

TRAVEL

16

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Mexico City was a magnet in the 1950s for some of America's greatest Beat Generation writers: Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, others.

Many of their old haunts in Mexico's capital have now faded. Fans of the Beats still can find traces of their sojourns here, however, in cafes and cantinas, along boulevards, even at the site of an infamous killing.

The Beats came to Mexico City seeking a refuge from mainstream America in what they saw as a magical and alien land south of the border. They were searching for enlightenment, and sometimes were fleeing criminal cases. Their stopping ground was the Roma district, a once-wealthy neighborhood of mansions that was in decline by the time Kerouac and Burroughs lived there.

In recent years, Roma has enjoyed a mild rebirth and is now filled with picturesque parks, hidden cafes, galleries and upscale restaurants. Still, it retains a bohemian, down-at-the-heels side with working-class eateries, tortillerias, cheap hotels and repair shops. Most Beat landmarks are in Roma, within walking distance of one another.

First stop for any Beat pilgrim would be an anonymous building at Monterrey 122 on the busy corner of Chihuahua Street. It is a dingy apartment block with cheap taco and enchilada restaurants on the ground floor, but it has a notorious past: During a night of drinking in 1951, Burroughs, the Beat godfather, shot his wife dead in an upstairs flat in a game of William Tell gone awry.

Burroughs, the author of *Naked Lunch*, *Junky* and *Queer*, had placed a glass on Joan Vollmer's head and fired his pistol, only to hit her head by mistake. He was imprisoned for 13 days before being granted bail. He was eventually convicted of negligent homicide and given a two-year suspended sentence. He later wrote that without Vollmer's death he would never have become a writer.

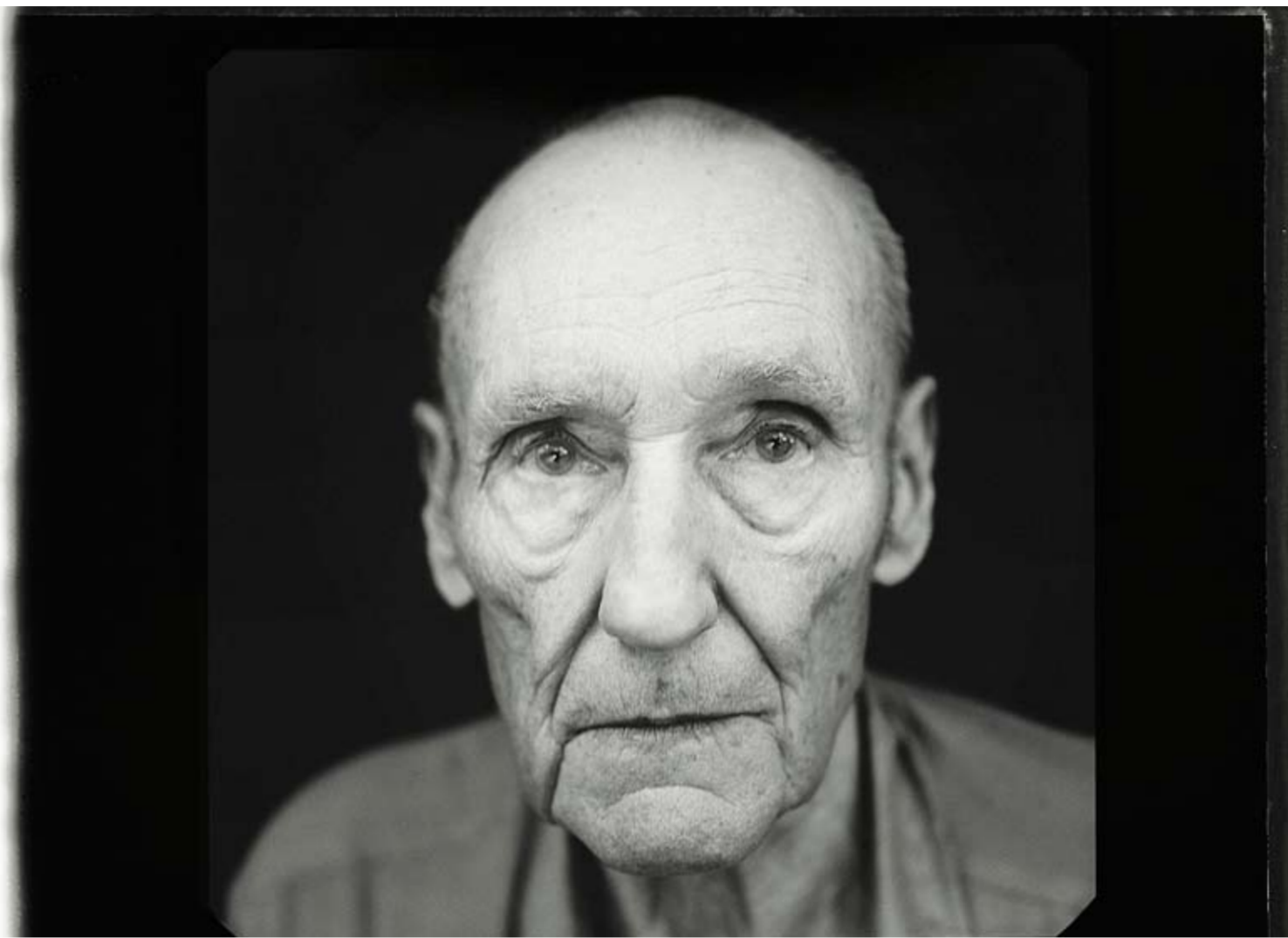
The apartment where Burroughs shot Vollmer was above the legendary Bounty bar, where expat Beat writers drank till dawn. Now the Bounty is an unassuming cantina called Krika's, where locals eat cheap meals largely unaware of what happened above their heads more than a half-century ago.

