

January, 2012

Oaxaca, Mexico

After we checked into our Bed & Breakfast, **Las Mariposas**, we decided to explore downtown Oaxaca by foot to get the circulation going after a 8 ½ hour car ride from San Miguel de Allende. Immediately we noted a nice feature compared to SMA. In SMA the sidewalks are narrow and the streets are paved unevenly with cobblestones. Most people walk in the streets. The citizens caution the tourists: "You can walk and you can look around you, but not at the same time." You must maintain constant vigilance as to where you step. SMA is known as the "City of Fallen Women". The moniker doesn't refer to their morals. Conversely, Oaxaca City sidewalks are flat, as are the streets. In Oaxaca the walking is easy.

Within just a few blocks we came upon an amazing site: 1200 life-size clay statues of men and women assembled in and around a church courtyard and spreading out to adjacent streets. Most were standing; some were prostrate. The clay soldiers discovered in China came to mind, only the features of these statues weren't as detailed. We could determine the sex of each statue; they were anatomically correct. The faces looked like they were executed in a hurry.

What did they mean? What was their purpose? It took us a while to find out.

Our purpose in traveling to Oaxaca was threefold:

1. We wanted to escape the cold. SMA is fairly cold in January, even on into February. It gets into the 40's at night. Even though it may hit the 80's during the day, our house stays cold for a long time. Although Oaxaca lies in the tropical latitude it's not what you might call "steamy". At an altitude of 5000 ft. and surrounded by mountains, it's more comfortable than SMA, but a sweater is *de rigueur* in the early morning.
2. We'd heard so much about the Oaxaca area: the handicrafts, the cuisine, the markets, the archeological ruins
3. Friends Jan and Dave Rooney spend their winters there. We hoped that they might give us some direction.

A few facts about Oaxaca:

Location and Geography: 4 ½ hours driving time southeast of Mexico City. Surrounded by mountainous terrain. At times the highway exceeds 10,000 ft. The province of Oaxaca is bordered on the east by Chiapas, on the south by the Pacific Ocean, on the west by the province of Guerrero. The Pacific coast offers some very nice beaches. **Puerto Escondido** and **Huatulco** are recommended. Unfortunately, a range of rugged mountains lies between Oaxaca City and the coast. It's a five to six-hour drive. Air transport is available. Oaxaca City boasts a population of 400,000.

We stayed at a B&B – **Las Mariposas**. The rooms were small but clean, and included refridge and hot plate. The place meandered. There were at least three charming courtyards, which the rooms surrounded. Guests would congregate in these courtyards for drinks (BYO) and conversation. One evening a group of us were asked to break up at 9:30 because we were making too much noise. Breakfast was just adequate, but the conversation was worthwhile. We had to park our car on the street, which was a bit of a problem. Some days we had to park two blocks away. The location is excellent. The price/night was right: \$40.

The **Biblioteca** is right next door. It's an English library that offers literally thousands of books, CD's and DVD's for the ex-pat community, as well as lectures and other assorted activities. Membership is required.

History:

Settled originally by the Zapotecs, followed by the Mixtecs, Oaxaca is reputed to be the least developed province in Mexico. One can hear the indigenous languages still spoken in the markets.

The Spanish conquered the area in the 1500's, with little resistance. The Spanish settlers brought with them domesticated animals that were unheard of before that time: horses, cows, goats, sheep, mules and oxen.

The Revolution of 1810 produced local two heroes: Benito Juarez, a full-blooded Zapotec, and Porfirio Diaz. Both became Presidents of Mexico; Diaz succeeded Juarez. Diaz, a dictator, held the office for a record length: 1872 – 1910. He was deposed by the Revolution of 1910.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910, which pitted the poor against the rich, produced another hero who was active in the area – Zapata.

In 2006 a teachers strike erupted in violence which disrupted tourism for that year. Our friends, the Rooneys, elected to stay away that winter.

Cuisine:

Oaxaca is famous for its **seven moles**. A mole is a sauce composed of up to fifty ingredients, mostly nuts and spices. The most famous of these are the black, the red and the green. The black, which contains chocolate, is my favorite. Chicken covered in mole negro is tough to beat. Unless you have a lot of time on your hands, forget about making mole yourself. Good mole sauce is usually available in the markets of Oaxaca or your local supermarket.

