The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico
July 2025
Issue 149
FREE

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The Magic of Oaxaca Unveiled:
Books to Start a Journey of Discovery

A Land in Between:
The Istmo de Tehuantepec

Guelaguetza 2025
A Dance of Generosity and Identity

And more....

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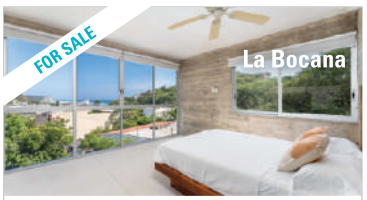

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Editor's Letter

"Oaxaca lo tiene todo: historia, geografía, arte, cultura y, sobre todo, alma."
"Oaxaca has everything: history, geography, art, culture, and above all, soul."

Andrés Henestrosa (1906–2008) was a Mexican writer, poet, and politician from Oaxaca, known for his work in preserving and promoting Zapotec culture and language. In addition to his contributions to indigenous linguistics, he was widely respected for his humanitarian work and lifelong commitment to education and cultural inclusion.

I love when two unrelated events cross paths and open a new window of thought. As I sat hunkered down in Huatulco, watching heavy rains fill normally dry canals, and reading the usual online buzz of neighbors checking in and sharing photos of Hurricane Erick, I came across a headline: the U.S. had bombed Iran.

And it struck me - this strange parallel between the violence of nature and the violence of humanity.

The storm had a rhythm. The wind shook the trees, the water rose, the power blinked. But nature's violence, even in its ferocity, seemed to have a purpose. I came across an article listing the benefits of hurricanes—how they redistribute heat from the tropics, bring rainfall to dry areas, churn the oceans and shake up stagnation. Nature's destruction has intention. It clears paths. It forces growth. It renews.

But what is the purpose of our violence?
Bombs don't bring rain. They don't shift tectonic plates in a way that nourishes. They don't rebalance ecosystems. They just kill. They divide. They reinforce walls that were never there in the natural world—Democrat, conservative, Palestinian, Israeli, Muslim, Jew, Christian. So many labels. So many reasons to separate. So many flags we wave while our homes flood and our forests burn.

Nature's violence may be terrifying, but it's not senseless.
Ours usually is. What would it look like to just be? To step away from the performance of identity and instead be guided by one simple principle to do the least amount of harm. To each other. To ourselves. To the planet.

That kind of thinking doesn't fit easily into a political agenda, especially when war is more profitable than peace and we have had it drummed into us that amassing money, points, clothes made by little hands in developing countries far away, is the point of all this. But that is a lie.

This month our readers explore the regions of Oaxaca reflecting on their beauty and diversity. I am so grateful to the people here who don't need a crisis to be reminded of what matters. History has never been peaceful, maybe it's time to try something different.

Jane

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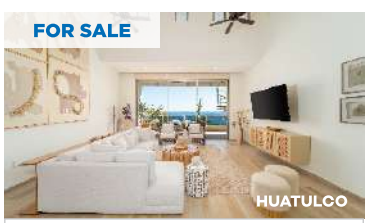

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The Eight Regions of Oaxaca

By Kary Vannice

Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico, is officially divided into eight regions. These regions are not administrative divisions like municipalities or states, but they are recognized officially by the state government and widely used for planning, cultural identification, and statistical purposes.

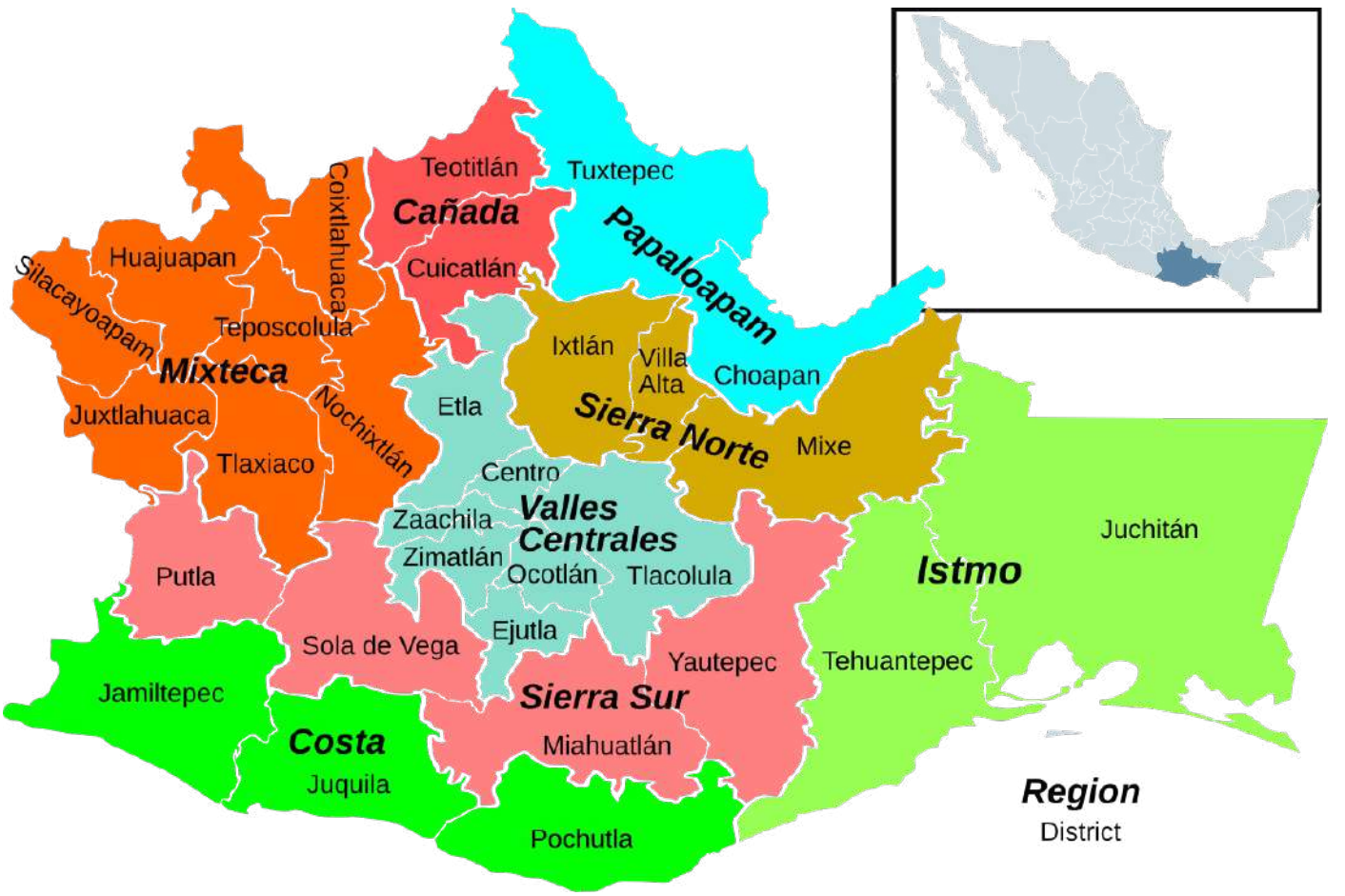
How Did These Regions Come to Be?

There are a variety of reasons for the existence of the eight regions. The most basic is Oaxaca's **geography and ecosystems**. The natural environment varies widely across Oaxaca—from mountains and forests to coasts and valleys—shaping economies and lifestyles. The mountains and rivers in particular can isolate one area from another, although rivers also provide transportation from one location to another.

Each region's **historical and cultural identity** is determined by its distinct mix of indigenous groups, languages, traditions, and history, and how these characteristics and events have evolved over time.

The **government planning** agencies use the regional divisions in designing and implementing development projects, educational programs, and infrastructure efforts more effectively. INEGI (Mexico's national institutes of statistics and geography) and other agencies use the regional breakdown for **statistical data collection** through surveys and census work, thus perpetuating the regional districts.

While the regions are not political divisions like states or municipalities, they are officially recognized and serve cultural and functional purposes. Here's a brief summary of the defining characteristics of each region of Oaxaca.



