Colors of Oaxaca

From Zapotec ruins to indigenous folk art to the life-affirming pageantry of the Day of the Dead, Oaxaca is Mexico's most enchanting city.

Five timeless wonders of Oaxaca

- **Church of Santo Domingo.** Open your doors of perception to what Aldous Huxley called "one of the most extravagantly gorgeous churches in the world."
- **Museo Regional de Oaxaca.** This museum in an old monastery features finds from Tomb 7 at Monte Albán.
- **Museo Rufino Tamayo.** Home to pre-Columbian artifacts from the collection of the famous painter, a Oaxaca native.
- **Basílica de la Soledad.** Legend has it that this 1682 church was built when a stray mule died on the site and was found to be carrying a statue of Our Lady of Soledad, the city's patron saint.
- **Museum of Contemporary Art.** Oaxaca's historic design and arts traditions have thrived into this century, as proved by the local art in this museum.

by MATTHEW JAFFE  photographs by JUDITH HADEN

A hammock salesman pauses on a Oaxaca street. At left, bright red cockscomb beckons at the Mercado Benito Juárez. In fact, Oaxaca is drenched in flowers during Day of the Dead celebrations from October 31 to November 2.
The holiday's presence colors the market: vendors sell sugar skulls, which are offered to children as a treat, while nearby stands display small plaster and cardboard skeleton figures playing soccer, trumpeting in mariachi bands, watching television, or even typing at computers. These figures are placed at altars or on graves by family members to commemorate a departed loved one's favorite activity in life.

But even on the eve of the sacred, the market, is first and foremost, a market. Plucked amber bodies of chickens, their throats freshly sliced, pile up on counters, and still-flapping turkeys are carried through rows of stalls by their feet, bound for tomorrow's mole poblano.

As I awkwardly stoop beneath sagging awnings, tiny Indian women wearing traditional clothing effortlessly move around me. The Zapotec faces of vendors peer over stacks of flowers and across the centuries, while the faces of plaster angels, bailed into traditional holiday breads (see page 142), look romantically upon the chaos.

In reality, Oaxaca is less chaotic than it is complex. All 16 of the Indian cultures in the Oaxaca area at the time of the Spanish conquest still live here, most notably the descendants of the great Zapotec and Mixtec cultures. So if you can't follow a conversation at the market, it may not be that your Spanish is rusty. More likely, you probably just need to brush up on your Popoloca or one of the many other languages spoken locally.

Walking to the center of town, I find the zócalo lively, too. As ancient as Oaxaca is, it's not immune to the modern world. An MTV Latino crew is camping it up as its members reenact the gray grasstoppers that are an Oaxacan tradition. And because the Day of the Dead coincides with Halloween, schoolchildren are dressed as devils and witches—and one boy with a painted skeleton face and cardinal's vestments—much about. Others, less fortunate, hawk cheap crafts. Some of these sweet kids will become part of the cast of characters that I will recognize over the next few days.

What a temptation to just blend into the nonlinear parade that is Oaxaca, to sacrifice its guidebook attractions and take in the action on the streets. But to do so would mean forsaking Oaxaca's great museums, the best folk-art shopping in Mexico, the ruins of Monte Albán 55 minutes from town, and spectacular colonial architecture, most notably the Church of Santo Domingo, which blends gold-plated baroque splendor with tin figureheads of martyrs in all their glory, apenado-glory.

We have time enough to see all of that, as well as the episemeral splendor of the Day of the Dead. In courtyards and storefronts sit altars built of flowers and sugarene sleds, festooned with garlands of fruit, glasses of water (the spirits are thirsty after the journey), family photos, maybe a favorite beer, and bowls of mole. Elaborately cut crepe paper squares, some with figures of skeletons and skulls, are strung across patios.

As night falls, we head over to the cemetery at Xoxocotlán to watch the decoration of the grave sites. Xoxocotlán, as it is known, has become a major tourist attraction. By the time we arrive, motor coaches are lining the narrow streets. The graveyard is packed as our fellow travelers (some wearing T-shirts that read "I'm Living It Up on the Day of the Dead") vie for camera angles.

The locals show remarkable patience through it all, although a few older women shield their faces with scarves. Tonight, angelitos, the spirits of children, are said to return. One woman, her sandals kicked off and a basket of flowers at her feet, wraps her arms around herself and, with her head bowed, rocks gently as she whispers at a long dead child's grave site. Atop the tombstone, a candle flame sings the petals of a lone calla lily.

