

## NOTES ON A SIX WEEK TRIP TO MEXICO – JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2005

Forty-two years ago Arlene and I went to Mexico for our honeymoon in 1963, but for some reason we never returned. I guess it was too close to the U.S. and we were concentrating our travels on more distant and exotic places. Planning this trip presented a challenge because we had little knowledge of this wonderful country. We had been to Yucatan, Mexico City, and Puerto Vallarta, but we decided not to return to any of these places. They were wonderful when we were there, but after talking to many people in Mexico it seems that we made the correct decision about all three. To return to a place after an absence of four decades is almost always a mistake.

For general travel guides we used Fodor and Frommer, and for Oaxaca we used the Moon Publications Oaxaca Guide. For the past ten years I had been thinking about a trip to Mexico so I put all interesting material from travel magazines and the New York Times, etc. in a file. When I started to sort the material so that we could decide where to go an amazing 50% of the file was about Oaxaca. So we decided to concentrate on the “Colonial Heartland” which included Guanajuato, Querétaro, San Miguel de Allende, Zacatecas, and Morelia. Oaxaca (obviously), San Cristobal de las Casas, and Zihuatanejo rounded out the itinerary. In the following I have not given addresses, unless the place is really obscure, because they are readily available from guidebooks or the hotel; also these notes are longer than necessary so I did not want to compound the error by adding more material.

### Guanajuato

One of the reasons for starting here is that we found a routing on Continental Airlines that left SFO at a decent hour (11:00 AM) and with a change of planes in Houston arrived in Guanajuato at 7:50 PM (only 5:50 California time). The other reasons were that it is in the same State as San Miguel de Allende, and close to Querétaro. Through the internet we found a terrific B & B called Casa Estrella in the Valenciana section which is about a 10-15 minute trip to the historical center. We had the Valenciana Suite, the owner’s favorite which cost about \$235. It was large, comfortable, had a good view, and the resident owner, Sharon Mendez, made our visit here very enjoyable. She drove us to town several times and pointed out the interesting places to see and visit.

Physically the most striking thing about the city is that the great bulk of traffic moves through underground tunnels below the city. We were told that some of these tunnels are actually old river beds, and instead of constructing more roads to handle the increasing amount of vehicular traffic, they made roads out of the river beds, thus preserving the integrity of the historical center. Often when we would take a taxi from one point to another we would spend what seemed like a very long time underground before surfacing finally at our destination. The city climbs up several hillsides, and a striking feature is the brightly colored facades and the eye-catching color combinations.

The following places were of interest to visit: The Central Market, the Jardin, Church of San Diego, and the Basilicata Colegiata de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato. There is an interesting museum called the Museo Iconografico de Quijote which has everything and anything that is in any way related to Don Quijote. The Teatro Jaurez was quite nice, and the Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato was a fine museum with an exceptionally good collection of “arte de miniatura” (small crafts). The Museum of the birthplace of Diego Rivera was another worthwhile place to see. The

Casa Capela, Ceramica La Cruz, and the Majolica Santa Rosa were also worthwhile visits. The Museo Regional la Alhondiga de Granaditas and a gallery called “Copelo” were of some interest.

The most interesting and impressive church is La Iglesia de San Cayetano at La Valenciana; the gold gilded Baroque interior was startling and almost overwhelming. Very close to the church is a crafts shop called “Ojo de Venado” owned by two men. One is Randy Walz, an American, who teaches art at the University. The shop had one of the best, if not the best, collections of Mexican crafts from many regions, that we saw in our six weeks. We love folk art and Randy seemed to get the best artisans from each region and his prices were quite reasonable. Even if you have no interest in buying the shop is worth visiting because it is like a museum of the best crafts in Mexico. Since this was our first stop we didn’t buy anything because we figured that we would see the same things in other places. In retrospect that was a mistake. There were several things that we did not see again, at least not of the quality that he had.

In an area of the city called Marfil there is the Museo Exhacienda San Gabriel de Barrera. This was our favorite monument or museum that we visited in Guanajuato. It is a large hacienda that gives one a good idea of how some rich people lived in the early 1900’s. For us the most interesting part was the gardens. There were about twelve of them in many styles including French, Italian, Spanish, Mexican, etc.

Writing about food in Mexico is difficult because you have to significantly lower your standards. I can guarantee that you will not find any Don Giovannis or Bouchons in Mexico. But we took the approach that we would seek out the best that was available. In most cases we ate Mexican food and stayed away from Italian, French, Chinese or International. When we strayed from Mexican food we were often disappointed. Mexican food is clearly not a “cuisine” that I like, and I doubt that I will ever eat Mexican food in the U.S. again. But Mexicans do Mexican food better than any other that they attempt. Makes a lot of sense.

The best meal we had in Guanajuato was a lunch at Posada Santa Fe which has a wonderful location on the main square. The ‘queso fundido’, which is chorizo and cheese with refried beans, the Caesar salad, and the chicken fajitas, were all quite good. With beer the cost was \$24. All prices in these notes are in U.S. dollars and include a nice tip. We had another lunch at Casa Del Conde de la Valenciana, across from the church. The atmosphere was superb, but the food was poor. Our two dinners were at Parador San Javier Restuarante and El Gallo Pitagorico. The Parador was poor, but El Gallo Pitagorico was quite acceptable. My Filetto Claudio, a marinated steak topped with capers, olive oil, and some other things. Mexican beef tends to be both tough and tasteless so the marinating and the topping made it quite acceptable. Our two breakfasts at Casa Estrella were very good.

### **Querétaro**

After two very enjoyable days in Guanajuato, which was just the right amount of time, we moved on to Querétaro. To get from one to the other we hired a car and driver for \$110; the journey took two hours. We had booked the Marquesa Suite at “La Casa de la Marquesa” which turned out to be occupied. After looking at several other rooms (the place was virtually empty) we settled on the Augustin de Iturbide which was a splendid room with a private little courtyard. The price was only \$155 for one of the nicest rooms we have ever had in a hotel that is one of the major sights of the city. It is such a magnificent and exotic old building that the stairway to the

rooms was blocked to keep curious tourists from invading the privacy of guests. The Moorish-like architecture was spectacular, and the architecture and decoration of the chapel on our floor level was an absolute jewel.

Querétaro is a large city, but the historical center is quite compact and walking from one end of it to the other is not a very long walk. Of all of the cities we visited the historical center was the most harmonious and intact that we saw. It was also one of the cleanest cities that we have ever seen, and certainly the cleanest we saw in Mexico. We kept looking for the proper word to describe the city and terms like sophisticated, regal, and others came to mind, but in talking to a local resident she thought the best description was “sensorial.” In any event, the place exuded class. We loved walking the streets of the historical center.

Other than the place we were staying the main attraction is the Plaza Aromas (or Independencias) in the center of the historical district. It is a very large square with restaurants, bars, and hotels around the perimeter. Before it is a huge garden (Jardin Zenea). Although we were there well after Christmas and New Years (January 4 to 8) all of the elaborate Christmas decorations were still intact. There were huge displays of life-size animals, nativity scenes, and every conceivable type of Christmas scene imaginable or fanciful. Balloon sellers were there in great numbers and stalls selling candy, food, and drink added to the unusually festive air. There was a tremendous amount of activity and celebration; it was quite a joy to witness it. At the edge of the Plaza there was a photographer making a small fortune taking children’s pictures with life sizes replicas of the three wise men. We spent a lot of our time observing the scene in the Jardin; each day we thought it must certainly be the last, but the celebration never let up, and for all I know that as I write this in February it may still be going on. Actually throughout the month of January Christmas decorations remained. Not until after a celebration called “Candelaria” on February 2 when dolls of the baby Jesus are dressed up, put in altars, and serenaded by brass bands did the Christmas decorations start to come down.

One of the main attractions of the city is the Museo Casa de la Zacatecana Convento Santa Cruz. We tried to enter to see the place, but were told in Spanish that one has to go on a tour and there would not be another for 30-45 minutes. We knew that meant it could be hours so we decided to skip it. A tall young Mexican man with several cameras around his neck came over to us and wanted to make sure that we understood what we had been told. He was a professional photographer who had an appointment with the padre of the church who was a no show. So he invited us to come along with him while he took some shots of the exterior of the church. He explained that he was the official photographer for the state of Querétaro tourism board. Actually every photograph we saw of the state after we met him was taken by him and they were all very impressive. He also worked on commission and had just completed a three month assignment to photograph the bullfighting in Portugal, where, like Mexico, the bull is not killed. We asked where we could see some of his books and he said that they were not for sale publicly, but that the best way was to walk over to his house which was not far away and he would show us his work. His name was Gonzalo Alcocer.

As we entered his house I overheard him tell his wife Lorraine that that he was going to invite us to stay for lunch. Lunch (or comida) in Mexico is never before 3:00 PM. As his wife explained we were going to have a typical Mexican lunch. While he went to pick up their son from school we were offered tequila (straight up) which was a new experience for us. With the tequila, which

was actually very tasty, she served some canapés of some nuts and cheese. When he returned we sat down at 3:00. Lunch was soup, salad, beans, chicken, a pork adobo and dessert. We tasted everything, but could not come close to finishing it. Needless to say it was a wonderful experience; they were very gracious, warm, delightful, and talented people and this was clearly the highlight of our visit to Querétaro. We never did get back to visit the Convento Santa Cruz or the museum, but I doubt if it was a great loss.

