

Southern Oaxaca

The state of Oaxaca (wa-HA-ka) is both magnificent and formidable, with some of Mexico's most remote and difficult terrain. Several mountain ranges converge more or less in its center, leaving no easy way in and no easy way out. Equally impressive is its human mosaic. Oaxaca's impenetrability has allowed its people to pursue their destinies relatively unmolested, and the rural areas are still dominated by Indians who retain their traditional ways of living. It is a land of harsh sunlight, rocky terrain, dry wind, rustic outposts, and stillness. When most people think 'Mexican Sierra', they are really thinking about Oaxaca.

The gawking that accompanied arrival in a new town never did go away, but as our Spanish improved, we became better at diffusing the situation with smiles and friendly conversation. After gaining their trust, we found the Mexicans to be exceedingly friendly and generous, and almost inevitably someone would invite us to camp in their yard or take a bed in their home for the night. With our smiling host proudly in the lead, we'd go marching through the farthest, dustiest reaches of town, gathering as we went, a trail of astonished townsfolk.

We gave equipment demonstrations, shared tales of our trip, attempted to describe Canadian snowstorms and the like - all of which were regarded with deep amazement - but as it turned out, nothing proved more intriguing than our map of Mexico. Everyone knew, in theory, what a map represented, but many had never actually seen one before, nor did they have the slightest idea how to read one. Everyone wanted to know whether or not it really worked. "*Is our town on the map?*", they would ask. Pointing it out to them, we confirmed that yes, their town was on the map. This result was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm and excitement. What a wonderful device this map was! "*And, is such-and-such on the map?*" (such-and-such being a small town up the road). We checked again, this time playing along with a drawn-out, suspenseful pause... "*yes it is!*", sending everyone back in their chairs, screaming with delight. On one occasion, we were brought into someone's house to inspect the town telephone. This was a recent acquisition and a point of great pride. "*How wonderful!*", we remarked, pleasing everyone tremendously. Somebody suggested we make a call. "*To Acapulco!*", cheered another, but unfortunately we had to tell them that we didn't know anybody in Acapulco. To make-up for our apparent disappointment, another asked if we might like a coconut. Holding it in the air with one hand, he made several quick, ferocious chops with his machete, and then, with a calm smile, presented us with the coconut, perfectly cut to drink from. We just about passed out.

Later in the evening, after everyone had returned home, we'd enjoy a view of what we came to regard as the *real* Mexico. Beyond our host's moonlit yard, in the deep shadows of jungle foliage, a few people tended cook fires that flickered warmly against handmade structures of packed earth and un-milled lumber. Others washed and bathed in darkness, to the trickling sound of water dished from outdoor cisterns. Here and there, chickens and dogs co-mingled freely and easily with each other and everyone else. We were always struck by the tranquility of these scenes - the details of life as we'd never seen them before, absent of the modern world's complexities and indulgences, and forged entirely from the land. And in the middle of it all stood our manufactured tent, as foreign an object as one could imagine in this small and primitive world.

We spent many, many evenings this way, drawn for a short while into the minds and matters of people we couldn't really hope to understand, but who amazed us nonetheless. These were the most memorable of all our experiences in Mexico. The smiles and warm hospitality are what we remember most of all. Muchas gracias, amigos.

Oaxaca City

Around 1325, a small tribe called the Aztec settled an island on a lake in central Mexico. They built a city, formed alliances, were successful conquerors, and expanded on cultural ideas that had been developing in Mesoamerica for thousands of years. By 1500, under the leadership of their king, Moctezuma, the Aztec had consolidated an empire that controlled all of central Mexico and territories reaching as far south as Guatemala. Unfortunately for the Aztecs, they faced the terrible burden of having to keep their god, the sun, alive; and the only known way to achieve this was through human sacrifice. Unfortunately for the conquered, the Aztecs felt it preferable to use people other than Aztecs. When Hernan Cortez arrived on the Gulf coast in 1519, barely a generation separated the Indians there from their former condition of independence. Many regarded Moctezuma as a tyrant, and they saw in the Spanish a possibility of freeing themselves from the Aztec yoke. Cortez was thus able to win over the first of his Indian allies. Meanwhile, stories of 'towers floating on water' (referring to the fleet of eleven Spanish galleons at anchor off shore) reached Moctezuma. In an unbelievable coincidence, the Aztec calendar told that 1519 would see the return of a legendary god-king from the east. Naturally, Moctezuma believed Cortez was a god, and invited him to the Aztec's lake-island capitol, Tenochtitlan. When Cortez and his small army arrived at the causeway leading into Tenochtitlan, they confronted a sight they never could have dreamed existed- a city of 200,000 people, dominated by great stone pyramids (at the time, Seville, the largest city in Spain, had a population of only 45,000). Moctezuma was caught by surprise, captured, and held hostage while the Spanish remained in the city for months under mounting hostility. Eventually they were forced to flee, during which time Moctezuma was mysteriously killed. But Cortez and his men had since made additional alliances, and returned for the final siege of Tenochtitlan, supported by an overwhelming army of 100,000 natives. And this is how 3000 years of ancient Mexican civilization was shattered almost overnight - by a tiny band of invaders who would later tear it all down, install a new religion, and enslave the very people who had helped them achieve their victory. It is interesting to note that 500 years later, the overwhelming majority of Mexicans are of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, but Cortez is nonetheless regarded as a villain, and universally despised. But this is jumping ahead.

