

Photo Gallery of Mexico: Oaxaca, Mont Alban, San Miguel de Allende

Posted At : November 13, 2004 11:13 AM | Posted By : Steven Erat

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What follows is an excerpt from a personal letter to a friend in Spain, made shortly after my return home from Mexico:

[August, 1999] For my trip to the south of Mexico I used the budget travel guide "Let's Go". When I arrived at the airport in Mexico City, I found that my luggage was lost, but I was so tired that I was having difficulty thinking& even in English! That night I went to a hotel where my reservations were made one week in advance and a clerk at the desk told me that I did not have a reservation. He denied that that I paid money, and told me that there was another hotel across the street. After some arguing, someone helped me out. The clerk finally returned my money, 130 Pesos and I left. It was clear that this clerk was lying and wanted to keep my money, and he immediately rented the room to someone else.



I telephoned for a taxi to a different hotel and the ride went through what seemed to be a rather dangerous neighborhood. There were several prostitutes on most corners, people appeared to be drunk or on drugs in the street, a couple groups of large dogs running in the streets and digging in trash, and there were occasionally fires in the streets for people to keep warm. This seemed to be a fairly run down neighborhood, and I was happy to leave it quickly.

The next day I went to the airport, and to retrieve my bags and then took a taxi to one of the major bus terminals. In Mexico city they say you never get a strange taxi on the street. Always buy a ticket in advance from inside the airport or inside a station, or call for a taxi. Supposedly if you wave to a taxi on the street, you may be robbed or kidnapped. I've heard several stories of this, and I believe it. The parts of Mexico City that I travelled through were mostly crowded, polluted, ugly, and poor. I was happy to leave the city on my bus from TAPO (terminal de autobus), the eastern bus station.

From there I travelled six hours by bus towards the south, through some high mountains, perhaps 3000 meters, until I arrived at the town of Oaxaca. On long bus rides, it's common for the driver to stop and let a vendor come in to sell a product (cassettes, drinks, books, candy?) to the people. I believe the driver must have a deal with these people, and that he probably receives a small commission from the sales. Usually only one or two people buy something. These buses often show movies, and they all seemed to be of low quality, including one old black and white show on Stalin.

The mountains of southern Mexico are really quite beautiful, much like the mountains

of Denver, Colorado. The town of Oaxaca is in the state of Oaxaca, and is north of the state of Chiapas. Due to Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, there is a strong military influence in the southern states. It was common to see soldiers with rifles and helmets guarding the road at checkpoints and toll areas. And at small gas stations and stores it was common to see private police carrying automatic rifles. Sometimes during the bus rides, the bus is stopped and the military enters the bus to inspect the passengers. Usually they walk to the back and then return to the front and leave.

In Oaxaca I stayed at a hotel called Casa Arnel. It was owned by a family who worked there, and it appeared popular with American and European tourists. In Mexico the houses, restaurants, and stores usually each have a tall, stone wall around the place, like a barrier. When you enter the walls through a large double door, there is often a courtyard inside. Casa Arnel has a beautiful courtyard inside it, like a jungle with many trees and plants and with many parrots in cages. There is a dining area outside, and also terraces to have drinks or sit and talk. In the mornings it was common to hear people outside calling the names of 'hielo !', or 'naranjas !' or something that they were selling while they walked.

Many Mexican towns have a town center called the zocalo, and in Oaxaca the zocalo is near the Catedral de Oaxaca. It's easy to walk in the city where the zocalo is only 2km from Casa Arnel. In the zocalo there are vendors selling everything from rugs to shirts to hats to candy to burritos, as well as jewelry, pottery, hammocks, and cassettes that cost only 10 pesos.

During my time in Oaxaca I visited Mont Alban, an important Zapotec historical site. There was a dominant culture in southern Mexico that began over 2000 years ago. These people were mixed between Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Mayans. Mont Alban is built on top of a mountain where the top has been sheered flat. The buildings and small pyramids were constructed in a geometric organization and oriented in the directions of north, south, east, and west. There are tunnels in the buildings, and fields to play pelota, and many Zapotec petroglyphs lying about. It was like being in a church without a ceiling.