On our second day we took an all day excursion with a car and driver. Our first stop was the town of Bernal that had a very picturesque setting just below a tall mountain. The church was very charming, both the interior and exterior. It was a very pleasant and friendly town, and small enough that we were able to walk most of it in about an hour. In addition to the setting and the wonderful church the town is famous for a candy made from goat milk. The driver took us to the retail outlet of the major manufacturer. This wonderful sweet is made from boiled down goat milk (*dulce de leche de cabra*) and pecans (*nuez*) with no sugar or conservatives added. It was perfect to have one after a spicy Mexican meal. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) we never found them outside of the state of Querétaro. From Bernal we went to the Freixenet winery where we took a tour and had a tasting of some of their still wines. The facility was quite vast and under-utilized; the vineyards looked very poor and unproductive.

Then we went to the town of Cadzereyta where we had lunch at Quinta Fernando Schmol. This place was settled, and still owned, by German immigrants many years ago. It has a famous cactus garden that we enjoyed visiting. The visit included a look at the way that they propagate cactus plants for sale. Our last stop was in the town of Tequis which was a spa town with thermal pools. For some reason the warm water had dried up and the town was transformed into a crafts market. The crafts were quite ordinary.

Monuments and buildings that we visited were the Museo Regionale which was excellent, the Museo de Arte that was a very nice old building, but it had a poor collection, the church and former convent of Santa Rosa de Viterbo that had very unusual exposed buttresses, and the Cathedral which was not much to see. A place called the “Cineteatro” had a very good art exhibit and the director gave us a private tour of the theater. There is a place called “El Rubi” that specializes in selling opals which are indigenous to the area. They have very limited hours (like 11 AM to 2 PM), but the selection is outstanding and the prices seemed reasonable. Arlene was interested in desert roses so the owner sent us to her mother’s place. While there we discovered an area that was new to us called Plaza Corregodoria that was a series of pedestrian streets lines with vendors selling various crafts; it was very colorful and there were some interesting things for sale.

For breakfast the hotel recommended a place called El Archangel. We had three breakfasts there and the food was very good. The fourth day we went to a chain called VIPS that was terrible; they are all over the country but we avoided them like the plague. Mexican food is not the greatest, but bad Mexican food it just awful. Our favorite restaurant for dinner was El Mesón de Chucho el Roto. Arlene had tacos with huitlacoche and squash blossoms. Huitlacoche is a fungus that grows on corn so it is really much like a mushroom. I had the Molcajete Chucho el Roto. A molcajete is a three legged stone bowl; most are now made of concrete rather than stone. It was filled with beef strips, chorizo, chicken, nopales (cactus leaf), onion, cheese, and a nice spicy sauce. With a bottle of Mexican Nebbiolo (a first for us) the dinner was \$64. This was

a very typical price for dinner with a bottle of wine and a margarita for two. Wines in Mexican restaurants carry a huge markup so to get a decent bottle of wine, the wine cost almost always exceeded the price of the food. We liked it so much that we returned a second time and both had the Molcajete; with a nice bottle of Spanish wine the cost went up to \$77. Wine selection in Mexico is limited to Mexican, Chilean, and Spanish primarily. There are also a few Argentinean, Californian, and French wines, but usually very expensive and not good labels. When we could we always ordered a bottle of Spanish wine from the Duero or Rioja. We never had a bad one. Another very popular restaurant that we tried for dinner was “1810.” There for the first time (but not the last) we had *escamole*, which are ant larvae. They were very tasty and have a delicate flavor. The steak with nopales, cheese and chipotle chili sauce was ok but tough as usual. In a place called La Casa los Cincos Patios there is a restaurant called El Miguelito. We had a lunch and a dinner there and both were very good. At dinner we had our first experience with a gargantuan margarita. I didn’t measure the glass, but it was 6 to 8 inches across. The restaurant is about as whimsical a place we have seen. Each table was different with different matching chairs. Also, each table, and there were a lot of them, had different tableware. An absolutely amazing place. Even more amazing was the bar next to the restaurant. It was a reincarnation of an old pharmacy with many old apothecary jars, interesting signs, tin ware, and much other bric-a-brac. But it was all in excellent taste. It was really more like a museum.

When we went for lunch we toured the entire building with its five patios. They were also quite amazing and in the same good taste of the wealthy Mexican owner. The Casa los Cincos Patios is not in any of the guidebooks we had, but it should be. It, the restaurant, and the bar was probably the top sight in the city, aside from the main plaza and our hotel. Four nights, which was only three days was the perfect amount of time here.

### **San Miguel de Allende**

For \$27 we took a taxi here; the trip was only about 50 minutes. The best place to stay, according to Andrew Harper’s Hideaway Report, is the Casa de Sierra Nevada where we had booked a suite in one of the main buildings. After looking at a suite there we asked to see a suite in La Casa en el Parque, another building that the hotel has about 5 or 10 minutes away from the main complex. It borders on Benito Juarez Park and the suite we chose was huge, secluded, and no further from the main part of town than the main complex. It has only two suites and three rooms so we had the grand place pretty much to ourselves. The name of our suite was Golondrina (swallow); it was expensive at \$360, but was quiet, comfortable, and had a par-like setting.

San Miguel is an unusual place because of the very high percentage of foreigners living here. The vast majority are Americans, most of whom spend winters here or who have become permanent retired residents. For the first hour that we were there we heard nothing but English being spoken. I don’t know what the exact percentage of foreigners, but it must be somewhere between 10 and 20 percent. In a sense it is not real Mexico, but something akin to Santa Fe South. I don’t in any way mean to this to be negative about the place. It is truly a very pretty Colonial city with attractive architecture, cobblestone streets and sidewalks, and oozing with charm. The rough cobblestone streets are just wide enough for one person. They make the narrow sidewalks of the Latin Quarter in Paris seem excessive by comparison.

We did a lot of walking in San Miguel visiting galleries and artisan shops in addition to our usual visits to the central market and the central crafts market. Another enjoyable outing was to the Botanical Gardens which is located a few miles from the downtown. The variety of cactus was amazing and all was well tended; the glassed in area of the garden was impressive and impeccably created and maintained. Other places worth visiting were the Belles Artes Museum where there was a good art exhibition and La Parroquia which is the Cathedral. There is also the Guajaje glass factory that gives tours of the plant. They use recycled glass which they reclaim at the plant, and the glass is blown by hand.

After visiting a place called Casa de Ignacio Allende, an old Colonial house of historic interest we went on the weekly Sunday house tour. There were three houses on the tour, all owned by Americans, and all artfully decorated with beautiful arts and crafts. There were over 250 people, almost all American. It was quite a sight to be walking through these places with so many Americans. Americans have been settling here since the 1940's and the numbers are truly amazing. Almost 500 years after the Conquistadores, but the NorteAmericanos have indeed arrived.

On a Monday we went to visit the town of Pozos. The church was very colorful and beautiful, but because it was a Monday all the galleries were closed and all we got to visit besides the nice church was the two hotels in town. After leaving Pozos we visited the ruins of a silver mine, and saw evidence of many more enroute to Dolores Hidalgo. Some were huge. The back road to Dolores Hidalgo took us through a cactus forest that was very impressive. I had never seen so many cacti in one area and some of the plants were huge trees.

Dolores Hidalgo impressed us as a real working class Mexican town with very little of interest to tourists. We enjoyed walking the town around its main plaza with its numerous ice cream stands. One of the main attractions is Casa Hidalgo, the home of Hidalgo who was one of the principal persons leading to the independence of Mexico; unfortunately it was closed. We had a very typical lunch at a place on the main plaza called El Carruaje. Sopa de abondigas, chicken tacos, soda water and beer set us back \$13. The outskirts of the town are lined with shops selling the Talavera pottery. We visited several, and saw some very nice ceramic pots, but none of the shops were set up for packing and shipping so we made no purchases.

On Tuesdays there is a market on the edge of San Miguel called Placitas. In sharp contrast to San Miguel this was a very local market with local people rummaging through mounds of clothing and other household items. There were no crafts or art of any kind. After the market we went back to San Miguel and visited the Dickenson Orchid Garden. It was a very nice and well tended orchid garden, but when we were there in mid-January it was too early to see much in bloom; March or later would be a better time to visit.

San Miguel, like Santa Fe, is an art center and a place with good crafts and folk art. Arlene had read about one of the master craftsmen in a book on the best folk art crafts of Mexico. His name is Maestro Esteban Valdez and the address is number 14 calle de Independencia in Rancho Las Flores. He is well into his 70's but still working in ceramics. His top price is 50 pesos (\$4.50); in San Miguel prices were double or triple. It was a very interesting visit to see how the family lived. We came away with one of his pieces and one by his granddaughter. This is real crude and simple folk art; nothing fancy.

Another interesting visit was a new building housing several very upscale art galleries called Galleria Aurora. Prices were totally out of the Mexican economy, but there were some very beautiful things there.

The best gallery we found was one called “Tesoros” where we found a great selection of mirrors. There happened to be a place that did packing and shipping right across the street so we made a significant purchase of these tile bordered mirrors and had them shipped. This gallery also had a large selection of pottery by Manuel Morales. We loved virtually every piece in the store and there probably were about 30 to 35. We didn’t buy any because he is from Morelia and we thought we would wait till we got there. Under the Morelia section you will see that turned out to be a mistake.