After the fall of Tenochtitlan, Cortez continued his dismantling of the Aztec empire, heading south. He traversed the uninviting interior of what is today Oaxaca state, before arriving at the juncture of three high valleys. Everything about the place - its spring-like climate, its gentle, pastoral terrain - was so completely at odds with the immediate surroundings, and charmed Cortez so thoroughly, that after sufficiently razing the Aztec city there, he decided to build one of his own in exactly the same spot. He named his new city Oaxaca (a derivation of the original Aztec), and began by laying out a wide public square which would be its center and most distinguishing feature. Today this square is known informally as the *Zocolo* (also an Aztec word, meaning stone plinth).

The *Zocolo* continues to be the center of life in Oaxaca. It can be a place for meeting and mingling, and can be a place to just sit in the shade of a giant Laurel tree, relax, and delight in the currents of life from a discreet distance. Elderly gentlemen arrive dressed in their finest clothes to peruse a newspaper or have their shoes shined. Vendors stroll the wide, cobbled paths with carts of frozen watermelon. Indigenous women from neighboring hill towns proudly display their handmade rugs and pottery. In the evening, especially on a Sunday, the soft notes of wooden xylophones linger among the trees, lending the ambiance of a garden ballroom - breezy and sparkling with a slow flowing elegance, as couples amble leisurely with arms intertwined. You'll find *everyone* enjoying life in the *Zocolo*. But perhaps the best thing about Oaxaca's *Zocolo* is that it offers an oasis of peace and equilibrium in a country that often lacks both.

Northern Oaxaca, Veracruz & Tabasco

Around 1200 B.C., on the Gulf coast of southern Mexico in what are today the states of Veracruz and Tabasco, a small tribe achieved the remarkable progress that shaped a rural, still primitive people into an organized civilization for the very first time. These were the Olmec. For every one of Mesoamerica's other ancient cultures - including the Aztec and Maya - the story begins with them. Unfortunately, almost nothing of the Olmec world remains today. A curious exception are thirteen colossal stone heads, seven of which may be seen at an outdoor archeological museum in the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco.

The Olmec heads so intrigued us, we decided we had to seek them out. It meant traversing the remote mountains of northern Oaxaca (which we knew almost nothing about), but southern Oaxaca had been a really great ride for us - we had never before handled something so difficult with such poise and control. The experience left us feeling like we could tackle anything. Certainly we could reach the Gulf coast in three, maybe four days at most. So off we went to see the great Olmec heads, so fortified with overconfidence and fighting spirit, that as we started up the first climb, we hardly noticed the pungent stink of overheated car brakes hanging in the air...

It would take something really exceptional to match the challenges of southern Oaxaca...

"Woah! - A little steep!"

Something so hard...

"Woah! - puff-puff-puff - hang in there! - puff-puff-puff..."

Something so terrible...

"puff-puff-puff-puff - oh God! - puff-puff-puff-puff..."

It would take something utterly stupid. Northern Oaxaca was much like southern Oaxaca, only the roads were steeper. A *lot* steeper. A steep that outstripped anything we'd ever seen before. A steep that flung us limply over the handlebars every ten minutes, because our legs were trembling uncontrollably and too much furious puff-puff-puffing had us seeing stars. And still we pressed on, ten grueling minutes at a time. What choice did we have? Besides, it would let up. It had to let up.

Three days later, we toppled over once and for all - stunned, speechless, waterless, and exhausted beyond belief. It was no use. We had been climbing the same mountain for hours, and God only knew how much higher it went. Our one consolation was the view. All around, the blue silhouettes of overlapping mountain ranges marched off toward distant horizons, and a light breeze echoed deeply through the canyon below. For a few moments the tranquility of this scene eclipsed everything else, until we realized just how utterly screwed we were. A vast stretch of wilderness still lay ahead, and our three days had done nothing other than dig us into a hole we couldn't possibly get out of. I felt a touch of panic - the kind you feel when you've swam just a little too far out from shore. We were drowning. Drowning in mountains. And soon we would have to confront the most unpleasant reality of all: drinking our own pee to stay alive.

