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Last year, my husband and I decided to take a sabbatical, after teaching college English for 20 years, to coincide with our 25th anniversary. We weren't sure where to go; we wanted to experience a different culture, preferably somewhere warmer than our native Montreal, Canada, and somewhere where I could write a novel and my husband could turn his research on at-risk students into academic articles.

In our early years together we moved a lot; in each new place, we always hung a huge poster of Georgia O'Keefe's lilies in a prominent spot in our living rooms. We dragged it around for years until it was too pock-marked from thumbtacks and ripped from wear and tear to hang. But it was that poster that planted the seeds of interest in New Mexico in our minds. So we began looking for homes on a great website, sabbaticalhomes.com and eventually found the little adobe home in Taos that we have called home for the past three months. It turned out to be an excellent choice.

When we first told friends about our decision to move to Taos, New Mexico, the reactions were mixed. Some said, "where?" Those who watch *Breaking Bad* and only knew the terrain as it is shown on the show, bleak, desolate and somewhat seedy, said, "Why?" But good friends who have travelled in New Mexico several times said, "How exciting." They already knew what we would come to know, that this area is simply breath-taking around every turn.

During our stay, we toured the Four Corners, from Colorado to southern Utah, to Arizona and back; all of southern and northern New Mexico; and the Grand Canyon. The landscape in each area was so beautiful and the wow factor of places like Mesa Verde, the Carlsbad Caverns, and the Grand Canyon, hard to transmit in words. There are now landscapes and colours in my mind that I will never forget.

But I want to focus on Taos. Everyone who comes here knows that it is a special place, with more art per square foot than anywhere else I've ever been. For a small town, there is so much to see and do. We quickly developed a routine, writing in the mornings, then spending the afternoons wandering around the galleries and artisan shops, stopping for happy hour at one of the many bars or pubs; some days we did day trips and hikes up in the mountains or along the Rio Grande gorge. We attended all the great movies shown at the TCA. In other words, we did not lack for entertainment, which is what one needs when one is far from home, a stranger in a strange land.

Taosños are friendly and struck us as very open-minded and liberal in their thinking, which suits our Canadian sensibilities. As outsiders looking in, it struck us that the three communities (native, latino, white) seem to get along fairly well; at least we felt there was a blending of cultures that might not take place in all small towns. We were relieved to see so much support for Obama and the Democrats, as democratic values are closer to our own, though there are many political differences between our two countries.

One of the biggest, of course, is that we have socialized health care. Our system is not perfect and there are many complaints about the health-care we receive, but we would not trade places with you for a minute. Just having to think and worry about coverage seems like an immense burden. It strikes us as odd (and I am basing this on several conversations) that many Americans dislike the idea of government being involved in their health care, but they don't seem to mind if corporations (HMOs) are. That is very odd indeed for a Canadian.

Canadians spend a lot of time trying to figure out our American neighbours, way more time and focus than I suspect you give us. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, our former (and last great) Prime Minister, once described Canadian/American relations as an elephant in bed with a mouse. Therefore, you can understand why we feel we need to understand you. We are, of course, the mouse. But we can only decode you through what we see, hear and read, unless we spend time – more than 3 months – down here. So we take our cues from not so reliable sources. The media only shows the worst of your country: the drugs, the violence, the crass consumerism. Yes, all these things do exist, but not with the ubiquity that the media portrays. It isn't that we came down here expecting to see all these things in our faces, but given that our countries do have such differing views on the issue of guns, Canadians are always somewhat nervous in the States. We can't help pointing to gun shops when we pass them and shaking our heads in disbelief. (Of course, I should admit that our current conservative government has just scrapped the long-gun registry, but it is a move my home province, Quebec, is contesting at the Supreme Court.)

What the media does not capture is what I have noticed most on this trip: that Americans are extremely warm and friendly, more so I would argue than Canadians. We are not unfriendly, just more reserved. Perhaps because we are such a huge country geographically (second in the world) and so small demographically (30 million), we have this concept of space that carries over into our social habits. I loved stopping to chat with people on hiking trails, or verbally sharing that moment of awe with strangers standing at the foot of an incredible rock in Arches. Americans look you right in the eye and say hello or how you doing in a way that makes you feel instantly connected and human. We travelled through Europe for 6 weeks earlier this summer and not *one* such exchange took place. One also feels the deep love of this land that Americans have so that when people meet at one National Park, they are anxious to share their experiences of another. Canadians are perhaps more regional in their thinking, so that when someone from Quebec meets someone from British Columbia, they don't feel much of a connection. Sure, we might both love Canada, but we sense we are from very different Canada's (as, indeed, we are).

Now, on the subject of Canada: one of the things that has really dismayed us on this trip is just how little you seem to know about us. At least five people in Taos told me point blank that they didn't know a thing about our country. When I said I was from Quebec, they couldn't tell if it was east or west, or floating off in the Atlantic. That astounds us. We only have 10 provinces; you have 50, and many Canadians can identify them all. Quebec is huge. It shares a border with Vermont, New York and a tiny bit of New Hampshire. It stretches way up to the arctic, where the Innu and Inuit live. Knowledge about Montreal is even slimmer. Montreal is a city of almost 4,000,000 people. It is the second biggest city in Canada, the biggest in Quebec. An even greater distinction is that it is the second largest French-speaking city *in the world*. As such, it is quite an important city and a very

unique city culturally. I would say to your readers that if you are looking for a European experience, come to Montreal. It is the closest you will get in North America. In fact, come to Canada period! No, we do not ride dog sleds like the young man from Texas thought we might. And we do not live in igloos. And to his father who thought I had probably been to Alaska, Montreal is as far from Alaska as it is from here, but I hope to go there one day.

Come on up! Get to know us. We are your closest ally (even though we did not follow you into war in Iraq; it is our opinion that you shouldn't have gone there either) and we share the longest undefended border in the entire world. We have more government intervention, but we are not communists, as some people seem to fear. We are liberal-socialist, although our current conservative government seems to forget that. I am proud to say that my home province of Quebec, *la belle province*, did not elect one single conservative politician to parliament; instead we sent the NDP (Canada's leftist party) to the house as the Official Opposition.

Thank you Taos for the creativity you have inspired. I finished my novel. It will be my 7th when it is published. Thanks for the scenery and art and warmth and beautiful jewelry. Thank you for the friendliness. We hope to see you up north.