Virtually every morning in Mexico we had *chilaquiles* for breakfast. They are strips of fried tortillas, usually served with chicken, and a choice of green or red sauce, and sometimes with refried beans. Usually the chilaquiles are served lukewarm and they are mild; if you like them spicy you have to ask for salsa piquante when you place your order. And the spicy sauce never arrives with the breakfast. You always have to ask a second time because they refuse to believe that there are Americans that like spicy food. Artery watchers beware that lard is the oil of choice in Mexico and is always used in beans.

The best lunch we had in San Miguel was at Olé Olé. It is a very local and authentic. Service was slow, but it was well worth the wait. We both had the Fajitas Olé that contained beef, chicken, and shrimp. With beer it cost \$25; a close second was Bujambilia which is famous for its chilies en nogada which is a poblano chile stuffed with meat, raisins, and nuts and served with a creamy walnut sauce and pomegranate seeds. Traditionally it is served at room temperature; we had one traditional and one served hot and both of us preferred the hot one. With beers this lunch was also \$25. We also had good lunches at Tio Lucas and El Pegaso.

Our most expensive, and probably the best, dinner was at a very sophisticated, formal, and beautiful restaurant called La Capilla. The potato chips served with my margarita were perhaps the best potato chips of all time. Better even than Maui potato chips in their prime. The menu is international. We had pork with pine nuts and pecans and duck with a garlic molasses sauce. With a modest bottle of Chilean wine our bill was \$93. We also had a very nice and much less expensive dinner at Hecho en Mexico. Again straying from Mexican food we had a fair dinner at Harry’s that serves New Orleans food. Our Cajun popcorn, crab cake, and jambalaya were all quite acceptable and with a Malbec from Argentina it was only \$56. Finally we had a good Mexican dinner at Villa Santa Monica with a high school classmate of Arlene’s. Nachos Santa Monica, Pollo Mole, and two chili rellenos with a Chilean wine cost only \$59 for the three of us. We did not look at a room at Villa Santa Monica, but it is where Arlene’s friend has visitors stay. It is virtually next door to La Casa en el Parque and maybe a good way to avoid their very high prices. So we ate quite well in San Miguel undoubtedly due to the competition for the American residents.

Through Arlene’s high school buddy now living in San Miguel, we found a very reliable taxi driver, Manuel, whose cell phone # is 044 415 100 1708. You’ll need some Spanish to communicate with him.

Again the amount of time, four nights and almost five days, was just right.

### Zacatecas

To get here Manuel drove us from San Miguel to the Leon-Guanajuato airport for \$50; the trip took 90 minutes. We checked in late to the Quinta Real Hotel. This is a luxury hotel, and one of the most unusual hotels in the world. It is incorporated into the ruins of the oldest bull-fighting ring in Mexico. The architecture is spectacular and also has a great view of the nearby 18<sup>th</sup> Century aqueduct. All of the rooms are junior suites and the rate is \$170.

This is the highest city we visited with an elevation of 8,200 feet, but every other place was above 6,000 so the altitude did not bother us. Worthwhile sights that we saw were the Church of San Domingo, the Cathedral, and the Museo Zacatecana. While at the Museo Zacatecana we saw a lot of history about the Huichol Indians who are native to the area. They are famous for their crafts, in particular the fine beaded work and their yarn paintings. We wondered and actually inquired about the possibility of visiting some of their villages. Just as we were speaking with a museum official a Huichol shaman and his entire family walked into the museum to collect payment for crafts that they had delivered. They were in full native dress. We got to talk to them in the museum so that was much better than trying to find them in some remote village where they would probably be dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. The head of the family handed us his business card, 'artist and shaman' with email address and website! Talk about bridging worlds!

There were two other museums of note. One was the Museo Rafael Coronel which is a former Franciscan convent that houses a huge mask and puppet museum; there must have been over a 1,000 masks of every conceivable design from all over Mexico. Wandering through the ruins of the convent grounds was equally as magical as the museum itself. The other was the Museo Pedro Coronel that had a fabulous collection of art from everywhere; a truly fine museum. One of the major attractions was La Mina Eden, an old silver mine that was unfortunately closed for repairs. We did get driven up to La Bufa which is high of a hill above the town and took the telepherico to the other end of the city.

We love markets so we did a very thorough job of seeing the central market here, both the interior and the exterior parts. If I neglected to mention markets in the previous cities it is not because we didn't go. We always go to the market in every place we visit. There is no better place to get an idea of what the place and its people are like. Like all other places we spent a considerable amount of time walking in the historic center of the city, and Zacatecas had a very nice one. Their Teatro and its stained glass windows was an outstanding building. In the Commercial Center Building Arlene found a nice small Huichol yarn painting to go with the small beaded bowl found earlier.

After lunch one day we went by taxi to Guadalupe, an ex-Franciscan Monastery now converted to a museum of religious paintings from the 1700's. For us it was a big waste of time given our feelings about most religious art. From there we went on to visit the Cacholà winery 15 kilometers past Guadalupe in the Valle de Las Arsinas. Because of the high altitude, cool nights and mild days there are a number of vineyards around Zacatecas. We had an interesting visit to their underground barrel room reached by an ancient platform elevator. Their top wine is aged in Nadalie French oak barrels for eight months. The bottle that we drank at a restaurant was a 1992 Ruby Cabernet that was slightly sweet.

We actually found some very good food here. The first night we went to La Cantera Musical. The chips and the tortillas were exceptionally good. The Asado de Bodo Jerezana, a pork dish with cinnamon and two kinds of chilies was superb and the Mole Rojo Zacatecana, a chicken dish was also very good. It was the first time we did not have to add chilies to the food because it had plenty of flavors of its own. My notes say that it was the best Mexican food by far. With that 1992 Cacholà Ruby Cabernet and a hefty tip for the excellent service our dinner was \$63. We also went back for lunch and had chili relleno and enchiladas Zacatecanas with chicken and the the best red salsa so far.

Another great place was Los Doradas de Villa. Unlike the very Spartan La Cantera Musical, it had a wonderful and lively atmosphere. It is a non-smoking restaurant; more rare here than even in France. The specialty is Pozzole Verde which is a soup made with hominy, corn, tortillas, chicken, radishes, etc. and served with a green salsa. We went here for dinner twice and the first time one of us had the soup and the other had some a special local version of enchiladas. The second time we both had the Pozzole Verde. The restaurant does not serve wine, and much as I love my bottle of wine with dinner I very willingly returned and drank beer in order to again to experience one of the all-time soups. With margaritas and beer dinner was \$25.

We had scheduled Zacatecas for four nights and Morelia for five. I was concerned that five was too few for Morelia and other parts of Michoacan state that we wanted to visit so we changed our flight cutting Zacatecas to three nights which was sufficient and increased Morelia to six which was much more comfortable.

### **Morelia**

To get to Morelia from Zacatecas we took a flight to Mexico City, changed planes and airlines, and flew from Mexico City to Morelia. This was the first of three times we had to go through Mexico City changing planes and airlines and each of the three times our flights were either early or on time and our baggage made it each time. We were on Aeromexico, Mexicana, and Aeromar, and Aerocaribe. They were all perfect. The only hitch we had was that our bags did not arrive with us on the Continental flight from Houston to Guanajuato, but they did come the next morning.

We had reserved a Master Suite at Villa Montaña, but we arrived on a Saturday night, a day early and the hotel was fully booked. They did manage to find us a regular small room for the night and we had our choice of suites the next day. The hotel is located on four acres on a hill above the city which was about a 10-15 minute ride by taxi. Our suite was about \$300 per night. The facilities are a bit out of date and there is no heat in the rooms except for fireplaces, but it is a beautiful old place with very nice decorative arts and crafts. The staff here was exceptionally good. Everybody at the front desk went out of their way to be helpful. The concierge, Santiago Canchola Ortiz, was one of the best we have ever found. He took all of the many items we bought and had them packed and shipped, and he did not want to accept a tip for his great service.

Our first day was spent wandering around the central historic district where we walked most of the streets and visited the Cathedral, the Governor's Palace, the Church of San Francisco, and other monuments. Morelia and the towns around it are famous for their handicrafts and to educate ourselves on what was available we headed for the Handicrafts Museum and the shops within it. The museum features a display of handicrafts from many of the areas in the state of

Michoacan. There is also a central store downstairs selling many of the items displayed in the museum. Finally in the upstairs area there are quite a few rooms and each one has crafts from a different village. By looking at what was available in each village we were able to make a list of places that we wanted to visit. After lunch we went to the Mercado de Dulces, the candy market which houses a countless number of shops sell various kinds of sweets. We also visited a fabulous crafts shop called Las Mercedes, and finished up with visits to the beautiful Conservatoria de Las Rosas and the Museo de Estado.