Valles Centrales (Central Valleys)

- Capital region; includes Oaxaca City
- Cultural and economic heart of the state
- Known for Zapotec heritage and artisanal crafts

Sierra Norte (Northern Sierra)

- Mountainous and forested
- Strong indigenous communities (Zapotec and Mixe)
- Rich in ecotourism and biodiversity

Sierra Sur (Southern Sierra)

- Remote and rugged
- Primarily Zapotec and Mixtec populations
- Known for traditional farming and coffee production

Cañada

- Narrow region in the northeast
- Predominantly Mazatec population
- Noted for herbal medicine and natural springs

Mixteca

- One of the most culturally distinct regions
- Home to the Mixtec people
- Struggles with soil erosion and migration, but rich in ancient history

Costa (Coast)

- Includes Huatulco, Puerto Escondido, and other beach areas
- Ethnically diverse (Afro-Mexican, Chatino, Mixtec)
- Fishing, tourism, and farming

Istmo de Tehuantepec (The Isthmus)

- Geographically strategic narrow land bridge
- Predominantly Zapotec with strong Isthmus identity
- Known for wind farms, matriarchal traditions, and cultural festivals

Papaloapan (also called *Cuenca* (basin) *del Papaloapan*)

- Northern tropical lowlands along the Papaloapan River
- Ethnically diverse (Chinantec, Mazatec, Mestizo)
- Sugarcane and tropical fruit production, other small-scale industrialization
- Continuous with the basin and delta of the Papaloapan in Veracruz

A Land in Between: The Istmo de Tehuantepec

By Randy Jackson

If you were to drive east from Huatulco for about two hours, you'd arrive at a narrow neck of land where the Pacific and Atlantic oceans nearly meet. You'll know you're there when you see a landscape covered by hundreds of windmills and feel and hear the force of wind as it hurtles against your vehicle. These are the Tehuano Winds, born from the clash of cool northern air spilling down from the Gulf of Mexico and the rising heat of the Pacific. Channeled through the Chivela Pass in the Sierra Madre, they come roaring toward the coast, sometimes with the force of a hurricane.

This region, known as the *Istmo de Tehuantepec*, is one of the eight distinct regions of Oaxaca, and it's known for far more than wind. It's a crossroads in every sense: a cultural crossroads between the heartlands of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, an ecological crossroads bridging diverse geographical zones, and now, with the Interoceanic Corridor project, a potential crossroads for global trade.

Ecological Crossroads

The Istmo de Tehuantepec is an ecological crossroads. While the southern portions near the Pacific are dry and windswept, the northern reaches include part of Mexico's largest tropical rainforest, the *Selva Zoque*, home to much of the nation's biodiversity. This varied topography also gives rise to pine-oak forests and more than 300 species of native orchids.

The Istmo holds an extraordinary range of ecosystems within this relatively narrow band of land. There are cloud forests in the Sierra Madre, coastal lagoons along the Gulf of Mexico, and everything in between. Its geographic position bridges the flora and fauna of North and Central America, creating a vital migratory and evolutionary corridor where species from different regions meet, interact, and adapt.

Cultural Crossroads

For millennia, the Istmo de Tehuantepec has served as a crossroads between the heartlands of the Mesoamerican civilizations. The first of these civilizations was the Olmec, widely recognized for their iconic colossal stone heads. Their civilization was centred just to the north of the Istmo in the lowlands of the Gulf of Mexico. Later, as the Olmec declined, the Zapotec civilization emerged in the Valley of Oaxaca.

Archaeological finds suggest trade between these two civilizations, with goods like obsidian and jade traversing the Istmo between these two powers. Trade also existed in later times between the Maya civilization, located south and east of the Istmo, and the formidable city-state of Teotihuacán in the valley of Mexico.

Today, the Zapotec are the principal indigenous group of the Istmo, and their identity here is distinct. The Zapotec language in the Istmo differs significantly from the version in the Valley of Oaxaca. There are also cultural differences, such as the matrilineal social structures in the Istmo compared to the more patriarchal structures of the Zapotec of the Valley of Oaxaca. Other indigenous groups in the region of Istmo de Tehuantepec are the Mixe, roughly centred around the area of Matías Romero, and the Huave (they call themselves the Ikoots), located around San Mateo del Mar on the Pacific coast.

Global Crossroads – Mexico's Interoceanic Corridor

Among the defining projects of former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the Interoceanic Rail Corridor may turn out to be the most transformative. Beyond the potential benefits to Mexico overall, the state of Oaxaca, particularly the Istmo de Tehuantepec, could develop into an economic engine. Spanning 303 kilometres (188 miles), this rail link connects the Pacific port of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca with the Gulf port of Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz. Its aim is ambitious: to serve as a land-based alternative, or complement, to the Panama Canal, allowing cargo to be offloaded at one coast, transported swiftly across the Istmo, and reloaded on the other side.

The corridor project aims to stimulate industrial growth in southern Mexico through major infrastructure upgrades, chief among them the modernization of the Salina Cruz and Coatzacoalcos seaports. To draw private investment, the federal government plans to establish ten industrial parks along the route, offering tax incentives to companies willing to build and operate there.

The project is well underway. The expanded seaports are already under construction, and the rail line now has limited passenger service between the two coasts. One of the most high-profile developments tied to the corridor came in December 2024, when President Claudia Sheinbaum announced a $10 billion USD green hydrogen facility to be built by Helax, a subsidiary of Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners. Scheduled for completion in 2028, the project signals a push toward sustainable industry in the region.

If fully realized, the Interoceanic Corridor could mark a historic shift in Mexico's economic geography, channeling investment and opportunity toward the poorer southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. The road ahead, however, isn't without obstacles: land disputes, environmental concerns, and questions about who truly benefits, especially among local Indigenous communities.

For centuries, the Istmo de Tehuantepec has stood at the intersection of movement and change – a crossroads where two oceans, multiple climate zones, and cultures converge. The Istmo continues in its role as a landscape of transition and is now, possibly, a passageway for global trade.

For contact or comment: box95jackson@gmail.com.

Valles Centrales

By Julie Etra

The Central Valleys (Spanish: *Valles Centrales*) of Oaxaca—also known as the Oaxaca Valley—are a geographic region encompassing the municipalities of Etla, Centro, Zaachila, Zimatlán, Ocotlán, Tlacolula, and Ejutla. This area is home to important and well-known archaeological and cultural sites, including Monte Albán, Tule, and Mitla, as well as lesser-visited sites such as Yagul and the Guilá Naquitz Cave.

The cave is especially notable as the verified birthplace of the oldest distinctly recognizable ancestor of modern annual corn: *teosinte*, a perennial grass with tiny mazorcas (corn ears) about the size of a slender finger. More on that in a bit.

Geography and Climate

The Y-shaped valley lies at the intersection of two major Oaxacan mountain ranges: the Sierra Madre del Sur and the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca (colloquially known as the Sierra Norte), which is an extension of the larger Sierra Madre Oriental. (*Sierra* means "mountain range." For context, I live on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada in northern Nevada—which, once upon a time, was part of Mexico.)

Oaxaca City sits at the heart of the valley at an average elevation of 1,550 meters (5,115 feet). With access to water from the Río Atoyac and Río Salado (though not in great shape today), the area has long been attractive for settlement. The valley spans more than 3,375 square kilometers (1,303 square miles), with about 1,100 km² (700 mi²) of arable land—by far the largest stretch of flat, farmable land in this mountainous state.

The Tlacolula Valley stretches 50 kilometers (31 miles) east, the Zimatlán Valley runs 100 kilometers (62 miles) south, and the Etla Valley extends 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest.

The climate is subtropical highland, with warm temperatures year-round—something that often surprises winter visitors. Rainy and dry seasons are distinct, much like the coast, though less extreme. The valley averages about 69.5 cm (27.4 inches) of rainfall per year. Winter temperatures hover around 17°C (63°F) in November through January, rising to around 22°C (72°F) from May through August.

Geology

The Valley of Oaxaca has an ancient and complex geology. It features a mix of Precambrian metamorphic rocks (dating back 4.6 billion to 541 million years), Mesozoic sedimentary layers (252 to 66 million years ago), and Tertiary igneous rocks (66 million to 2.6 million years ago).

The valley floor is composed of gneisses (coarse to medium-grained metamorphic rocks) and mylonites (fine-grained rocks found along fault zones). Surface rocks include schists, granodiorite, and limestones, the latter indicating the presence of an inland lake or sea in the distant past. Sediment from surrounding mountain erosion has also filled much of the valley.

