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TEQUILA, Mexico\_The train rolls through a crimson volcanic valley an hour northwest of Guadalajara. But this isn't any train.

The destination is Tequila.

That's like going to Beer instead of Milwaukee.

Or Bourbon instead of Kentucky. You get the drift.

And so did the 375 chug-a-lug passengers on the ``Tequila Express." The four-car train on the private Ferrocarril Mexicano line departs at 10:30 a.m. every Saturday for Tequila from the downtown Guadalajara Train Station.

Tequila (pop. 32,000) is a poor working-class town nestled in the rich fields of blue agave cactus. The word tequio refers to the labor of peasants. There's 12 tequila distilleries in Tequila. You can find your old friend Jose Cuervo here. And just off the town square is a tequila museum, curated by Sauza, the most famous distillery in town.

Tequila is the hottest item in the liquor industry. Tequila's sale volume has increased 112 percent since 1985, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. ``It's no longer a drink for the southwest," said council spokesperson Lisa Hawkins. ``It's gone far beyond the Margarita." Hawkins added that Chicago is ranked No. 5 in America's top metropolitan areas for tequila consumption.

Even hot shot celebrities such as rocker Sammy Hagar have gotten into the tequila business. Hagar's crispy "Cabo Wabo Reposado" (reposado is a smooth gold tequila rested or aged in oak barrels) was recently dubbed "one of the top three tequilas in the world" by Anthony Dias Blue, wine and spirits editor of Bon Appetit.

Tequila is a two-hour train ride from Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city. (By car, it's 45 minutes). In the Tequila region, an estimated 203 million agave plants cover 155,000 acres of land. This is one of the few areas in the world with the proper soil and climate necessary to harvest blue agave.

The popular "Tequila Express" includes a welcoming toast at the Tequila Train Station and a demonstration of the blue agave harvest process. The fleshy leaves of the agave must be cut off to get to the plant's pineapple-shaped heart, which, when cooked, provides juices that form the basis of tequila.

Following the harvest, air-conditioned buses take passengers to the town square

for a tequila museum tour and a Mexican Fiesta that includes live mariachi music, Mexican folklore dances and a "Country-Charro" cowboy exhibition.

There are also a visit to a primitive 200-year-old tequila factory on the Sauza property on the outskirts of town and a Vegas-style banquet at the Sauza compound, where the mariachis and a guest impersonator lampoon Mexican pop stars such as Juan Gabriel (imagine a Mexican mix of Liberace and Wayne Newton).

Actually, the mariachi guys are everywhere. Wearing traditional Western black suits adorned with silver bangles, the seven-piece ensemble even plays throughout the train cars to and from Tequila. Their repertoire ranges from traditional rancheros to a Tex-Mex take on "Achy Breaky Heart."

Oh. And did I mention the drinks?

Complimentary La Querencia Reposado, cans of Modelo beer, Coca-Cola and Fresca are served on the way to Tequila. And on the way back. We returned to Guadalajara around 7 p.m.

I think.

Our "Tequila Express" trip was sold out. Just for the trip to Tequila, the train was stocked with 60 bottles of tequila and 1,100 cans of beer, according to a conductor.

Drinks are served with Jicama, tiny pieces of cucumber, watermelon, lime and pineapple with chili pepper sprinkled over it. All this isn't a bad buy for 490 pesos (\$54 in American dollars) and 300 pesos for children (\$33) between 6 and 12. And there were lots of kids on our trip.

"The Tequila Express" is just two years old. Sponsored by the government of the state of Jalisco and the Guadalajara Chamber of Commerce, the excursion is extremely well-organized and immaculate in presentation.

The new, 18-month old train cars are carpeted in kelly green and there's loads of leg room. The train cars were built specifically for the Tequila Express. Scenic windows carry internal shades so they don't flop around in the breeze. The young and affable staff members wear tuxedo shirts, bow ties and green vests that match the train car decor.

Passengers sit in assigned seats, but by the time we were heading back to Guadalajara, everyone in our car was dancing in the aisles to the mariachi music. Your brain was in vain on this train.

There's just one downside to the trip and it's a small one. The excursion is so tightly structured, there's no chance to venture off and explore the Tequila valley on your

own.

Several years ago I drove through Tequila on a long and winding road trip from Puerto Vallarta to catch a baseball game in Guadalajara. The highway is lined with roadside peasants selling homemade tequila in plastic bottles. It's certainly a different way of looking at the tequila industry.

And, while Sauza is not cited as a "Tequila Express" sponsor, its presence seems to be everywhere. Not far from the town square is Cuervo's 200-year-old La Rojena, the world's largest tequila factory. We never saw it.

