. The orderly European model for cities, andeven the bustling but carefully planned United States archetypes thatfollowed it, have already given way to another version. Today, morethan half of the people in the world live in cities. Most of us do notlive in neat, orderly ones, like London and Toronto, Paris and NewYork. We live in enormous, improvised hypermetropoli, cities that inthe past few decades, with little or nothing resembling urban planning,have expanded to accommodate monstrously multiplying populations.Mumbai, Shangai, Istanbul, So Paulo, Lagos, Cairo, andKarachi, to give a few examples, each have more than ten millioninhabitants, often struggling over inches ofspace. Only a three-hour plane ride from L.A. and four and a half fromNew York City, of all these cities, Mexico City is the closest geographicallyto the U.S. and Canada (and, except for Istanbul, toEurope). Catholic and Spanish-speaking, it is also the closest to theU.S., Canada, and Europe in sociocultural terms. Like those othercities mentioned, it has absorbed and swallowed all the centuries ofits history, yet

most of them are still in evidence in some regurgitatedform on thestreet.Not all of those cities are alike, and each deserves its own book.But if you get a glimpse of how Mexico City workseconomically,socially, culturally, politically, and sexuallyand begin to understandhow its residents live, you will at least have a clue as to howmany of the people in the worldsurvive.Moreover, Mexico City makes the great capitals of the last centuryseem somewhat less relevant and certainly less spontaneous.Perhaps because of the stratospheric prices of real estate, it isincreasingly harder to be surprised by anything in New York,Paris, or London, yet Mexico City is constantly improvising a newinvention of itself. Further, as the divide between the rich and thepoor becomes ever more abysmal, those First World cities areslowly becoming more like Mexico City, with their schismsbetween haves (natives and others from prosperous backgrounds)and have-nots (usually down-on-their-luck immigrants and theirchildren).Globalization is making prosperous cities more alike and lessidiosyncratic. New York is the most emblematic example. Today inManhattan there is a bank branch and a Duane Reade drugstore onnearly every block. Yet most of the distinctive places that definedNew York as little as twenty years ago have disappearedfrom thesecondhand bookstores that lined Fourth Avenue to the dozen artcinemas that existed in various neighborhoods, to music venues likeCBGB (where the punk movement exploded in the United States)and Folk City (where Bob Dylan and Simon Garfunkel had theirfirst New York gigs) and any number of jazz clubs (Bradley's, TheCookery, Gregory's). Most of the department storesGimbel's,Orbach's, Klein's, B. Altman, Bonwit Tellerhave disappeared,because so many buy their clothes at the Gap, Banana Republic,and the same stores whose outlets exist in the rest of the country.Famously, the sleazy movie theaters, grind-house porno emporiums,and neon video game parlors of Times Square were turnedinto a Disneyland fit for family consumption, with flagship stores ofNike, Swatch, Toys "R" Us, Hello Kitty, and Disneyitself.Meanwhile, at least in the short term, globalization makesMexico City a more appealing place to live. Given its enormity, itwas quite homogeneous until the early 1990s, ripe for some internationalinfusion. An increasing population from the United States,Europe, South America, Asia, and the Caribbean has added to thecity's integral excitement, enhancing the city with added elementsof their own cultures. On any given evening you can have dinner inKoreatown on the fringes of the Zona Rosa, then go on to see afilm from Thailand or dance in a nightclub to a Cubanband.For most of the foreigners who arrive, it's a pretty good place tolive, undoubtedly better than for the majority of the Mexicans.Most Argentines, Colombians, and Cubans find better opportunitiesfor employment than their crumbling economies can offer, anda few have come to escape political persecution. Some Europeansand Americans are wowed by the chance to live a lusher lifestylethan at home, complete with enormous apartments equipped withmaids they can bully. To others of a more Bohemian bent, it's thebest thing since Paris of the 1920s, complete with cantinas, dancehalls, and unbearable potesmaudits.While foreigners here, principally Europeans, complain aboutthe proliferation of Starbucks and Wal-Marts, middle-class Mexicansrevel in the First World status bestowed by these establishments. What's more, despite globalization, the city, so far, has largelymaintained its idiosyncratic identity. Mexico City still remains anemphatically Mexican city, with sprawling open-air markets inmany ways like those that astonished the Spaniards in the sixteenthcentury; salesmen who bicycle their way through residential neighborhoodseach evening, peddling