"Every now and then I see tourists standing outside looking at the building, wondering if it could really be the place where it all happened," said Huberto Suarez, owner of Krika's. "There are no statues or plaques, so I tell them that this is it."

Even more anonymous is Jose Alvarado 37, a rundown white building on a tiny side street across from the Plaza Insurgentes shopping mall and a Sears outlet. Its black metal door is uninviting, and the neighboring building bears a large yellow sign that reads: "Housing yes! Evictions no!"

This was Burroughs' first address in Mexico City — Cerrada de Medellin 37 at the time — after he fled a drug possession case in the US. He was there when Kerouac and his buddy Neal Cassady showed up in 1950 on their famous road trip to Mexico.

Cassady was characterized as Dean



In the 1950s, members of the Beat Generation including William Burroughs sought enlightenment and refuge in Mexico's capital

BY DAVID W. KOOP
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Morality in Kerouac's Beat classic *On the Road*. Kerouac later penned the poem, *Cerrada de Medellin Blues*.

While Kerouac was inspired by Mexico's indigenous culture and spiritual Mayan roots, Burroughs' reasons for living in Mexico City from 1949 to 1952 were more practical, at least at first: It was a place to avoid the law, live cheaply and satisfy his vices.

"I liked Mexico City from the first day of my first visit there," Burroughs wrote in the introduction to *Queer*. "In 1949, it was a cheap place to live, with a large foreign colony, fabulous whorehouses and restaurants, cockfights and bullfights, and every conceivable diversion. A single man could live well there for two [US] dollars a day."

A 10-minute walk from Cerrada de Medellin is the former site of the Beats' informal Mexico City headquarters, Orizaba 210. The original building here was demolished and replaced by a red-brick apartment block. Occasionally a lone tourist guide shows up with a handful of travelers, staring at it forlornly before pointing to the neighboring building that he says used to be its twin.

In the 1950s, Kerouac, Burroughs, Cassady, poet Gregory Corso and Ginsberg — whose poem *Howl* launched the Beat movement — all stayed at Orizaba 210. It was there in a rooftop grotto that Kerouac wrote parts of *Mexico City Blues* and his short novel *Tristessa*. Heroin-haunted Burroughs wrote much of *Queer* inside its walls.

An obligatory stop on any Beat tour is Plaza Luis Cabrera, on Orizaba at Zacatecas Street, an attractive cafe-ringed plaza with trees and a fountain. In the 1950s it was a favorite hangout for Beat writers talking nirvana in a haze of marijuana, heroin and alcohol.