Just a handful of passengers on my early February excursion were from America. The majority of tequila pilgrims were from other parts of the state of Jalisco or they were making the trip from Mexico City.

"I wanted to visit the place where tequila is made," said Marco Acosta, a 23-year-old factory worker from Mexico City who sat across from me in the train car. His 4-year-old son, Marco Jr., slept in his lap. Together, they took the seven-hour bus ride from Mexico City to Guadalajara. They were meeting Karina Canales, 20, Acosta's wife and mother of their child.

At his young age, Acosta had more of a common-sense approach to tequila-drinking than most Americans. "It is meant to be sipped," Acosta said. Like most of the natives I met, Acosta cited Cazadores (reposado) as his favorite tequila. He explained, "I like the slow taste of it."

The smooth-tasting Cazadores was founded in 1972 and its unique feature is a security stopper on the bottle which guarantees authenticity. Cazadores is available at select locations in Chicago.

Before we disembarked at the Tequila Train Station in the shadow of an extinct volcano, one of the "Tequila Express" staff members gave a brief lecture called "Cultural Time." She stated that tequila (born 1795) is the national beverage of Mexico. "It crosses all levels of society," she said.

Tequila's cultural diversity is apparent in a spin through the Sauza Museum, located in a colonial-style building across the park from the Tequila Police Station. Sauza is 126 years old. Artifacts range from a reproduction of a typical Mexican kitchen to proclamations honoring Javier Sauza, the son of company founder Don Cenobio Sauza. Look closely and you'll see Sauza was even named an "Honorary Citizen of Oklahoma." There are letters of testimony from fans such as John Wayne.

Sauza was on the cutting edge of the tequila field, introducing such technical innovations as the use of indirect heating of the stills with steam coils rather than by direct fire.

The best part of the museum is the collection of mid-1960s Sauza Calendars, which feature the artwork of Vincente Morales. The colorful narratives of Mexican life illustrate the evolution in marketing tequila as the drink moved from its rural roots to the party-hearty connotations of misspent youth. The museum tour is offered with English- and Spanish-speaking tour guides.

After spending a little over an hour at the town square, buses transport merry tequila pilgrims to the Sauza hacienda. Visitors enter a cold cave where spooky Mexican bats can be seen darting around. Now, this is where you need a shot of tequila. Complimentary soft drinks and beer are available in ice-cold buckets before you enter the cave.

Within the bowels of the cave, a 200-year-old tequila processing plant is still in operation. A weary burro pulls a giant wooden wheel across a sunken pit of fruit to illustrate how tequila is made. According to a guide, later this year the processing plant will be restored to a full-tilt operation.

The tour winds down with a late afternoon traditional Mexican hoedown nestled among fountains and flowers on a scenic hill at the Sauza ranch. In cafeteria style, tequila pilgrims sober up with pozole (a mixture of pork and soup), white bean soup, chicken sandwiches and the all-important torta ahogada\_bread, pork, onion and salsa with a lemon chill on the side. Locals kept telling me this sandwich is "good for after tequila."

The-sit down dinner is augmented by live entertainment from the mariachis and Guadalajara-based entertainer Luis Miguel. His impersonations of Mexican pop stars such as Vincente Fernandez and his son Alejandro were lost on the few Americans in the crowd, but the natives loved it.

My girlfriend and I were roped into a "Mambo No. 5 (A little bit of . . .)" dance contest and after dinner just about everyone broke into zany conga lines. We were seated with our train companions at the outdoor banquet, and by this time everyone had certainly warmed up to each other.

Tatyana Esquivel Tabora is a 25-year-old computer systems instructor at a Ford plant outside Mexico City. Before one of several toasts, her words of wisdom were, "The kids and the drunks always say the truth."

Tatyana and her boyfriend, Enrique Astorquiza, tried to get us to go out dancing with them at the Side B nightclub in Guadalajara. This was after nearly 10 hours on the "Tequila Express." Tatyana declared, "We continue to the party to the next day."

I begged off. I continue to sleep the next day. I am almost twice Tatyana's age.

Not surprisingly, the return trip to Guadalajara was more high energy than the morning excursion. There was more tequila, more beer and lots more dancing in

the aisles. On the way to Tequila a shy 17-year-old artist named Jose Jimenez offered to sketch a portrait of myself and my girlfriend. He revealed the finished product on the way back to Guadalajara.

Our fellow passengers, Jorge and Eva and Domingo and Meche, purchased the portrait for us as a surprise. Our newfound friends signed it and as they presented it to us they said to remember this about Mexico: "Esta es su casa." (This is your home).

And every warm home is well-stocked with tequila.