

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Discovering Oaxaca

Following our family-history rediscovery tour of Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Pat and I began March with a week in Oaxaca City, the capital of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.

Though we came to Oaxaca City for Pat to attend a knitting retreat, our hosts Bill and Irene York, from Green Valley, had scheduled plenty of time for our group of 18 people to explore the area.

Our base of operations was the very nice Hotel Casa Antigua in the middle of town. Our walking tours of the city extended a mile or so from the hotel and included the busy zócalo (town plaza), many good restaurants and coffee shops, and the impressive 16th century church, Santo Domingo de Guzmán, a legacy of Spanish occupation.

We had bad luck with two of the city's museums. A timing mix-up (ours) caused us to miss seeing the Museum of Oaxacan Cultures, highly touted for its excellent exhibits of Oaxacan history. We did make it to the Textile Museum which unfortunately was a big disappointment, having very little on display.

We sampled Oaxacan cuisine – which is heavy into mole sauces. At one meal I had red, green, and yellow mole sauces – all on the same plate! Though we tired of mole sauces, we never tired of tasty soups and black beans. When we wanted a respite from Oaxacan food, we found Italian restaurants for pizza, wine, and gelato.

We attended a Guelaguetza performance of regional music, dances, and costumes. Pat and I managed to get seats right in front of the stage, but truth be told, enjoyed the scrumptious dinner buffet even more than the program.

We satisfied our shopping urges in plentiful clothing and native handicraft stores, but were unable to find a wine bottle opener (we borrowed one at the hotel).

We were able to take advantage of Oaxaca's trying to establish a market for mezcal – being offered free samples on several occasions. Like tequila, mezcal is made from fermented maguey plants, a form of agave that is grown as a crop all over the state of Oaxaca.

By drinking and brushing my teeth with bottled water, and trying to avoid raw fruits and vegetables, I managed to survive until the middle of our week in Oaxaca City (having been in Mexico for a week and a half) without succumbing to Montezuma's Revenge, from which I had suffered on previous trips out of the US. But this time, I came prepared with a prescription for xifaxan that immediately stopped my travelers' diarrhea.

On several days our hosts provided vans to transport us to sites outside the city and knowledgeable guides to explain what we were seeing.

We visited the extensive ruins of Monte Albán - thought to be the America's first metropolis, attaining a population of as many as 40,000 at its peak around 500 AD. I marveled at the indigenous Zapotek builders' engineering skill in literally scraping off the top of a mountain to provide a platform for their city.

We also made a couple of trips to visit local outdoor markets – one in a small town square, the other at least 10 city blocks long. We saw everything from endless produce booths, to a colorful display of painted underwear, to an older lady scurrying around with a live turkey under her arm.

Pat and I particularly enjoyed the excursions to see Oaxacan folk artists, including premier rug weavers, black pottery makers, and wood sculptors. We met these artists in their working environment, typically a dedicated village with extended family members comprising the team that produced the artwork under the direction of the “master” artist.

At the wood carvers, we were fascinated by a family group of a dozen people or more sitting around a large table, painting intricate designs on finely carved pieces. And we were surprised that Oaxacan potters don't use a potters' wheel, but instead fashion their pots on a plate - that they rotate slowly by hand – atop another supporting plate.

We were even more surprised on these explorations to keep running into other tour groups guided by our friend Pablo, who the previous week had driven us on our adventure 150 miles to the south, across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Oaxaca City is an interesting place to visit, especially for the archeological sites, the folk art, and education in indigenous cultures. There was no hint of the problems plaguing the border areas of Mexico and there is direct airline access to the city from Houston.

Sources and Additional Information: Moon Handbooks – Oaxaca, Viva Oaxaca – An Insider's Guide to Oaxaca's Charms.



Construction of this church and former monastery of Santo Domingo de Guzman began in 1570 and continued for 200 years. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Each Friday evening a troupe performs traditional regional dances at Oaxaca's Camino Real Hotel. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)