

Welcome



by DONNA LAUREN GOLD

Wintering
in a
Mexican
city of
warm
wishes
and
colorful
dreams

It takes something from the heart to speak its name. Pronounced wa-HAH-ka, the word cannot be said without a catching of the breath, as if Oaxaca were the name of a loved one.

And perhaps it is.

I was 14 when I first visited Oaxaca. Nights were often spent circling the tree-shaded *zócalo*, or central plaza, with other young women. I remember the air thick with the perfume of flowers and my ears ringing with the song of a hundred birds.

Then, from a high, central kiosk, a brass band flourished to a start. While the musicians alternated between Sousa marches and Mexican ballads, young men walking in the opposite direction would stop us, wanting to join our promenade. We accepted their offers of gardenias and roses, but shunned so much as a linking of arms, lest rumors of an impending engagement should fly. At 14, I was in love—

not with any one young man, but with the entire town.

Twenty years later the band still plays in the canopied, perfumed square and children still run along its paths, carrying baskets with nosegays for sale. Only the ritual stroll is gone. Times have changed, and today's young *novios* feel free to walk together as couples—even without a chaperone.

Set in a brooding mountain valley less than an hour's plane ride south of Mexico City, Oaxaca is a town whose walls are as likely to be decorated with bows and banners as with flowers and fountains.

At Christmastime, when the dry weather has burned the green off the mountains, the town itself overflows with color. Mexicans and tourists alike flock to the *zócalo* to buy luck for the coming year. Oaxacan luck costs no more than the price of a *buñuelo* sold at stands erected for the season. After eating the crisp tortilla covered with honey, revelers make a wish and toss the bowls onto the street. The *zócalo* rings with the shattering of crockery.

The Christmas season begins on December 18 with a cascade of fireworks in celebration of the birthday of Oaxaca's patron saint, the Virgin of *La Soledad* (Solitude). On December 23 comes Oaxaca's famous *Noche de los Rábanos* (Night of the Radishes), when farmers display the long red roots that they have carved into devils and angels, fantastic flowers, market and nativity scenes. The next night, Christmas Eve, children dressed as angels and shepherds, Josephs and Marys, join a parade of *crèches*. As the lantern-lit procession circles the *zócalo*, glorious hand-held spinning fireworks burst forth.

Oaxaca is a layered city, much like its own thickly painted, often crumbling walls that crack to reveal years of colors and the brown mortared-adobe bricks that form their base. In Oaxaca era upon era of history and culture coexist, equally alive, visible and potent, each layer in itself sufficient to lure a visitor.

The city, capital of the State of Oaxaca, was built just after the Spanish conquest in the

to Oaxaca

17th century. Thus, much of its architecture lends a colonial air, but it is surrounded by the ruins of the great religious centers of the Zapotec and Mixtec cultures that dominated the region long before Europeans came or conquered. Most famous among these is Monte Albán, a religious city that is only a half hour's drive from Oaxaca up a dizzily winding road. The site is as spectacular for its pyramids as for its vistas. And all visitors marvel at the fact that these huge stone structures, begun 2,500 years ago, were built on a mountaintop before the invention of the wheel.

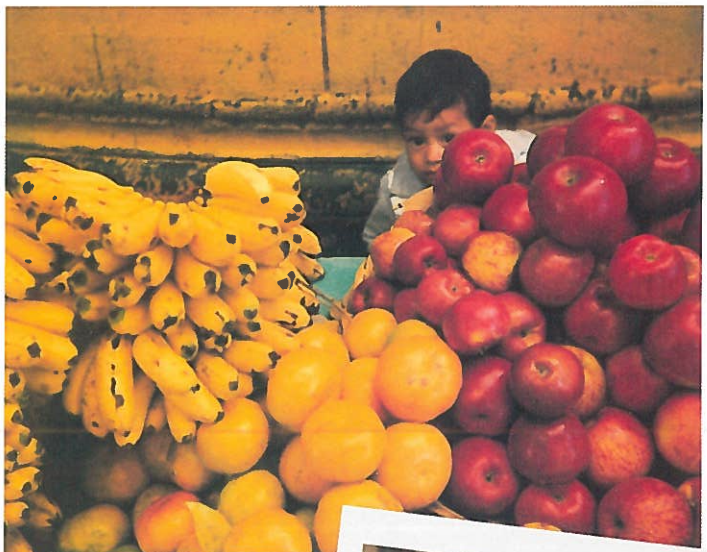
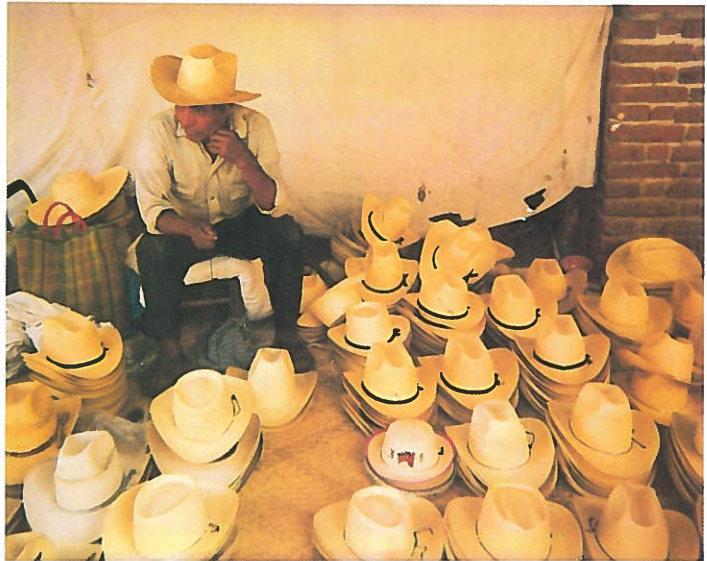
Coat of Many Cultures