Okay, not really, but the long distance cyclist will suffer this way from time to time, and it reveals one of the convolutions in his/her thinking. After all, we weren't in the middle of the woods, we were on a highway. For the last three days people had been passing us in trucks - honking and waving, and yelling "*Gringo!*", any of whom would have happily stopped to give us a lift if we'd so desired. But the long distance cyclist will soldier stubbornly along anyway, come hell or high water, right to the bitter end, consumed by the pure and beautiful idea of traveling from point A to point B entirely under their own power.

We'd never been so soundly beaten- and yet - *If we could just get over this last hill!* We started walking. But pushing a hundred pound bicycle up a steep mountain is only marginally easier than riding a hundred pound bicycle up a steep mountain. It's also an awful lot slower, and few things look sadder or more pathetic.

A pickup stopped and the driver helped us into the back. For a moment we wondered if we could trust this stranger, but it didn't really matter. We sped off over the mountain - rising higher and higher - for 5 minutes... 15 minutes... 30 minutes! We never would have made it. And all this, just for a detour to visit the stupid Olmec heads! I laid back to a view of clouds drifting calmly overhead. In an instant, I was fast asleep.

We didn't meet many Gringos in Tabasco, so we were doubly surprised to meet Van, a Gringo who actually lived there, in a small town in the middle of nowhere. Van was really nice, but not quite altogether there. He was given to long, vacant pauses, with a drifting gaze forever fixed on points a mile or two in the distance. Even in conversation, Van's grip on the here-and-now seemed tenuous:

"So Van, do you really live in this town?" we asked.

Van, looking around a bit, suddenly uncertain, *"Uh...yeah."*

"How long have you lived here?"

After a long, unsteady pause, *"Yeah....this town's pretty quiet."*

But he seemed harmless enough, and when he invited us to spend the night at his house down the road, we gratefully accepted. Van's house was a tiny, two-room affair, and would have been quite unremarkable were it not for his arresting collection of hardcore pornography. As we entered the living room, he tossed a t-shirt over some magazines and flashed a sly grin, apparently pleased with how deftly he'd pulled the wool over our eyes. Perhaps we also hadn't noticed the life-sized X-rated posters ogling lustfully from every direction. Van's rambling stream of consciousness was hard to follow, but after talking with him for a half hour, we were able to gather three things:

1. That he had stumbled upon this place two years ago, married a local woman who left him a month later, and that he now shared the house with his father-in-law (who wasn't around right now).
2. That he slaughtered his chickens by running them down with his car.
3. That he was *"real popular"* with the girls in town, something he mentioned often.

The next morning we met Van's father-in-law over a quiet breakfast. He studied us intently for a long time before grumbling something in a rough Spanish we couldn't understand. Van translated:

"Uh... he wants to know where you're going."

We explained that we were on our way to Villahermosa to see the giant Olmec heads. Van translated again. There was a long pause, then more grumbling.

"Oh yeah... he says a guy up the road found one of those in his field."

Clearly we were misunderstanding each other. We explained again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... he knows what you're talkin' about. The big heads, right? Yeah, I've seen it too- it's in a field just up the road."

Van's father-in-law had disappeared. When he returned, he produced three hand-sized clay figurines.

"He says he dug 'em up in the yard a couple years ago. I think they're probably kinda old."

Indeed, they looked old. Much cruder than the glossy replicas sold at tourist markets. We had seen other figurines that looked just like these in a museum in Oaxaca. We examined them for several minutes - they really looked real! Could they be? And if so...

"Yeah... he says you can have 'em."

Van's father-in-law had since lost interest in us, and was now on the couch, thumbing through a *Hustler* magazine. Van

looked bored as well - staring blankly from the kitchen table. And what of this giant head up the road? Could we have that too? Parting with some of their porn would surely be out of the question, but they seemed more than happy to unload their priceless collection of pre-Columbian artifacts. We thought about it for a long time - after all, it's not every day you're offered such things - but in the end, it just didn't seem right. Somehow, they weren't ours for the taking. So we didn't. We left Van, his father-in-law, their porn, their clay figurines, and possibly the lost 14th Olmec head, and hustled on to Villahermosa to bring our little Olmec adventure to a close.

We'd come a week out of our way to see them, over the most grueling road we would encounter anywhere in the northern hemisphere- and finally- there they were. The big heads. Ancient forebears of civilization. Big chubby babies with funny helmets.

It was an emotional moment.