This is a tectonically active zone—part of the Oaxaca Fault System, where the Cocos Plate subducts beneath the North American Plate along the Middle American Trench. That's why Oaxaca is so seismically active: about 25% of all earthquakes in Mexico occur here. The January 14, 1931, earthquake, which registered 8.0 on the Richter scale, flattened the city.
Further reading:
www.wiki.santafe.edu/images/4/45/Ch3-1.pdf

Economy

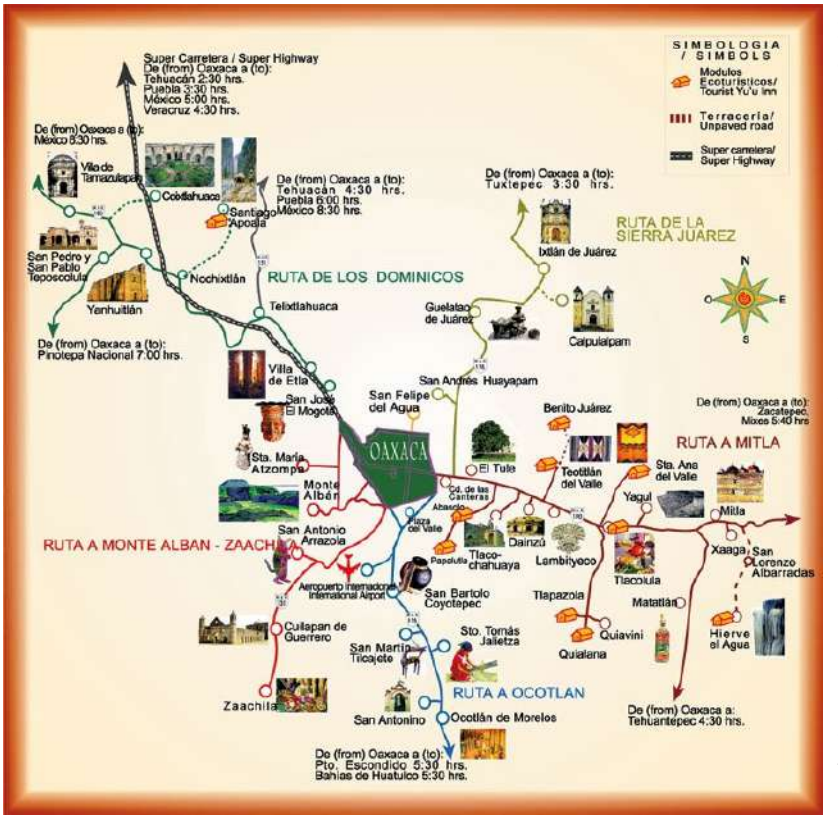
Besides tourism and crafts (alebrijes, ceramics, textiles), the valley continues to support extensive agriculture. Crops include corn, sorghum, beans, wheat, melon, watermelon, garbanzo beans, and of course, agave (*maguey*) for mezcal production. Corn remains the most culturally and economically significant crop.

Today, you'll also see large greenhouses growing ornamental plants—visible when flying in with Aerotucán or driving into the valley from the south via Highway 175. Flowers such as *flor de cempasúchil* (marigolds, genus *Tagetes*), *flor de borla* or *cresta de gallo* (*Celosia argentea*, aka cockscombs), and *terciopelo* (velvet flower) are cultivated for Day of the Dead altars (*ofrendas*). Roses are also grown here and sold in markets, including those in La Crucecita.

Important Archaeological Sites

Yagul

Located midway between Oaxaca City and Mitla on Highway 190, Yagul is a former Zapotec city-state first settled around 500–100 BCE. It remained occupied up through the Spanish conquest. The name "Yagul" is Zapotec: *ya* means tree and *gul* means old—"old tree." (What specific tree? That remains a mystery.)



Excavated in the 1950s and 60s by archaeologists Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock, Yagul is built around a hill and includes a large ball court, palaces, temples, and tombs. Building materials included cobbles from the Río Salado and volcanic rock like basalt. The community likely reached its peak between 1250 and 1521 CE. After the conquest, much of the population relocated to nearby Tlacolula, which now hosts a well-known and colorful market.

Guilá Naquitz Cave

This site is particularly close to my heart. Back in the 1980s, as a student at Colorado State University, we had a few *teosinte* plants on the university farm. As a grad student, one of my jobs was to help propagate heirloom corn (*maíz criollo*) seeds to preserve their genetic integrity. Years later, DNA mapping confirmed that *teosinte* was indeed the ancestor of modern corn—and that it originated here, in Oaxaca.

Guilá Naquitz Cave (Zapotec for "white cave") is located about 5 km (3.1 mi) northwest of Mitla, likely in a limestone outcrop. This site is of enormous ethnobotanical and paleobotanical importance, documenting the early domestication of crops like *teosinte*, squash (*Cucurbita* spp.), bottle gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*), and beans.

Inhabited as early as 10,000 years ago, the area once supported a rich variety of edible plants consumed by hunter-gatherers—acorns, wild fruits and berries, prickly pear cactus (*tuna*), agave, nuts such as *yak susí* (the identity of which remains unclear), wild onions, and more. Sadly, centuries of land-use change have greatly diminished this ecosystem. The cave is located at the base of a cliff at an elevation of 1,926 meters (6,319 feet).

Highlighted Communities in the Valley

Here's a small, somewhat random selection of communities we've passed through on our drives to Oaxaca City:

Ejutla de Crespo

Located at the southern end of the valley, Ejutla means "place of abundant greens" in Nahuatl. "Crespo" refers to Manuel Sabino Crespo, a contemporary of Morelos during the War of Independence. The town's economy centers on agriculture and mezcal production.

Ocotlán de Morelos

With a population of around 23,000, this town was bypassed about a decade ago when a new commercial route diverted traffic away from its bustling central square. The name *Ocotlán* comes from Nahuatl and means "among the ocote trees," referring to the pine species found descending from the oak-pine woodlands above. The suffix honors José María Morelos y Pavón, Catholic priest and independence leader. Agriculture is the main economic driver.

San Bartolo Coyotepec

Just five kilometers (three miles) south of Oaxaca City, this town is famed for its *barro negro* (black clay) pottery. The shiny finish comes from polishing and specific firing techniques. There's a wonderful little museum on the west side of the main highway. Years ago, my sister and I eavesdropped on a workshop there.

Villa de Zaachila

This town and municipality is 6 km (3.7 mi) south of Oaxaca City along Highway 131. Before the conquest, it was the main city-state after the fall of Monte Albán. The name may refer to its 14th–15th century ruler Zaachila Yoo—or it may mean "large leaf of the purslane" (*Portulaca oleracea*), a crunchy succulent considered a weed in the U.S. but a valued *quelite* in Mexico. You'll often find *verdolaga* in local markets and dishes (see The Eye Archives: www.theeyehuatulco.com/?s=quelites).

This Month's Cover Photograph by Elí García-Padilla

Elí García-Padilla is a social biologist and professional photographer with 17 years of experience in the formal study and photo documentation of Mexico's biological and cultural diversity. He has published three books and over 150 formal contributions—with more than a thousand citations—focused on knowledge, science communication, and the conservation of Mesoamerican biodiversity.

Since 2006, he has devoted himself to exploring Oaxaca and Chiapas, the most biodiverse and multicultural states in Mexico. In 2017, he began venturing into the mythical region of Los Chimalapas in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which holds the highest biological richness in all of Mexico, preserved under a system of community-based conservation.

He is currently immersed in the exploration of the utopia known as Los Pueblos Mancomunados in the Sierra Madre of Oaxaca through a community-focused project titled "Biodiversity of the Pueblos Mancomunados." He also collaborates with community leaders and enterprises in the Chinantla region, home to the most important remaining cloud forest in Mexico.

Elí has led several workshops on nature photography and the biocultural heritage of Mexico, and is an expert with the Red Tox (Toxin Network). He has conducted numerous trainings on venomous snake identification, handling, and prehospital care protocols for snakebite accidents in rural community settings.

His photography has been featured in prestigious publications such as National Geographic en Español and Cuartoscuro. In 2020, he co-founded the initiative "Biodiversidad Mesoamericana" to collectively build community around the dissemination of Mexico's most vital treasures: its biodiversity and Indigenous cultures.

His opinion columns on socio-environmental topics, Indigenous communities, and biodiversity are regularly published in Oaxaca Media, La Jornada Ecológica, La Jornada Maya, and the Ojarasca supplement of La Jornada.