Chapulinas: fried grasshoppers. They're usually cooked with salt, lime and chili pepper. You'll find mounds of them offered in various sizes in the markets (see photos).

Chocolate: Several shops in downtown Oaxaca grind their own chocolate. They'll custom-mix it with cinnamon, almonds or caramel for you. Their hot chocolate is out of this world, as is the aroma in the shops. **Majordomo** is the famous purveyor, along with Guelaguetza (also a popular traditional dance). In fact, Anzie is drinking some now. It is not like our chocolate. This is somewhat grainy and coarse, but delicious with the combination of spices.

Mescal: It's like tequila except, like Champagne, it's not made in the Tequila country near Guadalajara. Some brands will sport the worm in the bottle (but these are only really for the export Market). Made from the juice of the maguey plant, which resembles our century plant, the worm is actually a larva often found in the maguey. Aficionados will discuss for hours different brands and their complexities, but to me, a good mescal tastes a might rougher than a good tequila.

You'll often find mescal "cremas" offered. These are mescals that are flavored. One of the unique flavors is chicken breast. Go figure!

Oaxaca cheese: It's a string cheese, like mozzarella. Restaurants offer "fundido", a small casserole of melted cheese offered with a variety of toppings – chorizo, mushrooms. etc.

Tlayudas: Huge, flat tortillas spread with refried beans topped with cheese, salsa and your choice of chicken or pork – sort of a Mexican pizza.

Eating Out in Oaxaca:

Most restaurants offer "comida corrida" at lunchtime. It's a three-course meal which includes soup or salad, a main dish, dessert and a drink. Price: \$3 – 5. A real deal. Plenty of restaurants and cafes around the perimeter of the Zocalo. You'll find a plethora of Italian restaurants, some with wood-fired ovens to make pizza.

Living in Oaxaca:

Compared to San Miguel, life is cheaper. Where we pay \$1000.US per month for a two-bedroom apartment with off-street parking, in Oaxaca you pay \$800. or less.

Eating out is cheaper. Although we have wonderful restaurants in SMA, "comida corridas" exist here, but they are hard to find – and not of the high quality found in Oaxaca. Our friends Jan and David are experts here. They eat most of their lunches out, then have a light dinner at home. Even the best restaurants in Oaxaca are more reasonably priced than their brethren in SMA. Certainly the handicrafts are cheaper. After all, they're produced in Oaxaca province. We can buy them in SMA, but with an up-charge to cover freight and commissions.

Archeological Sites:

Monte Alban – Situated on an artificially leveled ridge about 5000 feet above the surrounding valley, this was the capital of the Zapotec nation from 500 BC until 500-750 AD. Its population grew to as much as 17,000. Temples and other structures rise from a grassy plain, along with at least one large ball court. It is famous for its carvings of human figures in contorted, twisted positions. These are known as “Danzantes”, because they were originally thought to be dancing figures. Additional investigations suggest that they depict prisoners of war. One can note evidence of genital mutilation, which could explain the odd expressions and contortions. Though the site is huge, experts think only 10% has been uncovered.

This is a truly impressive site, well worth the visit.

Mitla – This is another Zapotec site, allegedly established after the Mixtecs took over Monte Alban. It's a smaller, more intimate site than Monte Alban. The most significant characteristic is the brick fretwork. The designs done in brick are often complex and, to me, original. We see them replicated in the Oaxacan textiles and rugs. We walked around the site until we discovered an entrance which took us into “secret” rooms. These contained frescoes which, because they were protected from the harmful affects of the outside environment, revealed colors that were still fresh.

I left Anzie to explore another room. I had to duck to miss bumping my head on the low transom. The room measured about 8 ft. by 20 ft. As I entered I looked up to discover a man seated at a desk that was located on scaffolding eight feet above the floor. After I recovered my shock, I asked him in my brilliant Spanish what he was doing – “Que pasa?” He explained that he was an archeologist working for the government to record and interpret their findings. He told us there are 24 distinct brick patterns. After I thanked him and left, I kicked myself for not asking this font of information for more detail about the site.