Today Oaxaca is rich in culture, arts, and warmth, but economically poor. While Zapotecs and Mixtecs still make up most of the rural population, there are more than a dozen other indigenous cultures and languages in the state. Although most of these people depend upon agriculture for their subsistence, the Oaxacans also produce crafts, many of them of great beauty: woven blankets, pottery, embroidered blouses and dresses, tinware, wooden sculptures, baskets, sandals, toys, and more.

It is a city whose grace and enthusiasm nourished Rufino Tamayo, one of Mexico's most renowned painters. Its beauty has also drawn numerous foreign artists and writers, including D. H. Lawrence.

In fact, Oaxaca is so rich in culture, both formal and informal, that a visitor wants to see everything, be everywhere, buy everything. But it is better to be a little like the Oaxacans: Take it slow, feel it first.

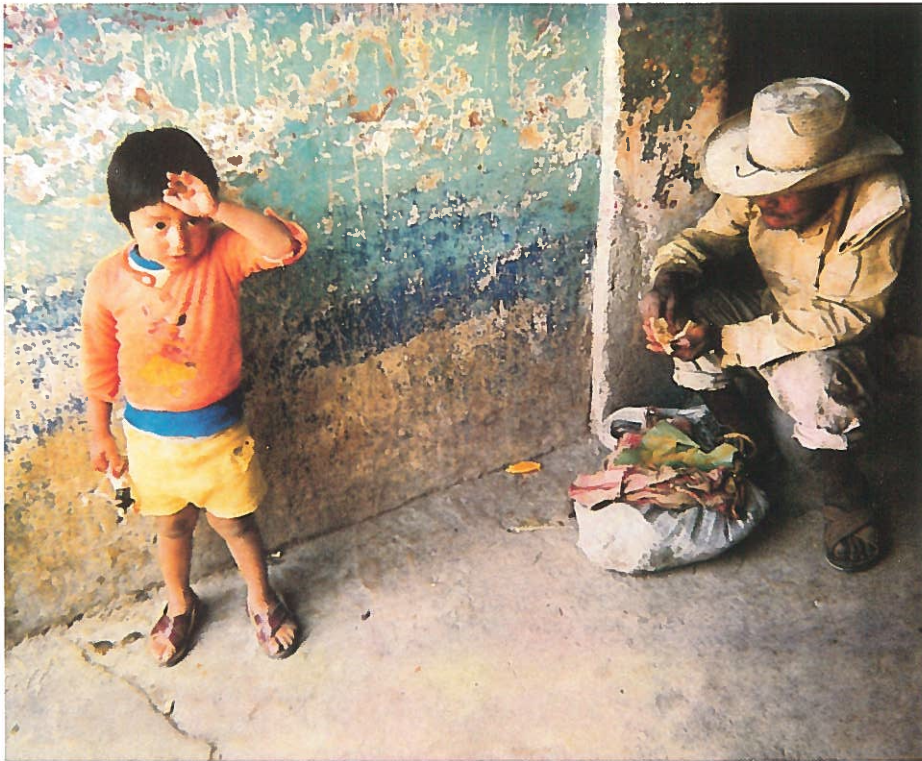
Because Oaxaca is a city that charms through its details, its streets invite walking. Maps are readily available in hotels, and Oaxacans are friendly and happy to give directions. One day I strolled down the old cobblestoned streets to the Pan American Highway, about 20 minutes from the center of town. The windows of the thick-walled houses are shielded by elaborate wrought ironwork. Although the red, yellow, and turquoise walls are high and protective, it is possible to peek through doorways into gardens that resemble miniature



ALL PHOTOS TAKEN WITH SPECTRA SYSTEM CAMERA

Oaxacans make wonderful photo subjects (opposite page), but visitors should always ask permission before taking pictures. The market (top and above) is a great place to seek interesting faces as well as colorful compositions, such as award-winning photographer William Albert Allard's little pyramids of limes (right).





water jars, food, herbal medications, and religious ornaments.