Follow him on Instagram: @garciapadillaeli

Huatulco Food Tours

Walking Food Tour

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Ancient Answers to a Modern Food Crisis? Look to the Sierra Sur

By Kary Vannice

As global supply chains wobble and climate change disrupts food production around the world, we are beginning to see evidence of a system that is far more "at risk" than we once thought, calling into question the sustainability of imported, prepackaged, and profit-driven food systems.

Because of the obvious vulnerability of such a vast and complex food network, more and more countries and communities are starting to talk about the necessity to rely less on outside sources and are asking the question, "How can we provide for the needs of our people, independent of outside resources?"

The Sierra Sur Region

And the answer may be found in the most unassuming of places, and very close to home for many of us, the high mountain region of Oaxaca's Sierra Sur. Contrary to popular belief, the best way forward may be to go back in time to a food production and distribution concept that's been around for centuries.

Unlike the more familiar concept of food security, which focuses on access to enough calories to feed a population, food sovereignty speaks to a deeper right. It is the right of people to grow, distribute, and consume food in ways that are culturally appropriate, ecologically sustainable, and locally controlled.

A Resilient Food System

The Sierra Sur's working model of a decentralized, cooperative, and land-honoring food system challenges modern day industrial norms; it also proves that the practices of working in community, diversifying crops, saving seeds, and using natural fertilizers increase and ensure food security.

Here, agricultural practices are resilient by design. Families cultivate the land using practices passed down for generations. At the center of this model is the traditional *milpa*, planting corn, beans, and squash together in the same plot. Each plant supports the others: the corn gives the beans something to climb, the beans fix nitrogen in the soil, and the squash shades the earth to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Some plots also include sunflowers to attract pollinators, chili plants to deter pests, and nitrogen-fixing legumes to improve soil structure and support long-term fertility.

This system is efficient, natural, and balanced, unlike the industrial approach to agriculture that relies on vast tracts of monocrops that often require chemical pesticides and herbicides to assure a profitable harvest – chemicals that deplete the land of nutrients and contribute to soil erosion.

This high mountain terrain is notoriously challenging to cultivate, but farmers here still employ the ancient technique developed centuries ago of expertly terracing the land. This allows families to farm steep, rugged hillsides and utilize natural rainwater irrigation systems that require very little modern infrastructure.

And because food is grown close to where it's eaten, the system isn't vulnerable to supply chain breakdowns or fuel price hikes. There's no need to transport goods across long distances, and no middleman taking profits. Small local markets and neighbor-to-neighbor bartering ensure that food moves efficiently within the community. Trade is based on trust and relationships, not price and profit.

Unlike the global supply chain, this local distribution model keeps food accessible, affordable, and in the hands of the community. And if one farmer experiences a surplus, it's managed through sharing, trade, or local sale. This keeps both waste and overproduction in check.

In contrast to countries like the United States, where government subsidies incentivize farmers to overproduce low-nutrient crops like corn, soy, and wheat — often flooding the market, driving down prices, and sometimes resulting in crops being dumped or left to rot — the food system in the Sierra Sur is built on intention. Waste is minimal because everything grown has a purpose and value within the community.

The Benefits of Food Sovereignty

And while these systems may not scale neatly into industrial agriculture, they do offer a meaningful answer to the food sovereignty question. The shift isn't necessarily about changing the physical system — it's about implementing a different value system. One whose guiding principles are diversity over uniformity, local over distant, cooperation over competition, enough over excess, and care over control.

But most importantly, this food model is socially regenerative. It empowers communities to care for their own needs without dependence on multinational corporations, fragile import systems, or debt-based agricultural schemes. It keeps the knowledge, value, and power of food in the hands of the people who grow it. And maybe that's exactly what the world needs right now: not a new invention, but a return to what has always worked.

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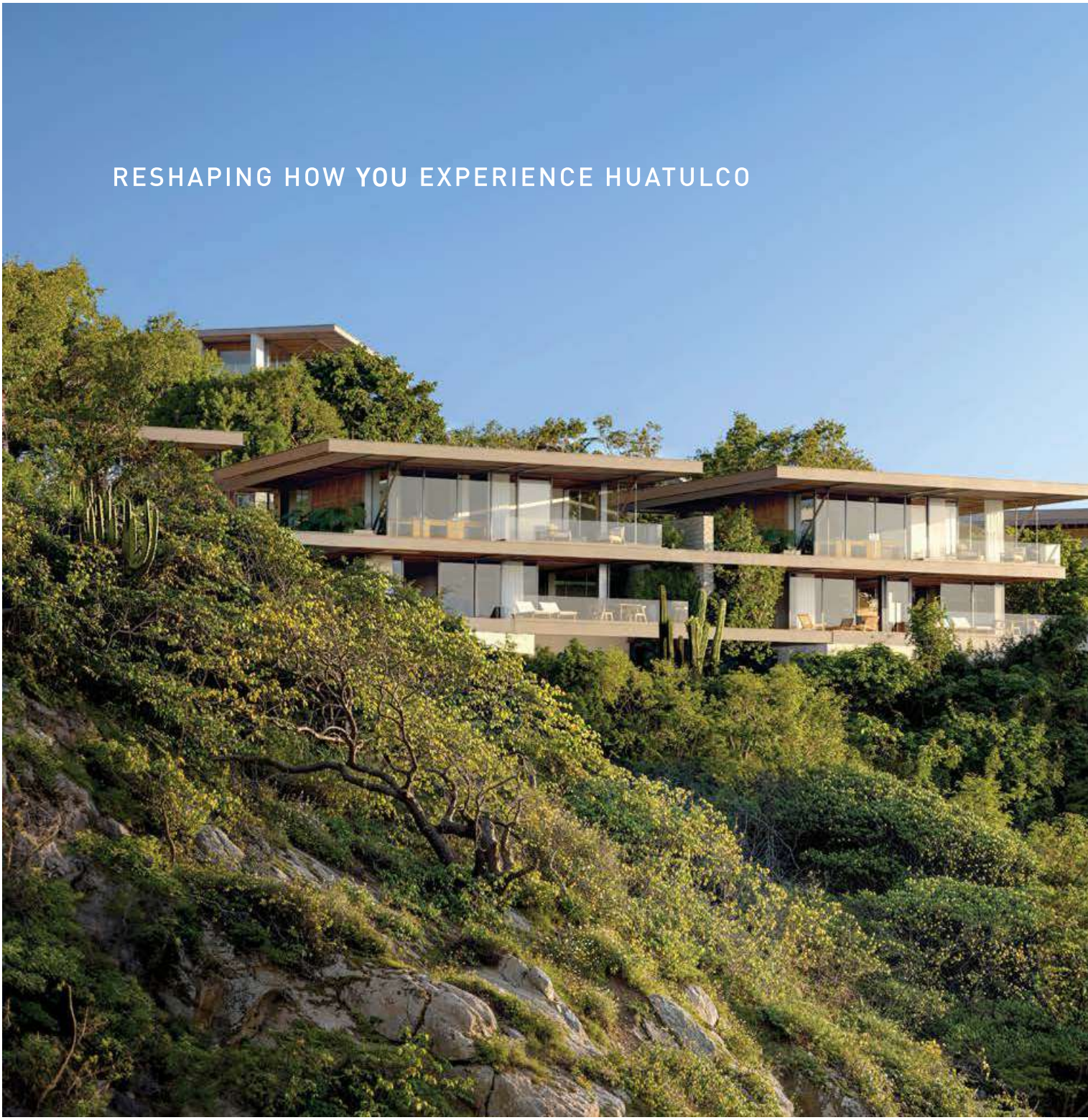

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A Personal Journey across the Costa Region of Oaxaca

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

Our annual drive from our home in Oregon to our condo in Huatulco included an approximately six-hour trip south and eastward from Pinotepa Nacional, a frankly unremarkable Oaxacan city bordering the State of Guerrero – a distance of about 255 kilometers (about 160 miles). Our route, National Highway 200, spanned all three districts of the region called Costa, Oaxaca – the districts of Jamiltepec, Juquila, and Pochutla.

Jamiltepec

After passing the State of Oaxaca boundary and replying to the uniformed heavily-armed border guards "*no drogas*, *no frutas*, *no armas*," we navigated the always frustrating traffic in Pinotepa. The city is forgettable in terms of architecture and scenery, but once a year it comes alive with a fiesta of horses, bands, costumes and dancers that draws people from all over the Jamiltepec district.