One of the reasons for coming to Morelia was to visit the place where the Monarch butterflies migrate to spend their winters. They come from various parts of the United States and Canada where they stay from about December until some time in March. The ones that make the trip breed in Mexico and their offspring make the trip north. Seeing them fly depends on the weather. If it too cold they just stay in huge clumps in the trees. Also they do move and it is necessary to have a guide who knows where they are. We asked the hotel to arrange for a driver/guide to take us the next day. Giovanni Rubio, a Purépecha Indian, showed up in his new VW Jetta and we set off at 8:45 AM. Giovanni became our guide for the balance of our visit in Morelia. He speaks very fluent English and several other languages, knows the area and the artisans very well and was really the key to Morelia. He toots his own horn a bit too much and has some grandiose ideas, but he's a nice friendly guy who will do almost anything to ensure that you have an enjoyable time. We highly recommend him. He is the part owner of a tour company whose name escapes me. However, his cell phone number is (044)44-31-364-638; Nextel number is 44-31-651-975; his e-mail is [Giovannirubio@hotmail.com](mailto:Giovannirubio@hotmail.com) or he can be reached through the Villa Montaña hotel if all else fails.

It was about a three and a half hour drive to the end of the road at Sierra Chincua Mariposas Park. From there we had a choice of walking or renting a horse to the place where the butterflies were residing. After much debate and fears of being saddle sore for the next week we opted for the horses which cost \$27 for the three of us. This turned out to be a wise decision because the trail was very dusty and it shortened the time needed to reach the site. The horses do not go all the way so there is about a 15 minute walk the rest of the way. We were very fortunate as it was a very clear and warm day although we were at about 10,000 feet. When we got there huge numbers of butterflies were in flight. Trees were literally covered with them. It is impossible to describe what we saw and still photos do not convey the incredible spectacle of so many butterflies in one place. Giovanni estimated that we were looking at about 60 to 80 million Monarchs, so I would guess that it was less than half that. But in any event it was millions or tens of millions. It was a phenomenon that has to be seen to be realized, and one of the greatest natural spectacles we have ever seen.

We drove through the town of Angangueo in both directions. There seemed to be a competition for which house could display the largest number of flowers in pots. Front porches of the most modest of houses were covered in flowers. They were on the railings, hanging from the ceiling porches and resting on shelves that had been constructed for them. It was quite a sight to see and although it was getting late it was hard not to stop and take many pictures. We had a very late lunch in Angangueo at 3:30 at a place called Los Arcos. The dishes of the day were chicken mole or chicken adobo which we all ordered. Before they came we were brought us a large molcajete of guacamole and chips. It was clearly the best guacamole of the trip and we sure tried many dozens. It was so good that we finished off two full molcajetes of the stuff. With beer the lunch

was \$18 for the three of us. Giovanni found a shortcut back to Morelia so we got back at 7:00 PM. A long day, but a great one. The charge for the two of us was 1,500 pesos (\$136) plus the horses and lunch.

Our artisan research at the Handicrafts Museum and shops told us that one village we wanted to visit was Capula for its ceramics. Giovanni took us first to see the property of Juan Torres, one of the greatest living artists in Mexico. His entire place was a work of art from the chapel/gallery, the showroom to the rock fences and everything else that we could see on the property. He is most famous for his day of the dead dolls called Katerinas. They were expensive and it was impossible to decide which one to buy so we left with none. The next visit was to another famous artisan, Pedro Ruiz. There is beautiful art book representing the best crafts people in Mexico that was first published in 1978. Mr. Ruiz is on the cover. Giovanni bought a large vase and we bought a beautiful small one for \$32. Our next stop was the Artisanias Market where many of the ceramacists were represented. Quality varied greatly, but we found a wonderful ceramic plate for the amazingly low price of \$20. Our last visit for the morning was the studio of Rojelio Martinez where we got a couple of small planters for \$13. The most enjoyable part of the morning was being able to see artisans in their houses and studios and see the way they lived and worked. Acquiring the items was fun, but getting to know the people was the most exciting part. This could not have happened without Arlene's increasingly fluent Spanish.

After a nice lunch at Rancho La Mesa which overlooks Lake Patzquaro and the town, we went to the town of Santa Clara Del Cobre, famous for its copper work. Giovanni got us a demonstration at Casa Felicitas. At first we thought we would not be interested, but when we saw what went into the making of a copper pot we were amazed. They start with a thick slab of copper and place it in a hot wood fire. When it reaches the right temperature it is removed and two men beat it with heavy hammers until it is too cool to work. The process is repeated over a dozen times until the basic shape is achieved, and then it is worked further into its final form. Quite an amazing process. After a quick look at the wonderful town of Patzquaro we headed back to the hotel.

The next day we went with Giovanni to the villages of Quiroga and Santa Fe de la Laguna. They are both small Indian villages with ceramics. Santa Fe was the more interesting of the two. No tourists, but a nice town square, church, and a wholesale cup market.

Our next stop was the town of Tzintzuntzan with its 500 year old olive trees, but our goal there was to meet Manuel Morales in his studio. Giovanni had set it up. This is the ceramicist whose work we fell in love with when we saw it at the Galeria Tesoros in San Miguel. His work is wonderful and much in demand so when we got there he had only some "seconds" that lacked the wonderful color of the ones we had seen in San Miguel. It was a real delight to meet this artist, but there was nothing to buy except a few tiles so we headed for Patzquaro where we spent the rest of the day.

Patzquaro is a lovely town of white stucco houses with red tile roofs. Although there are a lot of tourists it retains its charm as the development is all in good taste. The town square and the area around it ooze with charm and wonderful architecture. A lot of people who visit Michoacan spend a night or two, but I felt that we were able to do it justice by seeing it twice from Morelia; it is only about a 45 minute drive between the two. There is an outstanding museum here called Museo de Artes e Industrias Populares. It has a great collection of crafts from the entire state of

Michoacan. When we walked into the first room, one of the museum guards gave an explanation of the items in the room. I thought she was just being helpful. When the same thing happened in the second room with another guard I realized that there was nothing marked in any of the rooms and so we were given a personal tour of the entire museum by the guards. It was probably the most unusual museum experience we have ever had. They spoke Spanish so slowly and clearly that even I could understand most of what they were saying.

The rest of the day we spent walking the streets of this delightful town and visiting many artisan shops including the Casa los Once Patios, Galeria Del Arcangel and others. Our favorite was El Meson Galeria where we bought a few items from Guerrero state.

Our last day in Morelia was Arlene's 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday, and Arlene was in the mood to get herself some presents. We started at the Mercado de Independencia Artesanias shop looking at Morales pottery, ceramics from Capula, green pottery and did no buying. Then we went to the Galeria Les Mercedes on 485-1C Avenida Madero and it was there that Arlene made her purchases which they agreed to pack and ship. This place along with Ojo de Venado in Guanajuato and Tesoros in San Miguel were the best crafts shops that we found.

There were still some sights to see including the interior of the Hotel Virrey de Mendoza on the main plaza; its amazing stained glass roof is something not to miss. We also went to La Casa del Portal, a restaurant, and although it was too early for lunch we enjoyed seeing the highly antique decorated interior.

Finally we took a taxi to the church of San Diego and its incredible interior. From there we walked the length of the aqueduct and took a taxi back to the hotel. Six days turned out to be perfect to see and do all that we wanted in and around Morelia. Five would have been too short.

On the dining front the first place we had dinner was San Miguelito which has the same ownership as the wonderful place in Querétaro; it was ok, but not nearly as good as the original. We had two dinners at the hotel. One on a Sunday when we couldn't find anything open downtown and the other on Arlene's 65<sup>th</sup>. Both dinners were quite good (by Mexican standards) and the cost with wine was \$75 and \$90, the latter because of a very good bottle of Spanish wine. The food was "international" with a Mexican twist.

Our favorite place was Los Mirasoles where we had two lunches and a dinner. The best dish we had there was Chamorro (pork loin) en adobo moreliano con pulque (cactus) and chilies. Prices were very reasonable (\$63 for dinner with a nice wine), service was excellent and it is a very beautiful place. Their wine list was by far the best we saw in the entire trip. Second favorite was a very plain looking place called Las Trojes. I had a fabulous Molcajete Surtido with chorizo, chicken, beef, nopales, etc. With great service and a fine Spanish wine the cost was \$67. The patio dining atmosphere at Los Mirasoles was really spectacular, but it may have been exceeded by Fonda Las Mercedes, owned by the same people that have the Galleria Les Mercedes. It is primarily a steak house so when we went for dinner we both had Sabena Mercedes which is a filet mignon served with chimichurri sauce (our favorite from Argentina) parsley, garlic, and olive oil. With another very good bottle of Spanish wine our dinner was \$69; it was a good dinner. We had two lunches in Patzcuaro, one at Rancho La Mesa and the other at El Patio; both have the same ownership, and both were ok.

## Oaxaca

To get here from Morelia we flew to Mexico City, changed airlines and then flew from Mexico City on a 40 minute flight to Oaxaca. All publications and most of the people who had been to Oaxaca recommended the Camino Real Hotel. It is a large hotel converted from a former Dominican Convent. The location on a pedestrian street only a few blocks from the Zocalo was perfect and the place is magnificently done. There are many patios and one is more beautiful than the next. We had requested the best room in a quiet location and the first room they showed us was room number 235. It was a nice room and it was very quiet, but it was small so the very nice man at the front desk, Emanuel, showed us another six rooms. They were bigger, but the location was not suitable so we took number 235. It had an enclosed patio that was very well lit and actually bigger than the room itself. So we were convinced that we had the best available although at \$340 per night with breakfast for eleven nights we were open to a less costly alternative. Camino Real is a terrific hotel; it is just overpriced. Casa Oaxaca, a classy B&B, had been recommended so we went there and it is indeed a wonderful place. They were fully booked so we gave them our name in the hopes that a cancellation would materialize, but it never did.