One night, after taking peyote with Burroughs, Kerouac ran to Plaza Luis Cabrera at midnight and lay in the grass to experience the hallucinogen, writes Jorge Garcia-Robles, who documented the two authors' time in Mexico City in his book *Burroughs y Kerouac: dos forasteros perdidos en Mexico*.

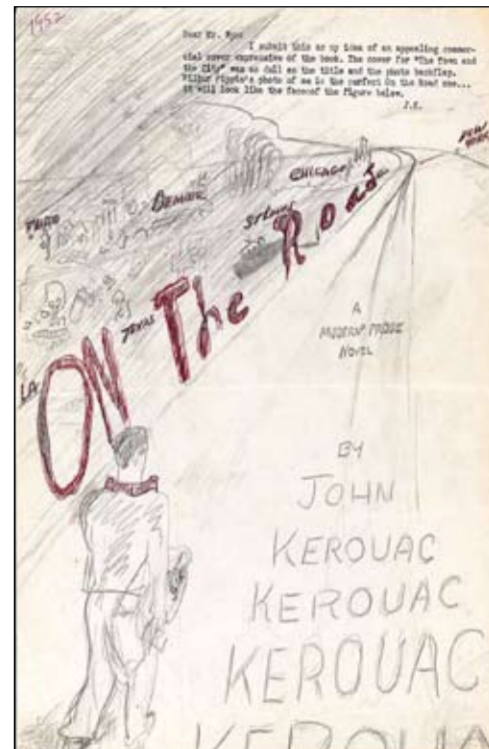
Kerouac also ended up at the plaza at the end of a rain-soaked walk while high on morphine. Describing the walk in *Tristessa*, he called Plaza Luis Cabrera "a magnificent fountain and pool in a green park at a round

O-turn in residential splendid shape of stone and glass and old grills and scrolly worry lovely majesties."

Kerouac's surreal stroll that night started in a crime-filled downtown neighborhood, probably La Lagunilla, where he passed a street lined with hundreds of "crooking finger" whores waiting in front of their "crib cells where Big Mamacita sits." He also passed Plaza Garibaldi — the legendary home of Mexico's mariachis — where musicians strum guitars for pesos and drunks stagger out of bars.

He continued past the Palacio de Bellas Artes, an Art Nouveau gem known for murals by Diego Rivera, and down San Juan de Letran street, now part of a thoroughfare called the Eje Central. He described walking 15 blocks down San Juan de Letran, where he let out a morphine-and-alcohol yell of "You're nuts!" to the crowd on the street. When he eventually reached Roma, he headed down the boulevard Alvaro Obregon, where the median is studded with statues and trees.

Visitors seeking to walk in Kerouac's footsteps will be relatively safe in Plaza



Above: Jack Kerouac's design for the front cover of the paperback edition of *On the Road*, a partly autobiographical story based on the writer's road trips.

Left: Annie Leibovitz's portrait of William Burroughs, who lived in Mexico for several years.

Below: The Ajusco volcano, on the outskirts of Mexico City.

Garibaldi, and Alvaro Obregon has bookstores and markets selling arts and crafts. On Sundays, a large street market at the corner of Cuauhtemoc Avenue sells everything from pirated movies and DVDs, to food, clothing and even guacamole made fresh from avocados on the spot. La Lagunilla lies next to Mexico City's notorious Tepito district, and is still considered a risky place for unwary tourists.

Garcia-Robles writes that it was on the banks of the lake in massive Chapultepec Park, Mexico City's equivalent of New York's Central Park, that Kerouac suggested to Burroughs that he name his novel *Naked Lunch*.

A fitting end for any Beat journey through Mexico City is the Panteon Americano cemetery in the city's north, near the Tacuba Metro station.

At the very back of the cemetery, on a rough concrete wall lined with rows of anonymous, crudely made niches, the cemetery puts the remains of people whose families didn't continue paying the rent on their graves.

Among these last resting places of the forgotten or poor, one small niche has a name inscribed on it.

It reads: "Joan Vollmer Burroughs, Loudonville, New York, 1923, Mexico D.F. Sept. 1951." The niche is unadorned by flowers or any mementos honoring the role she played in an extraordinary moment in American literature.

The largely unvisited stone square is the only named marker to the Beats' passage through Mexico's capital — but perhaps the antiestablishment Beats would have wanted it that way.

On the Beatnik trail
in Mexico City