We usually pulled over at an overlook outside of the city, with a view of the first of the many rivers we would cross en route. The Costa region is sandwiched between the southern Sierra Madre mountains and the Pacific Ocean. The mountains, northeast of our route, are home to coffee plantations and are the source of many rivers that cascade and form beautiful waterfalls throughout the northern Costa region. They flow out of the mountains, cutting across the Costa on their way to the sea. When they approach the Pacific, carrying nutritious silt from the uplands, the rivers enrich the long stretches of mangroves that host a plethora of birds, fish and other wildlife and separate the Costa sand beaches from the ocean. One of the largest rivers en route is the Rio Verde (Green River), close to an hour after our overlook, a beautiful sight at any time of day.

As we munched the lunch we had prepared before departing our last overnight stop, we watched the activity in and on the river that has been taking place for generations of Zapotecs and Mixtecs since long before the Spanish invaders arrived. Children playing, people bathing, washing clothes, fishing, and dipping out supplies of water for nearby gardens, cooking, cleaning and – a decidedly more modern activity – washing cars. This scene would be repeated along our trip, but the community we were viewing here at work and play are notable for the extent of their African ancestry. This part of the Costa region was previously home to runaway slaves who escaped the bondage imposed by Spanish colonialists. The colonialists imported sugar cane, pineapples, and coconuts and used African slave labor on their Costa region plantations.

Although the large plantations of the colonial era no longer exist, the route spanning the Costa is replete with [fields of pineapple plants, banana fields of pineapple plants, banana trees and sugar cane as well as crops native to the area – corn, squash and beans. Native shrubs and grasses are plentiful as well – cacti, yucca, and agave. Indigenous jacaranda trees and many species of morning glory provide colorful displays along the way, and coconut trees introduced by the Spanish dot the area.

Juquila

Continuing down Route 200 from the Jamiltepec to the Juquila district through small communities, we often see a donkey, pig, or dog in the road, announcing the first sign of habitation, soon followed by one or two *topes* (speed bumps). Local residents use the topes to sell food or drinks to the occupants of cars forced to slow down to avoid damaging the auto undercarriage. As you approach Juquila, you see fewer residents of African descent and more whose ancestors were the original Zapotecs, Mixtecs or the pre-Columbian Aztec invaders. The language in which we were offered the local fruits, corn products, or drinks was not Spanish but one of the more than 50 dialects of Mixtec or Zapotec spoken throughout the Costa Region. Schools proudly bear the sign *Bilingüe*, which in this region of Oaxaca means lessons are taught in one of the indigenous dialects as well as Spanish.

The primary landmark in the Juquila District is a sign saying *Rio Grande* – meaning both the community and the river, neither *grande*. Other than a Pemex station for a bathroom break costing a few pesos, we passed through the district counting *topes* (too many) and watching for the long pendulous nests of Montezuma Oropendola (*Psarocolius montezuma*) birds that hang over the road from tree branches, telephone poles and communication wires. Occasionally, red-belly squirrels scampered across the road and large iguanas would streak from one side to the other. Although signs meant to protect local fauna would feature the outline of an armadillo, and although they are indigenous in the area, we never were privileged to see one near the road. As we slowed down at *topes*, we were often treated to the songs and antics of the many varieties of birds that are native to the Costa or are on a migratory route.

Signs announcing the distance to Puerto Escondido alerted us that we were approaching the most interesting area of the Juquila District. The shoreline off Route 200 just a few kilometers from Puerto Escondido is replete with lagoons rich with wildlife. One of the lagoons is known for its bioluminescence. We once spent an enchanted evening boating and swimming in the lagoon, seemingly surrounded by stars above and stars below.

Puerto Escondido is worth a stop and a stay overnight. It is one of the newest municipalities in the Costa region and was originally settled in the early 1800s as a shipping port for coffee produced in the foothills of the Sierras in the northern area of the region. More advantageous ports replaced Puerto Escondido, and the municipality languished. In the 1960s it began to be developed as a tourist area, largely due to publicity about the "Mexican pipeline," the famous surf break at Playa Zicatela, and the construction of Route 100. Today there are many excellent restaurants, some with views of the beaches and rocky coast, and comfortable and affordable places to stay. North of the town, up in the steep foothills, one can visit Santa Catarina and a sanctuary housing the 30-centimeter statue of the Virgin of Juquila, which has been venerated since the 16th century. Thousands of pilgrims visit the site every year.

Pochutla

Continuing southeast from "Puerto," given the great improvements in Route 200, one soon reaches the Costa district of Pochutla, and for us our home district. Each kilometer of the highway and side roads evokes precious memories. The turnoff toward Mazunte brings memories of visits to the turtle sanctuary, with tanks of the babies saved from predatory animals including humans. We have visited the nearby area of Ventanilla, boating through the mangroves with arms, hands and fingers always held inside the boat to avoid losing one to the many crocodiles while watching the glorious water birds. The next notable turnoff to Zipolite always brings a smile. Zipolite is the only officially designated nude beach in Mexico and attracts an international crowd of tourists.

Huatulco English-language AA meeting

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Arriving at San Pedro Pochutla reminds us of market days (Mondays) and many Sunday afternoons with groups of friends in the original Finca de Los Vaqueros barbeque restaurant, singing to guitar music and watching our young grandchildren devour delicious *arrachera*. Driving north from Pochutla was our original route to Oaxaca City, now replaced by the new highway out of Puerto Escondido. The roads out of Pochutla also lead to the Hagia Sofia Park, developed a few decades ago to introduce species native to Asia, such as rambutan trees, to the Costa. Also north of Pochutla is Pluma Hidalgo, a small community serving workers on the surrounding coffee plantations. The beauty of this area never failed to charm us.

Driving south from Pochutla to Puerto Ángel, we shopped for handicrafts, including a matrimonial-size hammock that was well-used for many years. Down the road to the west is San Agustinillo, a laid-back small community that provides a relaxing life for short-term visitors and long-term expats. Although *Eye* writer Carol Reedy moved from there to CDMX, she is still remembered for starting the community's library.

Continuing east on Route 200 and passing the turnoff to Cuatunalco and Salchi, small upscale villages loved by Canadian snowbirds and one well-known US ex-pat, we can't wait to pass the road to Playa San Augustín – on the western-most bay of the nine *Bahías de Huatulco* – and one of the best places in the world to snorkel. At the San Augustín intersection, a road heads north into the foothills city of Santa María Huatulco. Since Santa María is home to administrative offices for the municipalities encompassed in and around Huatulco, we've spent many hours there filling out government forms. We've also participated in Day of the Dead observances in the large municipal cemetery, hearing stories about beloved relatives buried there.

Soon after the San Augustín-Santa María Huatulco intersection, marked by a very broad *tope*, is the entrance to the Bahías de Huatulco International Airport (HUX) and less than 15 miles down the road, the entrance to the University of the Sea (UMAR). Finally, and almost immediately after UMAR, is the road to Huatulco.

We're home at last, following in the footsteps of the original indigenous Mixtecs and Zapotecs who for generations peacefully fished the bountiful waters of Huatulco's stunning blue-green bays. They were invaded by the Aztecs and then Spanish colonists who saw Huatulco as a perfect port. Later, German immigrants and other coffee-growers and exporters claimed the Bays as their rightful territory for a while. But in 1983, FONATUR (the Mexican Federal agency in charge of promoting tourism) began outfitting the area with infrastructure for tourists, attracting visitors from around the world to enjoy the colorful fish-filled bays, long white beaches and warm weather of the Costa Region paradise.

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The Magic of Oaxaca Unveiled: Books to Start a Journey of Discovery

By Carole Reedy

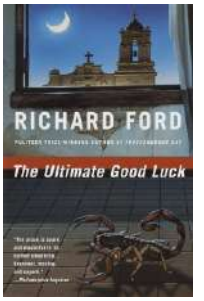
"Like its famous cheese, Oaxaca is a tangled web in which all the threads connect."
***— Secretaría de La Cultura*, Mexico**

Oaxaca is ethnically and linguistically the most diverse state in Mexico; it's also the home state of Mexico's most popular and effective president, Benito Juárez. It's here where July's wildly colorful annual music and dance celebration *Guelaguetza* takes place. And to quench your thirst, Oaxaca is known for its smooth yet tangy liquor known as *mezcal*.