Emmanuel at the front desk turned out to be a great concierge; he answered every conceivable question we posed and there were many; he was invaluable and reliable in making restaurant recommendations. The inclusion of the buffet breakfast turned out to be a huge plus. It was the best breakfasts we had during the six weeks. The cook who made eggs for most of the guests also made quesadillas. We had one or two each morning. There was a choice of about twelve fillings including chapulines (fried grasshoppers), chorizo, pork, squash blossoms, tomato, huitlacoche, and several others. There was also a great selection of fresh tropical fruit. After a few days in Mexico we gave up on the dreadful coffee and switched to hot chocolate made with milk and theirs was very good.

I had planned for eleven nights in Oaxaca which is a long time to spend in any place; that number was too high for us in Rome. We seriously considered cutting three days off and spending them in Puebla, a Colonial city that we have heard great things about. It was Giovanni Rubio, our driver in Morelia, who convinced us not to change our plan. He reasoned that we had seen enough Colonial cities and that Oaxaca was a special place that warranted the time. The eleven nights was actually ten days and one of those days was spent driving to Santo Domingo de Tonalá to visit the relatives of the lady in Napa who does our house cleaning. That left nine days. Of the nine we spent four days in Oaxaca and five days outside of the city visiting archeological sites, artisan villages, and other towns of interest. Because the Oaxaca area is so rich in fine crafts and they are of great interest to us we needed the five days out of the city. If they don't interest you I would think that three or four days in Oaxaca would be adequate and one day for the archeological sights would be enough. For us the eleven nights turned out to be perfect and I am grateful that we did not change our plans.

One of the first things we did in Oaxaca was to go to the El Amate book store on Macedonia Alcalá, 307, a store owned by someone from Berkeley that stocks books in English and an extensive library on things Mexican. We bought a book called "Oaxaca Tips" by Carole Turkenik. It bore an amazing resemblance to the 2002 spiral bound edition of my Paris Guide. It was an absolutely invaluable and accurate guide to the museums, restaurants, and artisan shops and more. The edition was dated January 2005 and is the result of 35 years of living in Oaxaca. She took the guesswork out of so much that interested us. Don't visit Oaxaca without one.

Our first day was a Saturday which is the day of the huge Abastos Market. We spent the entire morning walking almost every aisle and the periphery of this massive place. It was colorful, interesting, and certainly different from many of the other markets we had visited. There is a large indigenous population here (although not as large as Chiapas) and that certainly added to the flavor. After lunch we visited two crafts stores that we got from the “Oaxaca Tips” book. One called “El Chiribitil” is a very small shop, but the selection of crafts was superb. When we returned at the end of our trip to buy a couple of items that we spotted at the first visit we were shocked at the number of people lined up to buy baby Jesus dolls and clothing such as capes and shoes, etc. There seemed to be a buying frenzy as people purchased these dolls and carried them out of the store in a blanket as though they were real babies. We were baffled, but realized two days later that what we saw was just two days before the holiday called Candelaria when these dolls are placed in alters and celebrations take place around the baby Jesus dolls. The other store we visited, “La Mano Mágica” which is a quite large and very upscale store with crafts representing the very best of what is available. Prices were high, but the quality of everything was the highest.

The heart of Oaxaca is the large and very attractive main square called the Zocalo. It is a constant hub of activity with musicians, mariachis, band concerts on Sunday, and very festive. We spent a lot of our Oaxaca time in and around the Zocalo.

Oaxaca has a very fine Ethnobotanic Garden that we were eager to visit considering our strong interest in plants. The English tour is usually given by Carole Turkenik, author of “Oaxaca Tips,” but she was ill so we took had to take the tour in Spanish because the only way to visit is to take the tour. The tour guide gave a long introduction in the hot sun so we could tell that this was not for us. We left the tour and saw all of the gardens on our own. The collection of plants, mostly cactus, and the architectural layout was one of the best we have ever seen. If a garden can be a work of art, this place certainly qualified. Two hours later we looked down on the garden from the Museum and saw the same tour guide with the same number of people standing in the sun. So if you take the Spanish tour be sure to sneak off after a few minutes; nobody seemed to care.

Next thing that morning was to visit the Iglesia de Santo Domingo, a very impressive church that is definitely worth a visit. Mexican churches are so much more alive, light, and colorful than other Catholic churches; visiting churches is not our favorite activity, but Mexican churches are different enough that the better ones are very worthwhile.

Right next door to the Church of Santo Domingo is the best museum in Oaxaca, the Museo Regional de Oaxaca; it is also called the Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca. It is a very fine museum in a great old building and the collection is fabulous. Seeing this museum is an absolute must.

In the afternoon of the same day we went to the Artesanía Market, the 20 de Noviembre Market, and the Benito Juárez Market. They were all worth visiting, especially for market people like us, but are tiny compared to the Saturday Abastos market. We noticed in Carole Turkenik’s book that she suggested visiting a store called “Ambar de Bernstein” so we did. I sort of expected to discover a Mexican Jew, but I remembered when we walked into the shop that Bernstein is the German word for amber. The owner is married to a German lady so he put the word Bernstein on his sign to help attract German tourists. He had some very nice amber pieces that he fabricated

and some particularly fine and expensive textiles from Chiapas. We quizzed him about Chiapas, our next destination, and he was very discouraging. He thought the place was very inhospitable to visit and he did not go there any more; he preferred to do his buying by phone or letter.

Our last stop of the day was another crafts shop. This is a large one named “Casa de las Artesania de Oaxaca. They had an excellent selection of clothing and other crafts at quite reasonable prices. The second best museum in Oaxaca has to be the Rufino Tamayo Museum of Prehispanic Art. The building and the collection are fabulous. It is small, but a real jewel. This should be on your mandatory visit list.

After that we went to three more museums and they all are quite skippable. They are the Oaxacan Museum of Contemporary Art, the Alvarez Bravo Photography Center, and the Juarez House Museum.

The band concert at the Zocalo on a Sunday started at 12:30 and featured a 70 piece band. Unfortunately it was an all classical music concert featuring Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, etc. Of course it is personal taste, but I would have preferred some stirring march music by Sousa. We stayed for most of the concert as it was a very pleasant scene and a good place for people watching.

For all of our out of town excursions we were extremely fortunate to find a wonderful taxi driver. His name is Maurilio Quiroz Perez; phone number is 51-13757 and the cell phone is 044-951-1001379. He only spoke Spanish. He is a fine, jovial, and knowledgeable grandfather who either knew all of the places we wanted to go or he found them. We recommend him very highly. His price was \$11 an hour for the first four hours and \$9 an hour for anything over four hours. On two of the days Maurilio substituted two of his sons in law; they were not as knowledgeable, but both were excellent drivers.

On Sunday there is a huge market in the town of Tlacolula. It was almost as large as the Saturday market in Oaxaca, but perhaps even more interesting, and Oaxaca’s was pretty great. There were a lot more crafts for sale. Picture taking at both markets was no problem. Although we guarded our valuables carefully we saw no evidence of suspicious behavior nor any incidents of pick pockets or purse slashers, etc. On the way to the market we went through the town of Tlacoachahuya so we stopped to visit the Templo y Exconvento de San Jeronimo with its beautiful 16<sup>th</sup> Century frescoed interior and an intact small cloister.

The next stop that Sunday was Teotitlan Del Valle, known for its hand woven rugs. Our driver suggested lunch at Tlamanalli which is a famous restaurant that Saveur magazine wrote up several years ago. It is run by a group of sisters. We had the special of the day which was from a pre-Hispanic recipe and the food was both unique and tasty. The guacamole was served with delicious thin blue corn chips. We were actually there twice, once for lunch and once to buy a ceramic vase that we could not find anywhere else; the place is also a crafts shop. Both times one of the sisters was grinding fresh corn by hand for a sauce that they put on the chicken.

After lunch we visited the home and studio of a master weaver named Maestro Isaac (Bug in the Rug) Vasquez. We got a demonstration of how the wool for the rugs is made into yarn and how the yarn is dyed using natural dyes. The work was beautiful, but quite expensive. After this visit

we went to the Women's Weaver's Coop (Cooperativa Mujeres Tejadores) and got a nice small rug for a third of the price of the Vasquez rugs. Next stop on the way back to Oaxaca was the town of El Tule which derives its fame from an enormous 2,000 year old Cyprus tree. This tree was really astounding in size and seemed to be in great condition. There was also a very nice colorful church in the town.

Another excursion started in the village of Atzompa, a ceramics town. Our first visit was to Irma Claudio Garcia Blanco, a ceramicist of considerable fame. She and her family were absolutely delightful and her work is quite special. It was a memorable visit as we got to see her working and talking at length about what she does. We restrained ourselves and got two medium size pieces and several small ones. Her pieces are expensive, but buying from her they were half or less than half the prices charged in galleries.

Our next stop, suggested by Sra. Garcia Blanco was to the home of Joël Velasco Lara and his wife Manuela Villanueva Vasquez. They are at Avenida Juarez, 110. We looked at his work which appeared to be very ordinary and were about to leave when he showed us his specialty which for want of a better term I would call filigreed clay on clay. The work is particularly fine and we bought five small pieces. Subsequently in other places when we saw this kind of work it was always his. He seems to have a unique specialty.

