

Oaxaca, the Enchanted City

Written by Bob and Amy Niederhauser of COSAS

Driving up the new super highway between Puebla and Oaxaca is the beginning of the magic. As the road winds its way through the mountains, you find yourself above the clouds. Below in the valleys, herds of sheep, goats and cattle are escorted by a lone shepherd and his dog. The serenity gives way to jagged green rocks that form the scars from the cuts through the mountains that form the road.



As the road flattens out, you enter the bustling city of Oaxaca, about 200 miles south of Mexico City.

The state has one of the poorest economies in the country, but is one of the richest in culture. It is a colonial city with stunning churches and amazing museums, there are important archeological sites nearby, and a wealth of markets. Oaxaca is an authentic city and a Zapotec Indian city.

Over the past couple of years, Oaxaca has gotten some bad press due to what began as a teachers strike. The strike gave way to protesters who joined from various factions fighting for indigenous rights. Some of the protests turned violent and much of the center of the city was both occupied and defaced. Finally the authorities came in and established calm. Tourism was badly hurt as a result. Today, Oaxaca is safe and tranquil. The city has been cleaned up, shops have reopened and its' spirit renewed. Tourism has started to pick up, mostly by European visitors.

Oaxaca offers many lodging options. The famed five star Camino Real is a renovated convent built in 1576 and sits on the main walk street in the center of town. The myriad of Bed and Breakfasts are often adorned with the wonderful textiles and whimsical folk art of the area. We've had great experiences with some of the B&Bs. And, there are numerous smaller hotels that offer something for every traveler.



The "Zócalo" or main plaza in the center of the city was recently renovated and is host to beautiful gardens and towering trees. It is surrounded by restaurants with patios filled with families feasting and those who come for some great people watching. The cuisine of Oaxaca is mouth-watering. Mole and a myriad of special sauces made with delicious chiles and spices native to the region abound. Chocolate is famous. The atmosphere in the Zócalo is alive with marimbas, opera singers and other street entertainers, young couples arm in arm and vendors selling brightly colored baskets and balloons. What a magical way to spend an afternoon.



The city is also filled with glorious galleries and markets all within walking distance of the Zócalo. Oaxaca has produced some of Mexico's greatest artists including Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo. Today it is famous for its' art schools and there are many talented, young and interesting artists hard at work. Much of their work is accessible and affordable. Open air markets are filled with colorful crafts, aromatic chocolates, exotic tropical birds, freshly picked produce and flowers, leather crafts and just about anything you can imagine.

No trip to Oaxaca would be complete without some time spent exploring a few of the dozens of villages within less than a 30 mile radius. Many of these small towns specialize in a particular art tradition and families have spent generations becoming known for particular items. Artisans weave together rich tradition with creativity and fantasy to produce some of the most exciting folk art in Mexico.

Villages specialize in certain techniques including hand carved and brightly colored painted wooden animals and "alebrijes" or monsters; the famous black pottery from Coyotepec; the well known Aguilar sisters and their families who make painted clay figures; the amazing weavers from Teotitlan del Valle known for their natural dyed wool woven into gorgeous rugs; the families of Atzompa who specialize in natural clay figures and animals, incredible items of punched tin – the list goes on and on.

There are so many choices of things to see and do in Oaxaca, it could take weeks to soak it all in. Whatever you decide, you're sure to have a richly cultural experience and be embraced by the kindness of the people and uplifted by the spiritual nature of the city.