In Saturday's bustling Oaxaca market, there are bright red rows of tomatoes piled in peaks on the ground, fragrant green rows of mangoes, rows of deep burlap bags filled with red-brown chiles, an entire section of fabrics folded in the blistering sun, and brightly colored

rows of plastic cans, bags, jars, and buckets.

The women behind the tomatoes and peppers are all wearing the same pink and green blouses. When asked, they tell me they come from San Bartolo Soyaltepec, a mountain village some 100 kilometers away. Behind the piles of pink shrimp is a group of women wearing dark, almost sleeveless blouses. I recognize them as Tehuanas, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, an area renowned for its female-controlled marketplaces.

Market Memories

The women in their bright regional garb make excellent photo subjects, but a visitor must always ask permission before taking a picture; many Oaxacans don't like having their pictures made, for they don't know what will become of the image once it is taken away. On previous visits, I took photographs stealthily, using a telephoto lens, and felt guilty for my deception. With a Polaroid camera I walk right up to people in the markets and ask:

"*Quiere usted un foto?*" (Would you like a photo?)

"*Esta es una cámara instantánea, yo puedo sacar dos fotos, y regalarse uno.*" (This camera is instant. I can take two pictures, and give you one.) Even in sign language, the message will get across.

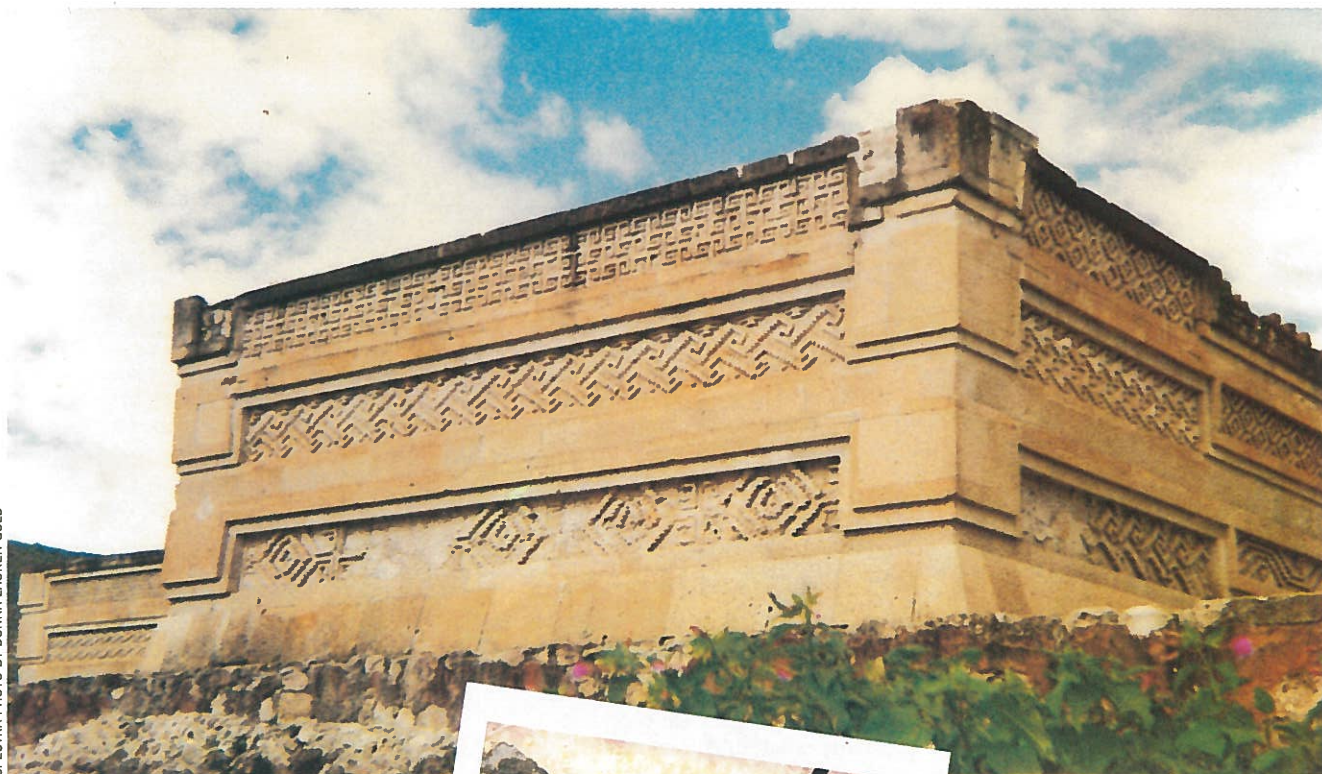
No sooner had one photo subject begun to rearrange her shawl and wipe her child's face than she and I would be surrounded. Three more people—groups of little girls, fathers, mothers, older brothers—would beg for a picture of themselves, their friends, their