At the other end of the scale was a visit to Lourdes Garcia Gonzalez, a 74 year old woman at Independencia #202, pista 2 who, compared to Irma Blanco, was living in poverty. Her work was not nearly as fine, but it was nice so we bought a few small pieces. As with visits to almost all of the artisans we went to, the real joy was seeing how they lived and listening to them talk about their work. This is where knowing the language really helps.

We went back into Oaxaca for lunch at a place on the outskirts called Bajo el Cielo de Oaxaca on Avenida Ignacio Bernal. For the first time we had a "tlayuda" which is a huge crisp tortilla, a Oaxacan specialty. It came with three different kinds of meats, nopales, etc. and for the two of us with beer it was a \$10 lunch and we could not finish it.

After lunch we visited Monte Alban, a ruin that dates from the period from 100 BC to 300 AD. It was a fairly impressive place and the museum was even more so.

With all the buying we were doing it was time to find a company that could do packing and shipping for us. We looked at three places and decided on AR EEM at Independencia No. 500, Despacho 202 (second floor) in downtown Oaxaca. We dealt with Gerardo Manscal who spoke perfect English. They seemed competent. However, on arrival in Napa a few items were damaged and one was missing.

Another all day excursion took us first to the studio and home of the 85 year old master craftsman, Manuel Jiménez in Arrazola who is still carving alebrijes, the very whimsical and colorful wooden animal figures that are seen all over Mexico. One very gratifying thing that we found at virtually all of the crafts people we visited is that not only are the older people are still working, but their children and grandchildren are carrying on the tradition in fine style and maintaining the high quality of their teachers. After visiting five or six of the better artisans we returned to Armando Jiménez Aragón, a grandson of the 85 year old Manuel Jiménez and got a

couple of nice pieces. We also went back to Mario Castellanes González and got a few more.

That same day we went to the market in Zacchila which was nice, but not in the same league with Oaxaca, Tlacolula, or Ocotlan. There was a very colorful church in the town that we enjoyed visiting.

In the afternoon we had a fascinating visit to a Cochineal Farm called “Centro de Difusion Del Conocimiento de la Grana Cochinilla Tlapanochestli.” Cochineal is a small insect that grows on cactus and when crushed it makes a deep red color that is used in the dyeing of yarn. When other substances are added to the cochineal different colors are produced. It is also used widely in the food industry for color. The place we visited was a large cactus planting where they farm the cochineal. Seeing how the insects are farmed was one of those surprises that didn't sound interesting, but when we saw it we were quite amazed and impressed by the operation.

We then went to San Bartolo Coyotepec known for its black pottery which was developed by Doña Rosa who died in 1980. Her descendants have a huge showroom where we got a few representative small pieces. The pottery is very inexpensive there and prices soar as you get farther from the source.

Our last stop of the day was the town of San Martin Tilcajete, which along with Arrazola, is famous for its alebrijes. We had collected names of the best craftsmen from shops in Oaxaca, but when we found the studios several had nothing to sell. We ended up with a few small pieces from the famous Xuana family and one from Jesus Sosa Calvo. These people were all spread out at different locations in the village and we found them by just asking directions to their houses. Everybody knows everybody in these small pueblos. The main street of the town was lined with quite a few shops, but we ran out of time and went back another day.

Friday was market day in Ocotlan. Another huge and very colorful market that we really enjoyed. The most interesting part was the turkey market that was jammed solid with people buying and selling live turkeys. Beyond it was a market selling other live animals, but we missed it because we never got beyond the turkey market. In Ocotlan we went to the Templo de Santo Domingo, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century church that had been magnificently restored by contributions of the artist Rudolfo Morales. Then we visited Casa de Cultura Rudolfo Morales which was both the house of the recently deceased artist and a museum. The kitchen in the house was wonderful as was the rest of the house. We were not too fond of his paintings, but we loved the exhibition of his collages. We later learned that he started his very successful career as an artist doing collages and after a long absence returned to doing collages in the last two years of his life. They were absolutely wonderful.

Ocotlan is also famous as the home of the Aguilar sisters. They, and their descendants, do a certain type of ceramics seen all over Mexico. We got a three small items from Guillermina Aguilar who we thought had the most interesting work.

At the end of this long day we returned to San Martin Tilcajete and got some wonderful alebrijes from Zeny Fuentes and some more from other members of the Fuentes family. Visiting the Fuentes family and seeing how they lived was another nice experience.

Finally there is the town of Santo Tomas Jalietza that is famous for its woven belts, handbags, and other items. We were too late as most of the stalls had closed, but there was another very pretty church in the town to visit and the light was perfect as the sun was setting.

On our last excursion out of Oaxaca I had read about a place called San Marcos Tlapazola where there were a lot of women potters doing red pots. Our driver had never been there and it took forever to find the place driving on dirt roads. When we finally got there we found one surly lady who was open; she was selling very unremarkable red pottery. Definitely a place to avoid.

We then passed by the ruin of Yagul on our way to Mitla. Mitla is known for its very interesting patterns of stone work on its temple ruins. We confined our visit to the main temple which had the best preserved and most interesting work.

Our driver took us to a very nice place for lunch – Restaurante Rancho Zapata. We had a nice portion of chapulines (fried grasshoppers) that was served with tomato and onion and flamed in mescal. We also shared a tlayuda (that giant crisp Oaxacan tortilla) that had chorizo, pork, avocado, chicken, etc. With a dessert of crepes caramel and two beers it was a \$20 lunch.

Arlene had seen some pottery by Dolores Porrás at the Tlamanalli restaurant in Teotitlan Del Valle, but we never saw anything like it again so we went back and got a nice small vase. They had a large one, but it was not in good condition so we drove to Atzompa and visited the studio of Dolores Porrás. She is elderly and not in good health, but she is still productive and handles sales herself. She does everything including the packing of the very large vase that Arlene bought. Like the other places her descendants are carrying on the tradition in fine style and it was another interesting visit to an artisan's home and studio.

Finally to the subject of dining in Oaxaca. We had heard that the best food in Mexico was in Oaxaca, and based on our experience I would have to agree. The restaurant with the best reputation is El Naranjo. The woman owner had been written up in the New York Times, gives cooking classes, and has become sort of an institution. We had two dinners there and they were both excellent, but I do not agree that it is the best in the city; we found several that were better. Her specialty is taking traditional Mexican dishes and giving them a nouvelle twist. For example the "gazpacho de la casa" is a cold tomato soup with olive oil, garlic, vinegar, dried cucumber, avocado, Serrano chili, jicama and shredded fried tortillas. The "poblano relleno de flor de calabaza" was a chili poblano with zucchini blossoms, zucchini, corn and cheese in a puff pastry with a light tomato and almond sauce. These are just two examples of her creativity; interesting combinations that work very well. One night we had the chocolate nut torte and it was superb. On the table each time as a canapé were orange flavored butter with chili, chopped liver, and a nice salsa. Prices are reasonable. With a bottle of wine and my usual margarita our dinners ran \$65 and \$78. One disadvantage is that the latest reservation accepted is 8:45 and with our late schedule it was difficult to dine that early.

Our favorite restaurant was a seafood place called Marco Polo. The outdoor patio setting is wonderful with much greenery and shade from the trees creating a nice cool environment. We had three lunches there. Most unfortunately they are not open for dinner. For our first lunch we did not realize how large the portions were so we order far too much food. After a seafood cocktail we both had shrimp, mine baked in guajillo chilies and Arlene's with garlic. We

compounded the error by ordering a goat milk crepe with pecans which was probably the best dessert of the trip. Everything was fabulous. They have a large wood fired oven outside and “Oaxaca Tips” said that items baked in that oven were the best so everything I ordered was from the oven. The second time I ordered “Filete Verona” which was red snapper with corn, chile, peppers, shrimp and cheese. It is prepared in the kitchen, placed on foil, and the oven tender places it in the oven with a paddle like a pizza and pulls it out at precisely the right time so that the top of the dish is browned. My mouth is watering as I describe this dish. It was clearly the best dish of the trip and one of my all time favorites. When we returned the third time we both ordered the same dish. It was just as good as the first time. With a couple of beers and that same wonderful dessert our lunch was \$26.

According to “Oaxaca Tips” the leading restaurant is Casa Oaxaca (the B & B). We were eager to try it, but the latest reservation they will accept is 8:30 so it took till close to the end of our stay in Oaxaca to get there. The patio setting is quite beautiful. They have four fixed price menus, all for 350 pesos (\$32). There is a choice of four or seven courses and a choice of “international” or Mexican. We opted for the seven course Mexican. This is what we got:

Hoja Santa stuffed with corn fungus, beans and cheese with gaujillo chilies sauce. Excellent  
Frijole soup with tortilla, cheese, and avocado. Very good  
Segueza de fandango, toasted corn in a tomato and chili sauce with pork. Excellent  
Mole pipian with a variation of seeds with beef. Tough beef as usual.  
Prawns home style with crushed garlic. Excellent  
Black mole with turkey. Best mole yet.  
Three desserts. Good  
Hot chocolate for a beverage. Excellent  
A Cune Crianza Rioja 2001. Very good

With tip the bill was \$117. Our most expensive meal of the trip, but certainly one of the best.