Oaxacan tamales; and literallymillions who improvise their livings on one sidewalk oranother.Economically, Mexico City exists in a sort of limbo between thedeveloped and underdeveloped worlds. Far from impoverished,according to a 2005 Price Waterhouse Coopers survey, it had theeighth largest GDP of any city in the world. However, the wealth isscandalously distributed. Perhaps 15 percent of its population hasat least a considerable amount of discretionary income, and the toptier of that stratum is staggeringly wealthy. Yet not only doesroughly half the population live at the poverty level, close to fiftypercent makes its living from the underground economy, countingon no protection or benefits from anyinstitution.While it can be instructive to compare Mexico City to NewYork, Paris, or London, the way that it grew in the second half ofthe twentieth century is emblematic of how big cities have enlargedin most countries in the same period. The way it is dealing with itsproblems, however haphazardly, might be instructive for other citiesas they try to solvetheirs.Despite its improvements, Mexico City has still maintained alargely lurid reputation. Much of that status is the result of a seriesof events that set Mexico on its ear in 1994. Near the northern border,Luis Donaldo Colosio, a presidential candidate, was assassinatedin front of the crowd while at a campaign stop, and at thesouthern pole of the country there was a guerrilla uprising amongpeasants in Chiapas. An economic crash devalued the peso byhalf.The clearest manifestation of the center not holding in MexicoCity was a crime wave, during which the capital became notoriousfor street holdups, express kidnappings in taxicabs, and cops whoused their uniforms to shake down the citizenry. Although statisticaland anecdotal evidence suggest that the city is safer than it wasa decade ago, it hasn't yet been able to live down that reputation.While there is no denying that on a daily basis in Mexico City thereare too many robberies and traffic accidents (and sometimes kidnappingsor grisly murders), in fact most of its population getsthrough its days and nights without either committing or being victimsof crimes, and without being any more exploited than the residentsof cities with similar economies. Given how much that couldgo wrong here, I am constantly amazed at how well it functions,largely due to Mexicans' talent for improvisation andingenuity.I am not suggesting that Mexico City is no longer a complicated,challenging, and often difficult place to live. But part ofwhat makes a city dynamic is the way that its citizens deal with itsproblems, and people here are nothing if not imaginative at problemsolving. Indeed, the Mexicans and their ingenuity are verymuch a part of what

gives Mexico City its dynamicenergy.At the time of this writing, for more than a decade the Mexicanpeso has held steady at an exchange rate of between ten and elevento the dollar, with fluctuations as high as twelve and as low asnine. In the context of the past forty years, this represents unprecedentedeconomic stability. Since the early 1970s, the peso tendedto crash at a rate of once every six years, sometimes even more frequently, resulting in devaluations of 50 percent or more. Inflationrates throughout the 1980s tended to oscillate between 60 percentand 100 percent peryear.However, there is no guarantee of the Mexican economy's everlastingsolidity. Nor does the peso represent most of the world'sreference mark for foreign-exchange rates. For these reasons, whenI mention how much something costs, I have chosen to note itsprice in dollars, except where otherwiseindicated.I have lived in Mexico City off and on (mostly on) since 1990, andhave never felt so much at home anywhere else in the world. Primarily,I have made my living as a freelance journalist. My curiosity hasbeen scrupulously promiscuous. To give an idea, I've written articlesabout a president and a Nobel Prize winner, a woman bullfighterand a deaf-mute transvestite, a dog trainer, a private detective, and apornographic movie actor. I've interviewed a tailor who custommakes suits for politicians, a dollar-a-dance hostess, five men whoimitate the pop star Juan Gabriel, and a man who draws caricatureswith pancake batter as his medium and a griddle as hiscanvas.In this book, with the help of all those people, Mexico City willbe reflected from the street level. They will provide the details ofthe cityscape; I'll complement with thebackdrop.Every writer is at least unconsciously trying to fashion a narrativewith which he can live. While this book is about Mexico City,it is reflected through my idiosyncratic gaze and experience. If onefact stands out more than any other, it is that in the past eighteenyears I have never been bored here. All those people have kept mealive and awake, have kept me in Mexico City, have helped me tomake it my home. I hope the book reads as a love letter tothem.