Another day I visited El Arbol Tule, the Tule Tree. This is reportedly the widest tree in the world at 52 meters in circumference. It was an impressive tree. It was more like a wall than a tree. This tree is more than 2000 years old, and it is reported to be the place where the King Montezuma was killed and burned.



Eventually I took a long bus ride back to Mexico City. From there, I immediately caught a second bus to the village of Queretaro, a couple hours north of Mexico City, but only to spend the night before moving on to San Miguel de Allende. That night I stayed in a cheap hotel in a room called a sencillo. At the door they gave me a roll of toilet paper, a towel, and a bar of soap, and told me my room was on the third floor. The door did not have a lock, the toilet did not have a seat, there was no hot water. The bed cover had a large hole in it, but the sheets were clean. The room was painted a bright yellow with brown, and the bed appeared to have a headboard, but it was not real.... just painted on the wall to look real. It was a clean place, and I was able to sleep, although with a chair propped against the door.

In the short time I had, I strolled Queretaro with my backpack, and went to the

Mirador which overlooks a valley containing an historic roman aqueduct bringing water to the city. Later I took a local bus from the zocalo to the ETN bus terminal and continued to San Miguel de Allende, about an hour north of Queretaro.

San Miguel is only one hour north from Queretaro, a total of four hours north of Mexico City. It has a strong American influence in the town, but not too much. There were more tourists than in Oaxaca. The city has a magnificent cathedral next to the zocalo and jardin with many expensive stores selling souvenirs from the local artisans. Still it's possible to bargain with them to drive the price down, but I'm sure the locals are much better at this than me.

San Miguel is a beautiful place. Many if not all of the buildings are painted in bright blue, orange, yellow, or dark red with large blocks of solid colors. Its like walking inside a painting. The streets are cobbled and narrow. They have sidewalks though, which allows you to escape walking next to the cars. The city has a rich culture with many places focusing on art, on musical performance like flamenco and the symphony, and on handmade crafts.

I stayed at the International Youth Hostel, which was only 50 pesos each night. It seem quite popular, with many young tourists leading to interesting conversations over dinner. In the morning there was free breakfast including coffee or tea, bread, butter, and jelly, and also fruits like oranges and bananas. It was required to do a little job every morning like sweeping or washing dishes, usually only about 15 minutes of work. This way the hostel is inexpensive because the residents clean the place each day. Most travelers were from the USA or from the UK. One night we had a person who was working for a human-rights organization called SIPAZ. She told us her opinions about the problem with the rebels in Chiapas and the Mexican PRI. For more than two hours she told her story to a table full of people, and we all listened with great interest.

While there I took a short bus ride to a hot spring called La Gruta. It cost 40 pesos to enter, and 8 pesos for the bus to get there. It was a beautiful pool of glimmering blue water. It wasn't really crowded, just a few people soaking in the water and a couple children playing. The pool is surrounded by a natural rock wall with many flowers, plants and trees hanging over. At the far end of the pool there is a tunnel, which is quite long. Entering the tunnel, the other side cannot be seen. There is a feeling of warmth and thick vapor floating in the air. As you continue in the tunnel, the bright light behind you makes it difficult to see ahead. Eventually, you come to the end, and after climbing a small step in the water, you enter a circular cave with heavy steam above the water. In the center of the dark room is a pole, supporting the ceiling where some people like to sit in the hot water with only the heads above the water. On one wall is a churro or cascade of water that falls from up high. You can stand in the water and let it massage your back or neck. It feels just wonderful with the strong push of the water on your skin.

After a few days, I left San Miguel to return to Mexico City. Again I took a small luxury-class bus, ETN, that was extremely comfortable and had service like an airline with food and drinks, and good movies dubbed in Spanish. The drivers came back to introduce themselves and greet the passengers. The cost was twice as much as regular bus lines, but still cheap at just 200 pesos or about 20 dollars.

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