There are lighter moments, too, as generations of families continue to arrive. A teenager wearing a Chicago Bulls jacket takes her friends through the family plot. "This is my uncle, that's my aunt, my grandfather is over there," and so on.

As one set of tourists clears out, more come in. I'm not sure if I am more bothered by their presence than the locals are. I ask one man (whom we
will run into a few days later on the stairs of a pyramid at Monte Albán) about our presence. No, he says, he likes the tourists to see the decorations.

I persist. "Don't the crowds bother you?" He looks around and shrugs. "Not really," he responds. "You will all go back to your hotels. We will be here all night."

INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE

Oaxaca is quiet on November 1, All Saints' Day. Today's observance is more private than yesterday's. We go to the Panteón General, Oaxaca's main cemetery, to see the display of altars that civic groups have constructed, and at night we watch a play set alongside the great walls of Santo Domingo.

As the holiday moves to a close the next afternoon, we head out of Oaxaca a few miles east to the small weaving town of Teotitlán del Valle. When we arrive, no one is outside. Inside their homes, villagers are spending their last moments with the spirits of relatives, who, according to tradition, will depart promptly at 3.

We sit in the square in front of the 17th-century church waiting for Teotitlán's residents to emerge for a pilgrimage to the old graveyard. The church bells ring out in a sharp, staccato rhythm. As at the market, it is hard not to get caught in the current, only this time it's a powerful undertow of emotion and spirituality that pulls us deeper into their holiday.

The feeling is less a product of belief than a faith in the believers themselves. Over the past three days, it has become easy to accept their acceptance of the breakdown of boundaries between life and death, to live in a world where whimsy and mourning, faith and magic, mingle freely.

As one man puts it, "Have you ever had a dream where you're able to visit again with a loved one, only to wake up later and not know what is truly real? That is the feeling of the Day of the Dead."

The church bells stop ringing. And at just about the time the souls should be returning to the other side, a whistling wind breaks the stillness, rustling trees and sending dust swirling around the plaza. There doesn't seem to be much point in searching for other explanations.

Oaxaca basics

LOGISTICS

For information on traveling in Mexico, call (800) 446-3942.

GETTING THERE. Oaxaca is about 200 miles southeast of Mexico City. Connecting flights from the capital via Aeroméxico or Mexicana take about an hour.

GETTING AROUND. It's really not worth the trouble to rent a car. Taxis are inexpensive, and the center of town is small enough to cover on foot. If you're going to outlying areas, hire a cab (cheaper if you don't do it through your hotel). Street rates run about $7.50 an hour.

GUIDE SERVICES. We spent a couple of days with American expatriate Toni Sobel and gained tremendous insight into the area. She can help with lodging too, and can be reached at 011-52-951-75947. Susana Trilling, a noted Oaxaca chef, leads market tours and cooking classes—day sessions or longer—at her school, Seasons of My Heart. For information, fax her at 011-52-951-65280 or 011-52-951-87726.

LODGING

Calesa Real. This modest European-style hotel is within a couple of blocks of the zócalo. From $55; 011-52-951-65544.

Camino Real Oaxaca. In a 16th-century convent, this is Oaxaca's top-of-the-line hotel. From $155; (800) 722-6466.

Casa Colonial. Run by American expatriates, this bed-and-breakfast-style inn offers a relaxed setting and plenty of local travel pointers. From $81, with breakfast; 011-52-951-65280, or (800) 758-1697 from the United States.

WHERE TO EAT

Oaxaca is a chili lover's idea of heaven. Be sure to try some of the city's famous moles, as well as dishes that incorporate fresh squash blossoms. The chocolate here is uniformly great, and the local cheese can transform a humble torta on the zócalo into something special.

For indigenous Oaxaca cuisine, try El Topil, El Biche Pobre, or Maria Bonita. Outside of town, Abigail Mendoza's Tlamanalli in Teotitlán is considered the best in the area. More casual is the open-air La Capilla in Zaachila, 40 minutes from Oaxaca.

ARTFUL SHOPPING

Galería Arte de Oaxaca carries paintings and fine art in a beautiful restored building and features works by noted Oaxacan artist Rodolfo Morales. For local crafts, try Corazón del Pueblo, Artesanías Cocio, Chimali, Taly, and Fonart.