Chiapas

Throughout most of the colonial period, the Spanish minority made fortunes at the expense of the Indian population, who were reduced to second class citizens and lost possession of all valuable land. The situation was partially corrected with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20, but somehow the revolution never really happened in Chiapas. Today, a wealthy elite still maintain an unshakable control over land ownership and political power, while those who actually work the land are impoverished and lacking in education, health care, and civil rights. Their protests were largely ignored until January 1, 1994, when an armed Indian group calling itself the *Zapatista National Liberation Army* attacked and took possession of the state capitol and several surrounding towns. After a three day standoff with the military in which 150 people were killed, the Zapatistas fled to a remote jungle region along with thousands of other peasants. The Zapatista's leader, a ski-masked figure known only as Subcomandante Marcos, became an instant hero to sympathetic Mexicans who resented the country's political stagnation; and with the world's media focused on Chiapas, the government had no choice but to enter into negotiations. At the moment the Zapatistas are not militarily active. From their remote jungle outpost they are now engaged in a war of propaganda, waiting impatiently for the government to settle their grievances.

From the moment we reached the pine-covered highlands, we started to notice them- Indian women remarking our passage discreetly from the forest- their traditional red and white blouses vivid as flowers in the fold of dark greenery. Chiapas is nearly one-third Indian, all of whom are direct descendants of the ancient Maya. They speak Mayan languages and practice Mayan traditions, and as one might expect after five hundred years of abuse and oppression, they are reclusive, guarded, suspicious of outsiders, and deeply resentful of interference. We traveled a remote road through some of Chiapas' most traditional Indian villages and received an uneasy reception- but were tolerated.

There is a culture of mysterious impenetrability even at the best of times, but nothing delivered us deeper into bewilderment than the unique religious practices we witnessed in the tiny highland church of San Juan Chamula. Thousands of shimmering candles, resin smoke, and chanting voices flooded the dark interior. On a floor of pine needles, kneeling worshipers arranged clay figurines and more candles, periodically wailing above the din in ostensible trance-like states. In one corner, a man ran eggs over the body of a woman who lay fetal and shuddering on the floor, pausing now and then to drink clear liquid from a small glass bottle, whisper magic words, and arrange more candles- for luck, for purity, for expelling unwanted spirits. The whole metaphysical drama was so weirdly organic and wonderfully unintelligible, that in our ignorance, we could only liken what we saw to a popular image of Voodoo. Fifty

years ago, when the Pope caught wind of what was going on in Chamula, he excommunicated the whole lot of them. Now, the people are led solely under the wisdom and guidance of their spiritual healer- the Shaman.

We visited the Shaman's house (he wasn't there- someone else took us), which was stocked with Voodoo provisions- extra candles, Christmas lights, crates of *Coca Cola*- but what really grabbed our attention were several framed photos of the Shaman himself, posing with various well-known heads of state. This was a real surprise and quite impressive- I mean, this man was famous! We carefully inspected an official White House photo featuring our smiling Shaman (who looks decidedly nuts, by the way) sandwiched between Bill and Hillary Clinton. Now, we mean no disrespect to the good Shaman, and fully understand that the townsfolk may look to these photos for confirmation from time to time ('*ok- if cutting the head off a chicken will fix his cold, that's good enough for me...*'), so let's just say that our Shaman is quite skilled with a pair of scissors. Because when we looked *really* close, we could see that he had spliced these photos together. Every one of them. But then, if preserving ancient traditions means going on holiday every once in a while and returning with a bogus picture of you on a beach with Madonna, so be it. At least the guy has a sense of humor.

On our last evening in Mexico we checked into a hotel with a balcony and a sweeping view to the south. We watched the wide and mighty Usumacinta river slither its way across flat jungle as far as the eye could see, orange-grey and dim in twilight haze. Now and then a flock of brilliant white birds lifted across the foreground in synchronized flight. And of course, it was hot- really, really hot. Perhaps we'd had too much sun. Perhaps it was the combined weight of the last four months as we began to reflect upon them. Whatever the reason, we were completely exhausted. Making sense of Mexico seemed next to impossible. Each time we tried we were given to long pauses, a slow shaking of the head, and such profound exclamations as "*wow.....*" Behind us lay panoramas of humanity and geography like none we'd ever seen before. We retraced our steps - through deserts, beaches, mountains and jungles; through cosmopolitan cities and the most primitive villages one could possibly imagine. Along the way there were people just like us, and others in whom we saw no reflection of ourselves whatsoever. Mexico's story, like that of any people, is one of a long human journey spanning hundreds, sometimes thousands of years. But where North Americans all live more or less in the same present and experience their collective past through books and museums, Mexico exists in a multiplicity of presents, with a thousand years of collective past still very much alive in the here and now. It's a fascinating meeting of worlds. And it almost killed us a few times too.

Adios amigos!