The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico March 2025

Issue 146 FREE

> In This Issue: Oaxacan Women Who Shaped History

Stumbling Steps Towards
Huatulco's Pedestrian Corridor

Social Class in Mexico: From Skin Color to Show Me the Money!



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Editor's Letter

Class, race, sexuality, gender and all other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other need to be excavated from the inside.

Dorothy Allison

his month our writers explore the class system. As humans, we love to categorize. We name things, sort them, put them in their proper place. It's how we make sense of the world, how we navigate complexity. We do this with plants and animals, with time and space, and, of course, with people. We build systems, hierarchies, and classifications—some useful, others arbitrary, and some deeply entrenched in power and history.

Lately, I've been thinking about this as I care for my mother, who has dementia. She was once an avid birdwatcher, able to name and identify countless species at a glance. Now, those names are slipping away. She no longer calls the kiskadee by name, no longer distinguishes between a flycatcher and a warbler in the way she once did. And yet, she still sees the birds. She watches their movements, listens to their calls, notices the shimmer of their feathers in the morning light. In some ways, she is experiencing them more purely, freed from the constraints of classification. It reminds me of Shakespeare's famous question: would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? While naming things helps humans to make sense of the world, it is also a way that we create divisions between ourselves and the world.

Mexico has long been a place of rigid social categories. The casta system of colonial times assigned people value based on their ancestry, with Spanish blood at the top and Indigenous and African heritage ranked below in an elaborate taxonomy of race and class. Those classifications may no longer be law, but their impact lingers. Social class in Mexico today is still a structure of division—one shaped by wealth, education, and skin color, as well as deeply ingrained perceptions of worth. The categories may have changed, but the impulse to sort people into hierarchies remains.

And yet, what if we let go of the names? What if, instead of seeing people through the lens of class, we focused on their essence—their kindness, their resilience, their humor? What if we paid attention to the qualities that matter, rather than the labels that confine? My mother may no longer remember the names of birds, but she still finds joy in watching them. Perhaps there's something to learn from that.

See you next month,





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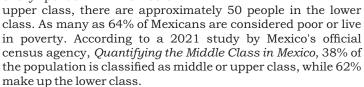
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Understanding Mexico's Middle Class

By Kary Vannice

here's something interesting going on with Mexico's middle class. While the majority of Mexicans identify as middle class, some scholars suggest that a true middle class doesn't even exist in Mexico.

In a country where the top 1% own 50% of the nation's wealth, it's not surprising that Mexico's economic structure looks quite different from its neighbors, the U.S. and Canada. For every person in Mexico's



Even among Latin countries, the economic gap in Mexico is wide. Closely tied to factors like race and generational wealth, research shows that lighter-skinned Mexicans, who often come from families with European heritage, dominate the upper class. By contrast, darker-skinned Mexicans typically earn 53% less than their lighter-skinned counterparts, making it challenging for those of indigenous decent to break the middle-class barrier.

Inequity is compounded in the lower classes where the majority work at informal, low-paying jobs simply to provide for their families, often without benefits like healthcare or retirement plans. More than half of the population works informal jobs in Mexico. Despite this, most Mexicans perceive themselves as middle class.

In 2022, *Revista: Harvard Review of Latin America* reported that, "79% of Mexicans consider themselves to be middle class, a quantity quite superior to the reality. The mistaken perception of belonging to the middle class exists in both the rich and poor. Two-thirds of the top 1% of income in Mexico perceive themselves as middle class. And 47% of Mexicans who live in poverty also believe the same thing."

Despite both upper and lower classes perceiving themselves to be "middle class," the day-to-day realities of these two socioeconomic groups is stark. In a World Values Survey, 62% of Mexicans identified as middle class, yet in the previous 12 months, one-third reported they had experienced food insecurity, nearly 60% felt unsafe, and close to 40% had been unable to pay for necessary healthcare. Only 33% of this group reported having their basic needs consistently met.



The Revista assessment suggests that only 23% of Mexicans actually fit into the middle-class category. So what does a middle-class income look like in Mexico? Most metrics put the annual income between \$6,000 and \$20,000 (USD), a shockingly low number by most foreigners' standards.

In contrast, Canada's average annual middle-class salary was between \$53,359 and \$137,000 CAD in 2023-24, while the United States reported an average middle-

class income of between \$53,740 and \$161,220 USD in 2023. These figures highlight a significant income disparity between Mexico and its northern counterparts. The top middle-class annual salary in Mexico is less than half of the lowest middle-class earners in both the US and Canada.