We also had two dinners at Casa Oaxaca-El Restaurante. Both were excellent and it is an exceptional looking place. To get to the restaurant you walk through the Galeria Quetzalli, the nicest gallery we ran into in Oaxaca. It is the same ownership as the Casa Oaxaca B & B, but stays open much later and with and it has an la carte menu. I will spare the details, but everything we had was excellent. With a good Spanish wine our dinners averaged \$73. Terrific food for a very reasonable price.

Oaxaca is famous for its moles and there is no better introduction to them than a meal at Los Pacos. We went for lunch and they brought a tasting of six different moles, all very distinct and different from each other. I chose my three favorites, Negro, Colorado, and Chichilo for my pork dish. Arlene had her favorite, Negro with her chicken. With beer this interesting and educational lunch cost \$26; we had intended to return, but never got around to it.

Another favorite of ours is Catedral where we had two dinners. The first time we had the suckling pig (their specialty) with potatoes and Coloradito Mole and a chicken with Mole Negro. The suckling pig and the special kind of potatoes served with it was the star of the show. When we returned the second time we both ordered the suckling pig with the special potatoes, but with the Mole Negro which we preferred to the Coloradito. It was a great combination. Our dinners with a nice bottle of wine averaged \$72.

There were three places that we tried for dinner that I would not recommend. The first is Las Danzantes, an architectural gem, very hip, and stylish, but the food was very average. The second is a popular place on the Zocalo, El Asador Vasco; if you get a railing seat, as we did, you look down on the Zocalo activity, so the setting is terrific. But the food was below average. The third is Hosteria de Alcalá which is in the same building at the El Amate bookstore. It is not a very comfortable place and the food was just fair.

Oaxaca was clearly our favorite place during our six week visit, and for us the eleven nights was perfect. We were actually a little sad when Maurilio picked us up to go to the airport.

### **San Cristobal de las Casas**

It was with a lot of hesitation on my part that we included Chiapas in our itinerary. I had heard that it had been ruined by tourists, that it was unfriendly, and that the main reason to go is to see Palenque and perhaps Bonampak. Also it would make our trip a week longer and it was already quite long. Neither Mayan ruin held any interest for me because I had been to virtually every one except these two and I did not feel that it was necessary to go to all of them.

But we did plan a seven day visit. Another problem was to find a nice place to stay. The best option seemed to be the Casa Felipe Flores, a B & B with six rooms. It was very difficult to secure a reservation because the owners were not there every time I called, nor was the English speaking manager. Finally, by e-mail, I got the reservation and was quoted \$90 per night.

We landed in Tuxtla Gutierrez and were met by Guadalupe Hernandez. He did not speak English, but was a terrific driver and person and knew the area very well. He became our driver for the balance of our visit to San Cristobal and we heartily recommend him. Phone number is 678-4455. I had heard that there were two things of interest in or near Tuxtla Gutierrez. One was the zoo and the other was a boat trip on Sumidero Canyon. Guadalupe said that we had time for only one and we chose the zoo. The zoo had been recently remodeled so it was in great condition. The unique thing about this zoo is that it only had animals and birds from Chiapas State. Never in our lives have I ever seen so many species in a zoo that we had never seen before. The one that stands out more than others is the Tigrillo; it looked like a tiger, but it was tiny. But there were many more that were completely new to us. They also had a large male Black Jaguar who got up and walked back and forth in the very front of his enclosure so that we were about a foot from him. And he did not stop; quite thrilling to see this magnificent animal, the largest of the predators in the America, at such close range. There were countless other species that were new to us, such as some of the snakes. A very worthwhile experience; we spent over an hour and a half at the zoo which is a zoo record for us. It may have been the highlight of the trip to Chiapas for me.

Casa Felipe Flores was cold, the rooms were small, breakfast was a disaster, the owners were away until after our scheduled departure, and for other reasons it was not the right place for us. We had heard that the owners, retired Americans, were a great resource for what and how to see the area. The Manager, seldom there, was not a resource at all. The next morning we checked out of Casa Felipe Flores and moved to Casa Mexicana, a nice hotel more in the center of the town. But we had seen a great suite at the Hotel Espagnol-Holiday Inn. It became available the next day (suite 224) and the lady at the front desk let us have it for the price of a regular room which was only \$59. It was spacious, in a quiet location, and quite a bargain. The problem with both of these larger hotels is that they get a lot of large tour groups which cause quite a racket when they come

and go. The best bet might be the beautiful and well located Hotel Paraiso which has only sixteen rooms so they do not take large groups. The rooms are reputed to be small, and we could not see one because they were all occupied.

The two villages that everybody visits are Chamula and Zinacantan. At dinner one night we ran into a French couple who we had met at Casa Felipe Flores. They invited us to join them in their rented car the next morning for a visit to these two villages. Both of these villages are noted for the woven clothing that they make, and some of the work is very fine. But they have all kinds of rules about picture taking and seem only interested in getting money from tourists. The church in Chamula was quite a scene. There were literally thousands of candles on the floor that people had lit in a candle lighting ritual the likes of which we had never seen. Different sizes and shapes were carefully put on the floor and lit one by one. In front of the candles were bottles of Pepsi-Cola and other soft drinks that I can only presume were the drink reward once the candles were all lit and burned out. Zinacantan is a much wealthier town due to their large business of growing flowers in greenhouses. So it was much lower key and only had a fraction of the tourists.

San Cristobal is a nice town with a beautiful newly painted church exterior next to the Zocalo; the interior is not much to see. The Mercado Municipal is the main attraction, certainly for us, and we spent a lot of time there going up and down virtually every aisle. Almost all of the sellers are Indian women in native dress. It is a very colorful, lively, and interesting scene. But picture taking is out of the question unless you want to pay an exorbitant fee which is not something we were willing to do.

We visited the Santo Domingo church and its golden interior, and in part of the church is a shop called SNA Jolobil that sells weavings from many of the villages near San Cristobal. Prices were extraordinary, but the quality of the weaving was exceptionally fine. The place was full of Americans using their American Express cards. Outside the shop were a countless number of stalls selling primarily woven items and clothing, but the quality was not nearly as high.

The other big attraction is Casa Na-Bolom which is a museum and a B&B. It is on the edge of the center of town. The first time we went there it was too late so we looked at the unimpressive Jardin and the museum shop. We returned later and saw the place. Although it is a very nice place it was nothing remarkable. We got the feeling that it was basically a monument to the Blum's. They were anthropologists that were very active in attempting to save what remained of the Mayan culture.

There is an Ambar museum and a Jade Museum in San Cristobal. The Ambar museum is interesting, but it didn't really have anything much different than an Ambar shop in the city. The Jade museum was very impressive with some amazing reproductions.

Part of our time was spent searching for some metal sculptures that we had seen and liked in Oaxaca. After many blind alleys we finally found one welding shop that still produced them. The name of the place is Herreria y Forga Servicio Santiago. We made our purchase and finally found a place that would do packing and shipping called MultiPack located right next to the main bus station. The next day we took the five items there. It took hours while the guy packed them while waiting on other customers, but finally the task was completed and they were shipped. They arrived in fine condition.

Despite my misgivings we set out with a car and driver at 8:30 AM for Palenque. We got there at 1:00 PM and did our own tour of the ruins. We had been told that it was the most magical of the Mayan ruins, but for me there was no magic at all. Tikal, Chichen-Itza, Uxmal, Sayil, Labnah, etc. were so much more enjoyable. The place was littered with souvenir sellers with their junk spread out all over the place. In addition there were sellers pestering us at every monument. To compound the situation we constantly were running into that yellow tape that is normally put up at the scene of a crime. I did not enjoy it, am sorry that I went, and consider a big waste of time. To make things even worse the museum was closed for some undisclosed reason. After two hours we left and stopped at Aqua Azul which is certainly an impressive falls, but because of the overcast conditions the water was not the blue color we had heard raves about. The only saving thing is that we did not go to Bonampak which from everything I have read would have also been a big disappointment. We got back to the hotel at 7:40 PM so it was an eleven hour day. At least we did not waste more time by staying overnight at Palenque.

Through the lady at the front desk at the Holiday Inn we learned that there was a Carnival going on in the village of Tenejapa, famous for its very fine weaving, so we went there to see the festivities. As tourists we first had to get permission from the authorities to stay there. Then we had to pay \$18 for the privilege of taking pictures. Activity was just beginning when we got there. The men participating in the ritual were dressed in bright colors and wore elaborate hats decorated with streamers of multi-colored ribbons. Women who sat on the sidelines wore beautifully embroidered blouses and all had a large pot of chicha or agua guardiente, both distilled spirits, that they doled out to the participants and themselves. The men paraded or ran around chasing a figure dressed like a bull who represented the evil spirit. Often they stopped and drank. It seemed that the purpose was that everybody should have a sip from everybody else's vessel. I only saw one who was inebriated, but since this was going to go on for the entire day I would imagine that everybody would be pretty well smashed by the evening. It was very colorful and we enjoyed watching the activity for about an hour. It actually reminded both of us of a colorful festival that we saw in Bhutan.