Just outside the site we came upon a market. Most of the handicrafts were standard fare. However, I came across a vendor of men's belts, several of which I had been looking for awhile – leather with brightly colored fabric inlay. Price: \$8.00. In SMA they're demanding, not asking, \$40.00.

Jan and Dave were so helpful to us. They served as our guides, both in and around Oaxaca.

Here are just some of the wonderful craft communities we visited. All of these are south of Oaxaca City. Most of these have compound names starting with a

saint, as in Santa Maria de Tule. The locals refer to them using only the last name – Tule.

Tule: This town is famous for the site of the oldest tree in Mexico. Some say it's one of the oldest trees in the world. In any case, it's ancient – over two thousand years. It's a huge tree; it would take 35 people holding hands to reach around the trunk.

Ocotlan: Home of a huge market both under roof and outside. Here we dined with an ersatz Frida Kahlo (see photos). The town is revered for its handcrafted knives and machetes. At the entrance to the town lie the workshops of the **Aguilar sisters** – famous for their figurines fashioned from red clay.

Also revered here is the painter **Rodolfo Morales**. Known for the dream-like quality of his paintings, murals and pillars, his works remind one of Marc Chagall (see photos). Aside from his art he was known for his work on restoring churches and monasteries in the region. There's a beautiful church which fronts onto a garden/park next to the market. What makes the church so striking is the exterior paint: sky blue and soft grey accentuated by gilt. Adjacent to the church is a restored monastery, **Fundicion Cultural Rodolpho Morales**. It contains exhibits of religious art from the monastery, as well as folk art and samples of the master's own work. His nearby home is also open to visit.

Santo Tomas Jalieza: Women here use back-strap looms to make scarves, shawls and sashes. An interesting note: The Spanish introduced the large floor loom used to make carpets and tapestries. Men customarily operate the floor looms.

Arrazola is famous for its *alebrijes*: carved out of light copal wood these pieces are both beautiful and amusing. I love the peacocks, porcupines, lizards and countless other animals and fanciful creatures all decorated in bright colors with dots, squiggles and other artistic touches.

Santa Ana del Valle: We never would have stopped in this tiny village if it hadn't been for the Rooneys. As we arrived in a large courtyard surrounded by shops (unfortunately all closed), we noticed a couple hanging out carpets for display. Jan introduced us. Both the husband and wife not only weave, but they dye their own yarn. This couple is *muy simpatico*. The wife explained, in too much detail, the various herbs and plants she uses to produce the colors.

One I remember – cochineal. This tiny insect is crushed to produce red dye. Legend has it that Hernando Cortez realized that cochineal dye was more valuable by weight than gold. As a result the Indians were put to work in the fields harvesting the insect, as opposed to life-threatening work in the gold and silver mines. The Spaniards maintained a monopoly on cochineal dye until the late 1700's.

Carpets are also found in **Teotitlan** and **Tlacolula** (rhymes with Be-bop-a-lula). These markets are much larger than Santa Ana and, therefore, more confusing and less intimate.

San Bartolo Coyotepec: You've undoubtedly seen the black, shiny pottery. Well, this is where it comes from. It comes from the local *barro negro*, black mud.

Atzompa: Known for its green glazed pottery.

So, what's the story behind those clay sculptures of men and women that we discovered our first night in Oaxaca? Our research – asking Jan and Dave – came up with the following: A Mexican artist, Alejandro Santiago Ramirez, lives in Oaxaca. He has become famous throughout Mexico, the U.S. and Europe. He visited the town of his birth to discover that most of the men and women of the town had migrated to the U.S. and other parts of Mexico – 2500 of them. Shortly thereafter he had a dream in which these migrants came to him as sculptures. He set out to sculpt these figures – all 2501, including himself – as a way to dramatize the serious effect that migration has on Mexican towns and villages. To date Santiago has completed 1200. For more on this story check out this link: <http://www.2501migrants.com/home.html>.

That's all for now. Newburyport friends Anne Smith and Paulina Watson are visiting us for a few days. They want to check out San Miguel and the Writers Conference that starts this week.

Hasta luego!

Chuck & Anzie