Minimum wage comparisons further underscore these differences. As of 2025, Mexico's national monthly minimum wage was 5,576 pesos (\$388 CAD), while Canada's federal monthly minimum wage was \$2,768 CAD.

This means the Mexicans who work in private homes, food service, or run the shops you frequent are likely facing very different financial realities than you might expect. Mexico's daily minimum wage is just \$278.80 pesos. A Canadian making minimum wage makes in one hour what a Mexican makes in seven hours, likely doing manual labor.

Despite identifying as "middle class", the majority of Mexicans still struggle to meet their monthly needs. The *Revista* assessment concluded by saying, "Mexico is <u>not</u> a country of middle classes. It is a country in which to be middle class is the exception, a level of lifestyle to which very few people have access."

Understanding the complexities of Mexico's middle class offers valuable insight into the lives of those you may encounter daily, like housekeepers, gardeners, artisans, or servers. While their lighthearted smiles may reflect a "perceived" middle-class status, their reality is often far more challenging.

Supporting local businesses, tipping well, and paying fairly for services provide opportunities to help bridge the gap between perception and true financial stability, and to contribute to a safer, more secure middle-class reality here in Mexico, which in turn provides a more stable economic future for Mexicans and foreigners alike.

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A Brief Overview of Slavery in Mexico

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

lavery is one of the oldest human institutions. Archeological evidence points to slavery being practiced in Mesopotamia over 5000 years ago. Each year, our family (along with Jews all over the world) gathers to retell the story of our people, the Israelites, gaining freedom from slavery in Egypt in 1513 BCE.

Slavery has been practiced in every corner of the world on every continent except perhaps Antarctica. Mexico

was no exception. Long before the Spanish arrived in Mexico, the indigenous tribes enslaved captives taken in ongoing battles. Forced labor was commonplace for producing necessities of human life – food, clothing and shelter. And once Europeans began to colonize the "new world," indigenous populations here became a source of slaves for building towns and cities and plantations, and for mass cultivation of agricultural products such as sugar cane for world trade. The *encomienda* system (see Julie Etra's article on page 26) legitimized this practice. However, the introduction of viral and bacterial diseases to which the natives in "New Spain" had never been exposed and against which they had no natural immunity, resulted in massive numbers of slaves dying or being left without the physical ability to carry out heavy labor.

From Africa to Mexico

Relatively small numbers of slaves from west and central Africa were then brought to the Americas from Europe by the conquistadores in the early 1500s. In addition, free Africans were members of the crews serving the Spaniards and Portuguese who claimed lands in North and South America for their royal sponsors. Soon, however, the transatlantic slave trade became a major commercial operation, capturing Africans and selling them as slaves in the Americas. It began in earnest in the 16th century, peaked in the 18th century, and continued into the 19th century. New Spain was the major territory in which these slaves were first sold. Between the early 1500s and the mid-1600s, approximately 120,000 slaves were shipped from Africa to Mexico to work in the mines, on sheep and cattle ranches, and on plantations - primarily sugar cane plantations. Four areas were particularly populated by slaves: the Veracruz ports and plantations, the mining and ranching areas northwest of Mexico City, the stretch of land south of Puebla to the Pacific Coast, and the Valle de Mexico.

Although the predominant "Gone with the Wind" myth of slavery north of the border portrayed slaves as well-cared for, singing as they picked cotton in the fields, in colonial Mexico the resistance to enslavement was graphically made known by relatively high rates of suicide and infanticide among the slaves. Mothers would prefer that their babies die rather than suffer the life of the slave. The first threat of a major uprising of slaves in Mexico occurred in 1537 in and around Mexico City.



This threat led not only to brutal public murder of the Africans who were identified as leaders, but also resulted in the use of extremely repressive measures to control slaves. Official proclamations issued in the late 1500s penalized slaves who were runaways to hundreds of lashes, castration or death. Throughout the first half of the 1600s, small groups of former slaves, who literally overthrew their shackles and often joined with equally outraged indigenous people, terrorized cities and ranches around

the colony.