If that's not enough, Oaxaca cheese and mole are incomparable.

I was fortunate to spend ten happy, serene years living on a Oaxacan beach. What follows is a selection from the written word in diverse styles, eras, and points of view of this highly original Mexican state.

The Ultimate Good Luck, by Richard Ford (1981)



We know Richard Ford as the author of *The Sportswriter* (1986) and its sequel *Independence Day* (1995), with Frank Bascombe as the protagonist; *Independence Day* won the Pulitzer Prize – there are three more Bascombe novels. Irving can lay claim to being our present-day Faulkner or Updike.

One reader calls this novel a "*narcocorrida*." It certainly take us to the dark side of Mexico with drugs and eroticism in Ford's unique understated style. *The New York Times Book Review* describes it as having a "taut, cinematic quality that bathes his story with the same hot, mercilessly white light that scorches Mexico."

Recollections of Things to Come, by Elena Garro (1969)

The universally admired poet and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz calls this classic gem "a truly extraordinary work, one of the most perfect creations in contemporary Latin American literature." These words and the recommendation from the venerated Paz are reason enough to open the pages of this unusual novel.

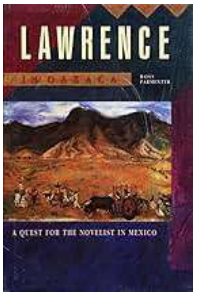
The fictional town of Ixtepec narrates the story, set in the post-Revolution time (late 1920s). You will meet all the town's inhabitants, from those in high society to prostitutes on the street.

In an unusual episodic style, impressions move the plot of this novel, which is full of color, smells, and visual seasoning. Garro's book is often considered one of the first magical realism novels. It is not a pretty picture of Mexico during this time of classism, racism, misogyny, and violence.

You may not be familiar with Garro, though she was at one point married to Octavio Paz. She has been ignored by Mexican intellectuals, who consider her a government informer on the 1968 student movement (known as the Tlatelolco massacre).

Garro spent many years in self-exile, living in the US, Spain, and France, but she returned to live in Cuernavaca, where she died at 81 near her beloved cats and daughter.

Lawrence in Oaxaca: A Quest for the Novelist in Mexico, by Ross Parmenta (1984)



The well-travelled British novelist D. H. Lawrence, famous yet controversial, spent just two years in the Lake Chapala and Oaxaca regions of Mexico.

After the Mexican Revolution, in 1923, he and his wife visited a Mexico that was recuperating from the dregs of war. It is here he finished his well-known Mexican novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). He also completed four of the essays that make up his popular *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), personal observations that capture the country's spirit. Reading both these gems will be well worth your while.

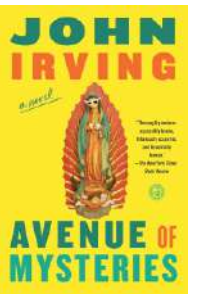
Lawrence was not interested in the politics of the Mexican Revolution or the cultural and artistic aspects, such as Mexico's famed muralists. Lawrence's interest lay in the "mythical exaltation of the Indian," which is at the core of *The Plumed Serpent* – an early draft of the novel was published as *Quetzalcoatl* (1998).

Lawrence and his wife fled to the US in 1922 after WWI, he having just escaped death from a bout of influenza. He did, however, die shortly thereafter, at age 44 in 1930, from complications of tuberculosis.

He once said "I want to gather together about twenty souls and sail away from this world of war and squalor and found a little colony where there shall be no money but a sort of communism as far as necessaries of life go, and some real decency … a place where one can live simply, apart from this civilization [with] a few other people who are also at peace and happy and live, and understand and be free." Many would wish the same.

Lawrence in Mexico is a work of double affection both for the novelist and Oaxaca, the city in which he produced his memorable work.

Avenue of Mysteries: A Novel, by John Irving (2015)



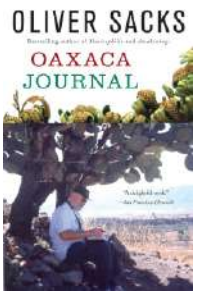
John Irving, the modern popular American novelist influenced by Charles Dickens and Gunther Grass, likes to think of himself as a 19th-century storyteller. But Irving introduces additional elements and style that create an almost eccentric and modern atmosphere.

This, his fourteenth novel, is named after a street in Mexico City. It is a story divided into the two aspects of the life of Juan Diego Guerro. The first, where the heart of the novel lies, is reflections and memories of his young life in Oaxaca in the 1970s. The other is his present journey from Iowa to the Philippines to fulfill a promise.

Tayari Jones in *The New York Times Book Review* lauds this difference: "John Irving is his own thing, and so is his new novel. *Avenue of Mysteries* is thoroughly modern, accessibly brainy, hilariously eccentric, and beautifully human."

Avenue of Mysteries is distinctly different from the more popular Irving novels that come to mind when you hear his name, such as *The World According to Garp* (1978), *The Cider House Rules* (1985), or *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989).

Oaxaca Journal, by Oliver Sacks (2002)



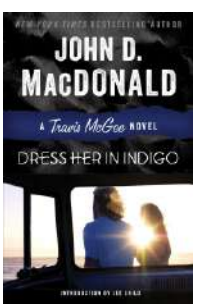
From *Awakenings* (1973) to *A Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (1985), Sacks is best known for case studies of his patients. This British neurologist, naturalist, historian of science and, of course, author wrote nineteen books, many of them bestsellers.

A nature lover, Sacks blessed us with the beautiful *Oaxaca Journal* after his 2001 visit to the popular state. The book is an adventure in itself, manifesting the marvels of Oaxaca through his expansive point of view.

From the science of astronomy to the flavors of a luscious cuisine, from the dream-evoking waterfalls to the bustling street markets filled with intricate textiles, Sacks bequeaths us his larger perspective via minute details.

Before his death, Saks philosophized, "Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."

Dress Her in Indigo: A Travis McGee Novel, John D. McDonald (1969)



Travis McGee is a household word to faithful McDonald readers. Loyal fans devour each new novel. This one, set in the backlands of Oaxaca, was no exception.

What is the attraction? Fans cite the author's philosophical and social commentary as their reason to return to each new novel in the series. *Dress Her in* Indigo centers on a dead woman in a hippie-type community on the outskirts of Oaxaca.

One reader expressed it precisely: "I may never make it to Mexico, but after reading this book set in Mexico – I may not have to." Another says the story "carries the color and the weight of Mexico on almost every page."

Oaxaca de Rius, by Eduardo Humberto del Rio García (but known to all in Mexico by his pen name Rius; 2013)

The book boasts 128 eight pages of illustrative delight that explore the traditions, art, and conflicts of Oaxaca. "Drawings, jokes, and notes referring to the state where I live, fleeting impressions," is how the author himself describes his book.

The sketches offer a glimpse into the gods, customs, churches, Zapotec traditions, festivals, culinary delights, mezcal, and all the rest that makes this state matchless.

Who was Rius? The Mexican government, in the announcement of his death, wrote, "During his lifetime, Rius aimed to contribute to the education and politicization of Mexicans, combat alienation, and foster a critical spirit."

With Naranjo, Soto, Magú, and other cartoonists, he created *Insurgencia popular*, the news outlet of the Mexican Workers' Party (PMT).

Lost in Oaxaca, by Jessica Winters Mireles (2020)

Jessica Winters has done her homework. Most impressive in all the reviews is her understanding and ability to convey the customs and cult ure of this glorious state.

The novel's plot centers around a schoolteacher in search of her student and a Zapotec man who helps her understand the culture and customs of a society so different from her own, as well as how to view the world in a different light. He helps her navigate the wonders of an unfamiliar culture that is "rugged as the terrain itself."

On your first or next exploration journey into Oaxaca, heed the advice of a popular song from my youth and "Slow down, you move too fast; you got to make the morning last."

Soak it all in … and enjoy!

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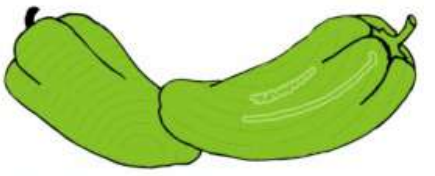

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Guelaguetza 2025
A Dance of Generosity and Identity

By Alicia Flores

Every July, the city of Oaxaca bursts into celebration. This year, the famous *Lunes del Cerro*—known as the **Guelaguetza**—will take place on **July 21 and July 28, 2025**, in the iconic amphitheater atop Cerro del Fortín. It's more than a festival—it's a kaleidoscope of music, dance, tradition, and the spirit of community drawn from Oaxaca's eight distinct cultural regions.