Edens. Even if no doors open, flowering vines pour over the red-tiled roofs, sending pink petals onto the streets below.

On another day, I walked through the zocalo—quiet in the morning hours—then sat for a cup of Oaxaca's frothy cinnamon-spiked chocolate at one of the outdoor cafés surrounding the plaza, to relax a bit before going to the market. Oaxaca now has two major markets, the old one, Mercado Benito Juárez, behind the zocalo and the new, Central de Abastos, both are bulging on this Saturday, Oaxaca's market day. There are also neighborhood markets, and

weekly markets in many of the surrounding villages: Tlacolula on Sunday, Etila on Wednesday, Zaachila on Thursday, Ocotlán on Friday. Each is different, but each is a clear window into Mexico, a setting where a foreigner can become a part of a lively spectacle, a theatrical display of life through its necessities: bedsteads, grinding stones, toothpaste,





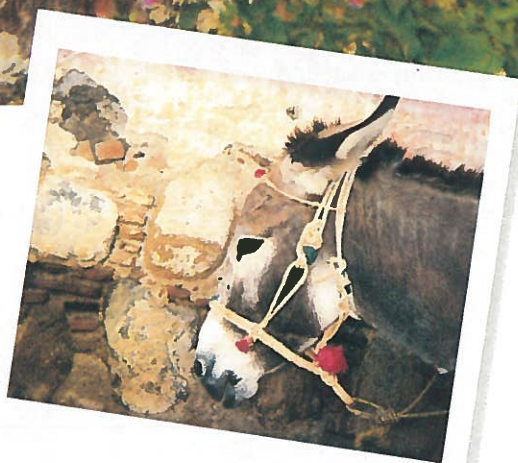
daughters, sons, brothers, and sisters. And suddenly, I, who had been only an observer of the marketplace, become a part of it. Even more important, I, who have received so much from these people, am able to give something back. Bringing instant photography to a place like Oaxaca is like bringing a never-ending source of gifts to distribute.

Village People

Oaxaca's markets are a great place to get a feel for the culture, but most of the items that visitors will want to buy—Oaxaca's famous wooden animals, black pottery, clay figurines, tinware, serapes, and embroidered dresses—are sold in stores near the markets; in the center of town along Garcia Vigil and the pedestrian street, Macedonio Alcalá; and in "crafts villages" outside of town.

But the craftspeople are generally quite open, and are often pleased to share their work with interested, respectful visitors. One of my favorites is Aaron Vasco, whose workshop is just past the Pan American Highway, where Garcia Vigil becomes José Lopez Alavez (in Oaxaca, one street can have many names). Up a flight of stone stairs, the metal-smith makes gaily painted tin hangings of animals and birds, boats and suns, in a manner learned from his father, who learned it from his father.

But the tinwear only buys time for his own work, the creation of delicate miniatures,



Monuments like the ruins at Mitla (top) make memorable pictures, but so do a city's smaller details, like its niños and niñas (opposite page, top and bottom) and even a little burro (above), framed against a picturesquely peeling wall.

such as trees with birds hanging in spiraling branches. While I look at his work, Vasco uses huge metal shears to cut a delicate half-inch bird with a heart in its beak from a sheet of tin. It is his gift to me.

I also enjoyed visiting Josephina and Irena Aguilar Alcante, sisters with sweet, ringing voices who live in the village of San Antonino, just past Ocotlán, less than 20 miles south of Oaxaca. Josephina and Irena make very fine embroidered dresses whose shirred bodices form elaborate designs. It is always a joy to feel these crisp blue-white cotton dresses that smell of the sun while looking at the gardens embroidered on their yokes.