There was a village crafts shop selling weavings of very high quality and at prices that were a fraction of the shop in San Cristobal. Arlene got a couple of purses of exceptional quality. There was nothing else to see in the village so we left for a ceramics village called Amatenango del Valle. The town was not interesting and the pottery was crude. We had heard that in the villages of Chamula and Zinacantan an Evangelical movement had taken hold and there were quite a number of converts to Evangelical Christianity. They were ousted from these villages and forced to move elsewhere. On the way to Amatenango we saw an area that was populated entirely by Evangelical outcasts from Chamula and a little further up the road was a settlement of those ousted from Zinacantan. Both places had quite a number of Evangelical churches, and between the two was a tiny Catholic church. This was the only interesting part of the trip to Amatenango.

The best restaurant we found in San Cristobal was El Eden which is located in the Hotel Paraiso that I mentioned earlier. After a couple of breakfast disasters we had the rest of our breakfasts there. Their chilaquiles were the best of the trip. They were served hot instead of lukewarm and they had a lot of chicken and cheese and a nice sauce. Their hot chocolate was also the best (except for Casa Oaxaca). We also had four of our six dinners at El Eden. Twice we had a dish called fondue bourgignonne. It was pieces of tender raw beef that you cooked in a pot of boiling olive oil and then you dipped it into any one of the eight sauces they presented. The sauces were

excellent and the beef was actually tasty and tender. It was terrific and we were ready for a break from Mexican food. They also served the biggest and most powerful margarita of the trip. We got one with two straws, but it could easily have served four. A terrific guacamole was served with the margarita and the chips were the best we found. With an excellent bottle of Spanish wine and a generous tip for the fine service our dinners were \$60 each night. We liked the place so much that we even had lunch there one day and it, too, was excellent.

We also had dinners at La Paloma and Fogón de Jovel, but they were not in the same class as El Eden. We had lunch at an organic vegetarian place called La Casa del Pan which reminded Arlene of Katmandu in the 70's; the food was good and the place was a kick. There is also a good place for lunch called Emiliano's Moustache that specializes in tacos. A taco in Mexico is not like the crispy ones we are used to in the U.S. Basically is a stir fried dish of ingredients that you chose; it is then served on a plate; tortillas (soft) are served with it and you fill the tortilla with the stir fry.

In six days we had exhausted the possibilities and decided to leave a day early for Zihuatanejo.

### **Zihuatanejo**

We thought that our trip should include one visit to a seaside resort. We intended to go the Puerto Escondido where a friend of ours is part owner of the best hotel, but the airplane departures were impossible. Something like a 6:00 AM departure and a 7:00 AM return or going through Mexico City which would have required an overnight in Mexico City. That early a departure or overnighing in Mexico is not my idea of vacation.

By reputation the best place in Zihuatanejo is La Casa Que Canta so we booked it for our last four nights in Mexico and got a substantial discount by using our Andrew Harper "Q Club" membership. Our rate was \$428 for a large suite whereas the rack rate is around \$600. With tax and the screwing you take on the exchange rate it comes to about \$500 per night. It is a small place with only 24 rooms so I started calling two days before our one day early arrival to make sure that they could accommodate us. It was a weekend and reservations were closed for the two days which struck me as odd for such a high priced place. When we arrived they did have a suite, but it was in the worst possible location. Out the left side windows was the dining room and out the front was one of the swimming pools; also the view of the bay was blocked by a coconut tree. It was the only room available as the place was completely full; the suite was number three. They moved us the next day to room number seven which was an even better room and the location was perfect. Very quiet and secluded with a fabulous view of Zihuatanejo Bay. The suite was very spacious, had a great bathroom, a large terrace, air conditioning, and every possible amenity imaginable. The place has two swimming pools, a fresh water and a salt water pool. We used only the salt water pool because it was very quiet and used by very few of the guests.

The best beach is Playa la Ropa and it was only a ten minute walk from our room. The design of La Casa Que Canta is really special. From our suite you could not see another unit. The architecture and the decoration are done in the best taste. In short it is one of the nicest places we have stayed. The only shortcoming was the service and the restaurant. We had dinner at the restaurant the first night. Instead of my usual margarita I ordered a special \$8.00 cocktail that supposedly had rum, vodka and apricot liquor plus juices. All I could taste was pineapple juice; \$8.00 is a lot of money for pineapple juice. I ordered red snapper (huachinango) that was

supposed to be served with pineapple and a chili sauce. There was a tiny amount of snapper and a lot of pineapple. The sauce came a full ten minutes after the fish was served. Arlene had mahi-mahi (dorado) and it was not much better. Service was poor and very slow. We went back for breakfast the next morning and we ordered our usual chilaquiles. Salsa Mexicana which is the combination of onion, tomato, and chili was served with every meal we had in Mexico, and if you finished it they always brought more; there was never a charge. It is just something that comes with the meal, like tortillas or bread and butter. They charged us for the salsa. We were stunned and had them remove it from the bill. Needless to say we never returned to the restaurant, even for breakfast.

There is not much to do in Zihuatenejo which was perfect for us after five plus weeks of traveling. We did go to the Museo Archeologico and the Central Market and took a tour of the artisan shops. We also took an excursion to Barra de Potosi which was a 35 ride by taxi. It has a nice beach with just a few people on it. There are quite a few restaurants facing the beach with a total seating capacity of about 2,000 but virtually nobody was there. There are also two small hotels. We heard it described as being like Zihuatenejo 40 or 50 years ago. We took a 30 minute boat ride up the fresh water lagoon which was fabulous. The birdlife was amazing. I am not a birder so I can't be too specific, but there were about four different varieties of pelicans, and there were herons, egrets, and many other species. They were all in great abundance and there were no houses on the shoreline. An absolutely beautiful experience.

Other than the aforementioned we spent our time writing, reading, swimming and taking it very easy. We had the rest of our breakfasts at Nueva Zelandia in "downtown" Zihuatenejo. They were all very good and reasonable. The papaya was exceptional; better than anything I ever had in Hawaii. The chilaquiles were terrific as was everything else we ordered there.

For lunches we tried a couple of places on Playa la Ropa. One was Rossy and the other was Il Gaviota; both overcooked the fish. The best was at a place on the waterfront in town called Serena Gorda; the red snapper and the mahi-mahi were perfectly done. Ixtapa is only eight kilometers from Zihuatenejo and is described by the locals as Little Miami Beach. We had heard that there was a very good Italian restaurant there so against our better judgment we went and had lunch at Beccofino. It was the most expensive lunch of the trip by far and the food was mediocre. But we had a nice view of the multi-million dollar yachts in the marina.

The second night we went to Kau-Kan for dinner; it is a five minute walk from our hotel. With the margarita they served a canapé which was a fish quesadilla. The carpaccio of mahi and the tuna rolls with bass tartare were both exceptionally good. The main course (which we split), a potato stuffed with plenty of lobster and shrimp, was also excellent. Arlene ordered chocolate pecan pie, also excellent and they even served a couple of petits fours. With a very nice bottle of Spanish wine our dinner was \$105. My notes say that it was overall perhaps the best meal of the trip; it was certainly one of the best. We went back our last night and ordered all different things. The first dinner was great and the second was mediocre. Guess we picked the best things the first time.

One of the two Relais & Chateaux in Mexico is Villa del Sol located on Playa la Ropa so we went for dinner. We had an excellent dinner there. Almost as good as the first one at Kau-Kan and the same price. Service was superb. We would have returned the next night, but they were having a

buffet. This is a very beautiful place, and might be an alternative to La Casa Que Canta as a place to stay. It is, however, even more expensive and during the high season you have to have breakfast and dinner there. We met a wonderful taxi driver, Efrain Mendoza, telephone number 55-44025 who can take you to Barra de Potosi or a place like Troncones which is close by and not nearly as populated as Zihuatenejo.

The other dinner was at the most popular place in town, the American owned and operated Coconuts which has been there for about 25 years. We had an excellent dinner there and the price was very reasonable and the service excellent. It is a very nice patio setting with many trees. My only complaint is that the chairs are the most ill-designed I have seen; they were very uncomfortable. It was almost full at dinner. We went back for lunch the last day and it was almost empty, but the food again was terrific.

Our nonstop flight to San Francisco on Alaska Airlines was right on time. The plane was about two-thirds full but for some reason the entire exit row was empty. We moved into three of the seats in that row which had loads of leg room. We could have had all six.

### **Conclusion**

Zihuatenejo was the perfect place to end our long trip. It gave us a chance to make the transition from very active traveling to going home. I am really happy that we made the trip. Every part of it with the possible exception of Chiapas was very enjoyable. Mexico does have some problems which I would sum up as *basura*, graffiti and *topes*. The roads have a lot of garbage on them despite thousands of signs saying “*no tocar basura*.” There are so many of these signs that they, too, could be classified as garbage. The amount of graffiti on the buildings is horrendous. Almost every building in almost every neighborhood had some graffiti. The only buildings to escape were the churches and I even saw some on a few of them. *Topes* are speed bumps and their number of them is absolutely ridiculous. Our driver to Palenque said that the first 80 kilometers had 136 of them and I would not argue with that figure. The *topes* made a two hour trip a four hour journey. The vandals that spread the graffiti should divert their efforts to removing the *topes* and then two of the three problems would be solved.

I can't say enough about the people. They were friendly, warm, and wonderful everywhere. It is a very colorful place with great artisans and some beautifully preserved 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century architecture.