The Guelaguetza has ancient roots in Zapotec rituals, originally honoring **Centéotl**, the goddess of corn, in ceremonies that asked for rain and bountiful harvests. With the arrival of the Spanish, these traditions merged with Catholic celebrations of the **Virgin of Carmen**, whose feast day is July 16. By the 1930s—after a devastating earthquake and the founding of modern Oaxaca City—the festival evolved into a cultural event. It was first called the "Homenaje Racial" in 1932 and has since become a joyful, theatrical, and deeply symbolic showcase of Oaxacan identity.

Five Must-See Dances

1. Danza de la Pluma *(Central Valleys)* Perhaps the most iconic of all, this feathered dance dramatizes the Spanish conquest from an Indigenous perspective. It's elaborate, reflective, and filled with historical symbolism—often closing the show with a sense of pride and endurance.

2. Flor de Piña *(Papaloapan Region – Tuxtepec)* Choreographed in 1958 by Paulina Solís, this dance features dozens of women in bright huipiles carrying pineapples on their shoulders. With precise footwork and elegant movements, they offer their piñas to the audience as a gesture of reciprocity and community.

3. Jarabe Mixteco *(Mixteca Region)* Set to the nostalgic tones of "La Canción Mixteca," this dance is both joyful and emotional. It pays tribute to the resilience of the Mixtec people, many of whom live between migration and home, heartache and pride.

4. Sones y Chilenas *(Oaxacan Coast – Pinotepa Nacional)* Flirtatious, fiery, and full of rhythm, this coastal dance combines energetic footwork, playful handkerchiefs, and cheeky lyrics. It's the Oaxacan party spirit in motion—sun-soaked and bold.

5. Danza de los Jardines *(Sierra Norte/Sierra Sur)* This lesser-known piece enchants with its sweetness. Young girls dressed as flowers and plants dance in gentle patterns that represent the lush fertility of Oaxaca's forests and gardens.

So if you find yourself in Oaxaca this July, bring your open heart, your curiosity, and maybe a good sunhat. You'll leave with more than memories—you'll leave with a little bit of every region tucked into your soul. Because the Guelaguetza is not just a festival; it's a living, breathing act of cultural generosity. It reminds us that identity isn't about isolation or hierarchy—it's about exchange. Every embroidered huipil, every burst of brass and marimba, every shared fruit or dance step is a message: we are different, and we are connected. That's the beauty of Oaxaca.

Papaloapan:
The River and Region of Butterflies

By Deborah Van Hoewyk

In 1518, Juan de Grijalva (c. 1480-1527, killed by natives in Honduras) left Cuba with four ships and 200 men to explore the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Although his uncle, conquistador Diego Velásquez, was angry that Grijalva built no settlements (actually, Grijalva's instructions were not to do so), the mapping and reports from Grijalva's expedition laid the groundwork for Hernán Cortés to settle the coast and move inland to conquer Mexico.

Along the coast of what is now Veracruz, Grijalva encountered a meandering, slow-moving river, naming it Río de Alvarado (River of Whiteness), now known as Río Papaloapan (*Papaloapan* comes from the Nahuatl *papálotl*, "the river of butterflies"). The Papaloapan Region of Oaxaca runs across Oaxaca's northeastern border with Veracruz; the river crosses the foothills of the Sierra Norte and descends to the coastal plain, through Veracruz, and out to the Gulf of Mexico.

The headwaters of the Papaloapan arise in the Salado River near Tehuacán, in Puebla, and then join with the Tomillín River in Oaxaca. It takes the name Papaloapan near San Juan Bautista Valle Nacional, about 170 km (±106 miles) northeast of Oaxaca City. The Papaloapan River Basin, second only in size to the Rio Grande basin, covers over 15,000 square miles and portions of the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and a bit of Puebla.

The First Settlers

As the river slowed and broadened, it formed fertile levees that were attractive to settlement; the **Olmecs**, among the earliest (1200-400 BCE) Mexican groups to leave traces of their civilization, lived throughout the basin in Veracruz and somewhat into Oaxaca. There is ample evidence of trade between the Olmecs of this area and the Aztecs, in this case the Zapotecs, of Monte Alban.

In fact, the Aztecs gave the Olmecs their name, which means "the rubber people," named for the gum rubber the Olmecs traded throughout southeastern Mexico. Rubber trees grew in abundance in the Papaloapan basin, and the Olmecs figured out how to convert the latex sap of the tree into a substance that could be cured, shaped, and hardened. What the Olmecs called themselves is not known – their literacy included only a small collection of glyphs, considered the earliest form of writing in the New World; most Olmec communication, however, was oral, and lost forever when their civilization collapsed.

The Olmecs began to disappear around 400 BCE; the cause is unknown, but archeologists have generally credited environmental change with damaging the resources needed for survival. It is thought that the river and its tributaries began to silt up so badly the water supply was cut off. Another theory is that increased volcanic activity in this time (Popocatépetel erupted almost constantly from 800-215 BCE) coated the earth with ashy mudflows, making it unsuitable for cultivation.

On to Modernity

Because of annual flooding, and the masses of mosquitoes it brought, the Papaloapan Region was not a popular place to settle. The Spanish conquistadors mostly passed through the area en route to better pickings – saliently, gold – in Tenochitlán (Mexico City). Eventually, the colonialists took over Tuxtepec, renaming it of course, as San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec, in 1811. After the War of Independence (1810-21), it became the head town of its own municipality in 1825; it is now the second largest city in Oaxaca, after the capital Oaxaca de Juárez, with a population just under 500,000.

Until the mid-20th century, the region languished. Flooding had become more severe, largely because of upland deforestation; in 1944, a terrible flood wiped out over a hundred people living in small villages or out on ranches. Shortly thereafter, Miguel Alemán, the first "civilian" Mexican president after the post-revolutionary chain of generals, and a native of the area, established Mexico's first river basin commission. The *Comisión del Papaloapan*, formed in 1947, was in charge of everything from water (building dams, generating hydroelectricity, clearing swamps, etc.) to other infrastructure (building roads and towns) to social services. Signal achievements were two large dams, the Miguel Alemán dam (1954) and the *Cerro de Oro* (Hill of Gold) dam (early 1980s), which sharply reduced the threat of flooding, increased hydroelectric generation, and provided water via reservoirs.

This set the stage for economic development of the Papaloapan region; Victor Bravo Ahuja, governor of Oaxaca from 1968 to 1970, emphasized "modernization" of the region (he came from Tuxtepec). Bravo promoted new practices in agriculture and laid the groundwork for commercial and industrial development.

Visiting Papaloapan

This is not Mexico City, full of high culture and amazing food, nor is it the state of Oaxaca, replete with natural wonders. We have been to San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec, as it was rumored to have a wonderful Christmas celebration. It probably was great, but it happened the day before we got there, and it must have used up all the electricity, because we were on the 6th floor of a hotel with no power, no elevator. We climbed down and wandered about in the colonial part of the city, very nice, not very special.

The *turismo* bureau of Tuxtepec recommends the river, of course, but mostly its tributaries. The industrialization of the region has been so effective that the Papaloapan itself is heavily polluted – you are advised not to expose any part of your body to the water. If you are in Tuxtepec, you can walk across the Papaloapan on a suspension bridge that goes off the Muro Boulevard, or you can take a boat from the Paso Real Pier, in the heart of downtown.

The region does, however, boast special experiences. The rivers that run into the Valle Nacional River before it reaches the Papaloapan are crystal clear. There are spas on rivers that flow through lush tropical forests (the Zuzul, Los Cocos, Piedra Quemada, and Los Sauces rivers). Ecotourism is primary in the area, with hiking through the mountains, horseback riding through the jungles, exploring caves, and kayaking streams and lagoons are all available.

While there are indigenous groups in the Region (Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Chinantecs, Mazatecs), their presence is not prominent – with one exception. In San Mateo Yetla, just south of Valle Nacional, on Route 175 heading southwest towards Oaxaca, the Chinantec women specialize in embroidery. Led by Doña Carmen Vásquez Pérez, the embroiderers are working to preserve traditional needlework techniques and patterns. San Mateo Yetla is in a beautiful mountain setting; there is an ecotourism office in the town center that can advise you about jungle hiking, hikes to waterfalls, etc.