Not all artisans in all villages are as friendly, but many do open their work spaces to visitors. Some, like the black-clay potters of Coyotopec, or the serape weavers of Teotitlán del Valle, will give demonstrations for groups of travelers. Although these visits lack intimacy, it is fascinating to watch a pot come to life on a hand-powered wheel, or to see a 14-year-old weave rich, colorful yarns into a woolen serape.

In fact, I don't think it's possible to know Oaxaca without going to the villages, where the smell of wood fires heating clay stoves peppers the air, and the crowing of roosters punctuates the steady, muffled slaps of women patting tortillas into shape. The villages are small and all within an hour's drive of Oaxaca,



The Spectra images of your vacation are a lasting record of the color and texture of a distant place. Take the time to compose them properly, as Allard did when photographing this Oaxacan woman (above) and little girl (below).



so even with just the name of a particular wood-carver, or a weaver, or a potter, it is usually simple to take a taxi from a Oaxaca hotel and get directions once in the village. Hotels will organize small groups and arrange for a taxi.

One day, I went with one such group to the weaving village of Teotitlán in the morning and the ruins at Mitla in the afternoon. Zapotec priests once lived within the intricate stone mosaic walls of Mitla, still in use after the conquest—until the Spaniards erected their church at one edge of the site, taking some of Mitla's mosaics for the church's walls. My fellow travelers and I lunched in the lovely colonial courtyard at *La Sorpresa*, Mitla's restaurant/museum that serves excellent, inexpensive food.

On our way back we stopped at Yagul, a smaller ruin that once was a fortress. Although it lacks the majesty of Monte Albán and the detailed mosaics of Mitla, Yagul is strategically situated and less crowded than the other ruins. Here I was able to breathe a bit of the ancient air and feel some of the chill of standing in a Zapotec religious center.

On the eve of the New Year I returned to Mitla. There, on a little hill just outside the town, the rural Zapotecs present their wishes for the coming year. Those wanting land draw a rectangle in the soil; those wanting a husband stop at the market to buy a miniature plastic man—yellow, green, or blue. I bought a little straw house with brown grass laid over its roof and set it on a square of dirt. My friend bought a little man. As the year slipped away we sat, with a candle beside my house and my friend's little man and waited with hundreds of black-shawled Oaxacans for the new year to fulfill our dreams. □

Donna Lauren Gold would like to take her Spectra system camera to Oaxaca every New Year's Eve.

A Brief Guide to Oaxaca

Oaxaca is hard to pronounce, but not hard to visit. American Airlines flies regularly from most major U.S. cities to Mexico City; from there it's a 50-minute flight to Oaxaca via Mexicana Airlines.

The city has surprisingly good hotels, and with the current rate of exchange, the most luxurious room in town will not cost more than \$40 a night. Our favorites are the *El Presidente Oaxaca* (Cinco de Mayo 300; 6-0611), conveniently located near the center of town in a restored 16th-century convent; *Misión de Los Angeles* hotel (Calzada Porfirio Diaz 102; 5-1500), more resort-style, with tennis and fronton (jai alai) courts, and a swimming pool; *San Felipe Misión* hotel (San Felipe de Agua; 5-0100) and *Victoria* hotel (Km. 545 off Route 290; 5-2633), each a few miles out of town, both with pools, tennis, and great views.

Oaxaca's regional cuisine is delicious and can be sampled at such restaurants as *El Asador Vasco* (on the zocalo) and *Mi Casita* (Hidalgo 616). The restaurant at the Victoria hotel reportedly serves excellent continental cuisine, and *El Sol y La Luna* (Murguía 105) is a coffeehouse that offers pizzas, pastas, and salads. *Catedral* (García Vigil and Av. Morelos) has wonderful steaks and regional dishes.

For Oaxaca's legendary crafts, visit the appropriate villages, or in town, *Yalalag* (M. Alcalá 204), a shop that sells the best that Mexico has to offer, at accordingly high prices; *El Arte Oaxaqueño* (Mina and J. P. García), for wonderful carved wooden figurines; and *Ariño* (García Vigil) for various crafts. In addition to the crafts villages already mentioned, there are Teotitlán del Valle for serapes, Atzompa for green pottery, and San Bartolo de Coyotopec for the famous black pottery of Oaxaca. Tlacolula is the place to go to sample and purchase mescal, the potent local beverage.

Oaxaca has two good museums: the *Rufino Tamayo Museum of Pre-Hispanic Art* (Morelos 503) and the *Regional Museum of Oaxaca* (Calle M. Alcalá).