The Pineapple Dance – A Turismo Creation

Given the impact of the Papaloapan river and its connection with Veracruz, the region has always tended to see itself as a Jarocho (Veracruz) culture. In an interesting commentary on traditions and tourism, up until 1958, Papaloapan dancers always went to the Guelaguetza (the statewide dance festival held in July) with the Fandango Jarocho as their dance. Given the mountains that separate the Papaloapan region (in both Oaxaca and Veracruz), the audiences didn't know the dance, and didn't pay much attention to it. At that point, Oaxaca governor Alfonso Pérez Gasga decided there should be a more generally Oaxacan theme to Papaloapan's dance. The pineapple was chosen as broadly representative of the region, and everyone knows pineapples! The Pineapple Dance costumes were based on the Chinantec huipiles; last came the music and the dance. Needless to say, it took older people a while to adapt to the Pineapple Dance.

At the End of the Papaloapan

Given the cultural connections across the *Cuenca* (Basin) de Papaloapan, if you go anywhere in Papaloapan Region, you should also make it towards the mouth of the river in Veracruz, to a town called Tlacotalpan. (There is no passenger boat travel between Tuxtepec and Tlacotalpan – if you're not driving, you need to take the bus.)

Set up on what used to be an island in 1550, Tlacotalpan was declared a World Heritage site in 1988, mainly for its architecture and colonial layout along the river. It was established to serve as a colonial river port. For a visitor today, it's not the architecture so much as the brilliant colors in which it is painted.

Local residents are voluble about their town – we had an impromptu guide who explained which houses he himself had painted, why the colors were what they were, and of course, where his cousin's restaurant on the river was! Should you be lucky enough to be in Tlacotalpan on February 6, you can see the Virgen de Candelaria arrive by boat to be trekked through the streets to the cathedral.

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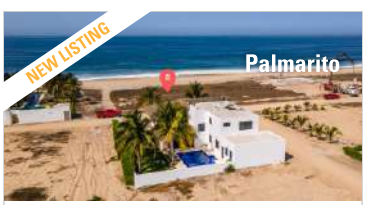

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Mushroom Summer

By Jane Bauer

In the same way the simple pleasure of Proust's madeleine led him down the road of memory, I can trace my relationship with mushrooms, and my refusal to eat them, as a road map through my childhood.

My father, an animal psychologist and amateur mycologist was my first and best travel companion. He was often described as eccentric with his Albert Einstein hair, clothes that always looked as though he had just rolled out of bed and his plaid shirt pocket always with a Mont Blanc pen sticking out. When I was nine years old we rode the train across Canada to British Columbia where we stayed in a log cabin and he taught me how to fish. Before I went to University we explored the Cabot Trail and Peggy's Cove and before my move to Mexico we went to Germany where we retraced memories of his childhood, eating in upscale restaurants and fancy hotels. "Always spend your money on good food" he liked to remind me when I was a struggling student.

Augusts were reserved for the cottage, cottage being a too quaint word for the large house that we rented each summer. The furniture was from the 1940s, there was a record player and black and white photos of the original owners decorated the walls. My older brother and sister would come and go, but I would spend the whole month lying on the dock with the friends I met up with each year. My father spent his cottage days foraging for mushrooms. He left early in the morning with his wicker baskets and his walking stick, limping his way through the village and into the forest. He had his spots. My sister and I accompanied him but it was soon clear that my sister's interest and knowledge about mushrooms far exceeded my own and I soon drifted away from these expeditions. Mushrooming wasn't as exciting as fishing or swimming across the lake or losing myself in the pages of a book. Opting out, I became the frivolous daughter, the one who preferred hanging out on the dock or going to parties with the summer kids.

My father and my sister would return in the afternoon, their baskets full with chanterelles and boletuses. There were stories of poisonous mushrooms that looked just like edible ones and of course there was Alice from Wonderland who found a mushroom that would make her grow bigger or smaller depending on which side she chose. I decided mushrooms were a very risky business and I refused to eat them. This presented a dilemma for my father who managed to incorporate mushrooms into every dinner. So for the month of August I lived on peanut butter toast, Bull's Head ginger ale and the occasional all-dressed hot dog from Larry's Snack Bar. My mushroom boycott was only second to my teenage vegetarianism as food protest, which ended our smoked pork excursions to Chinatown and devouring my father's veal birds. Food was my teenage rebellion – that, and rolling my eyes at his repertoire of 'fun guy- funghi' jokes.

I have become less rigid in my eating habits; being in the food business, I will try just about anything, but mushrooms still have a special place of mystery for me. I am not alluding here to any psychedelic varieties, I mean regular old portobellos, shiitakes and chanterelles – whose earthiness transports me back to those summer days.

A few years ago when I first heard of the Wild Mushroom Festival in Cuajimoloyas, I immediately wanted to go. Each year, however, I found a reason that making the trip to Oaxaca for this two-day event, which includes mycologists, foraging and meals entirely prepared with mushrooms, was not possible.

This year I went. I kept my mushroom reticence a secret, which was fine, as I have always liked a good secret. I would eat everything and smile.

It was foggy and cold when we arrived in the town square of Cuajimoloyas that first day. I had travelled overnight and had been looking forward to 'checking in' to my cabin, but after a watery coffee we were asked to choose between the 3-hour or 5-hour walk and we were led into the woods. My inner voice was thirteen again but on the outside I smiled and walked along. The woods were like a movie set for a Grimms' fairy tale, blanketed with pine needles, moss, lichens, succulents.... everything so moist and alive you could practically hear the mushrooms growing. Everyone in my group was collecting mushrooms with great enthusiasm. Within an hour our baskets were brimming. After five hours we gathered with the rest of the teams in a field for a picnic lunch. Each team's mushrooms were laid out, examined and counted by the festival organizers and mycologists. My team collected over 223 different mushrooms – I didn't even know such a thing was possible. Lunch was mushrooms in a red adobo sauce, which I ate with a smile, but was not enough to convince me that I could be a mushroom lover.

After a good night's sleep in a cocoon of blankets, I awoke refreshed and ready for day two, which was a series of workshops, discussions with mycologists and cooking. Vendors had set up stalls in the town square and the products ranged from woolen hats (I bought one the first day and even slept in it) to organic chocolate, mushroom teas that held the promise of healing … well, just about anything.

The cooking demonstration was given by Martha Contreras, a local from Cuajimoloyas. We prepared Amanita caesarea, commonly known in English as Caesar's mushroom, a la Mexicana, by sautéing the mushrooms with tomato, onion and jalapenos in a large clay pot on an anafre (small tin charcoal brazier). A handful of epazote added a lovely top note and the mixture was rolled up in a potato tortilla. It was my 'aha' mushrooms moment. The flavors were so delicate and the mushroom still raw and fresh enough to not be chewy.

I came away from the festival with a healthy supply of dried mushrooms, ideas and an excitement for learning more. I met so many interesting people, as the festival attracts biologists, naturalist, birders and mycologists.

My father passed away just as I was making Mexico my permanent home, and while he was supportive, he was paternal in his concern. At his funeral, the rich chanterelle stews he was known for were served. A good measure for me is to wonder what he would think if he could see me now. As I trudged through the woods at the Cuajimoloyas festival, suppressing a craving for peanut butter and ginger ale, I think he would have loved it.

The Wild Mushroom Festival in Cuajimoloyas will take place on July 19 and 20th, 2025. Information below.

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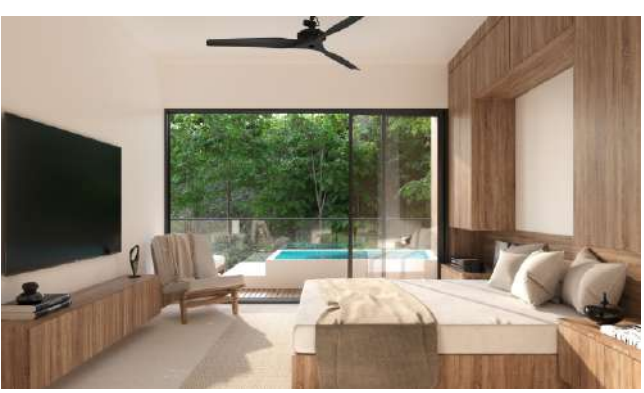

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