The Emergence of AfroMexicanos

Over the following decades the number of slaves brought from Africa to Mexico began to decline. Perhaps because of the insatiable desire for slave labor on cotton and other plantations north of the border, sales of African slaves in Mexico were reduced in favor of sales in the southern British colonies. By the mid-1700s the population of Mexicans who had African ancestry - free or slave - had primarily been born in Mexico. Mandated by the Catholic Church, marriage of slaves was encouraged. And given the disproportionate number of men among the enslaved people of African ancestry, marriages commonly involved male slaves marrying indigenous women. Their children were called, in the caste system of Mexico, zambos, and they were either enslaved or at the lowest rank of the social-legal hierarchy. Woman slaves were commonly violated by Spanish colonists without the benefit of marriage and their children, called mulattos, were also typically slaves or essentially the same low rank as zambos. Children of mulatto and Spanish parents were called Moriscos and were somewhat higher rank than zambos or mulattos; children of Moriscos and Spanish parents were designated Tresalvos and were the highest rank among those with African ancestry. Although the caste system was very rigid and patently based on skin color and ancestry, there is documentary evidence that even though they were still legally slaves, mulattos and their children with Spanish parentage often received instruction in reading and basic information about their legal rights. One right was to redeem themselves from slavery for a set price or to be set free when their owner died.

The End of Slavery

The 1800s saw a major development in the institution of Mexican slavery. The revolutionary leader and priest Hidalgo, often called the father of Mexican independence, declared slavery abolished in 1810. Slave trade was legally forbidden in Mexico in 1824 after the successful revolution and the formation of a new government. The institution of slavery itself was declared illegal in 1839; in practice, however, slavery was far from abolished for several decades. Yet, given the existence of communities in Mexico where slavery was prohibited, many slaves in the U.S. and adjacent territories fled to Mexico to live in freedom. Although New Spain set the invidious example of colonial development dependent on enslaving Africans and selling them for profit, once Mexico threw off the shackles of Spain, the government set the example of striking the chains of slavery from their citizens.

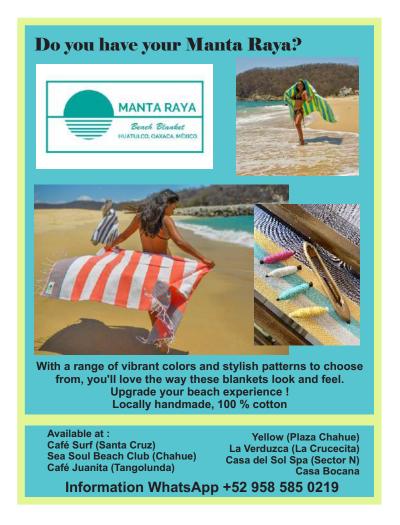
In the United States, slavery was officially ended by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, but the period that followed also saw a lengthy adjustment. Even today, the residual effects of the slave trade can be easily noted in demographic data about the locations of black residents in Mexico and the US. In the US, the Census Bureau has for decades tabulated and mapped the percentage of black residents in states, counties, and down to census districts. The maps show that communities having substantial black populations (as high as 80%) are still located primarily in Southern states with boundaries along the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico (where the trade ships made port).

Measuring AfroMexicano History

INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía), Mexico's statistical agency, traditionally accepted the reality that the population was a complex mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and so did not attempt to collect data on individuals' self-reported race. In the 2015 survey, however, INEGI asked whether people considered themselves black, that is to say, "afromexicana o afrodescendiente," for the first time. The results revealed the residual influence of a centuries-old pattern of slave trade - this one in the Pacific. In addition to areas around Veracruz and Mexico City mentioned above. concentrations of AfroMexicanos were found in rural areas near Acapulco and elsewhere in the state of Guerrero, as well as in the state of Oaxaca. Although the number of AfroMexicanos is nowhere very high (averaging 2.4% in the entire country), these Pacific coastal areas revealed some of the highest concentrations: 9.6% of the population of Guerrero (9.5% in 2023) and 4.9% in Oaxaca (3.6% in 2023). Most of Oaxaca's AfroMexicanos live near Puerto Escondido and Huatulco.

The origin of these populations with African ancestry along the Pacific coast was not the transatlantic slave trade, but the 17^h-century slave trade known as the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade route. (The galleons were large, multi-story Spanish sailing ships that had previously served in warfare.) At that time, the Philippines were a territory of Spain, facilitating trade from Europe and Africa through there. Slaves from various sources, including Africa, were sold in Manila, and some of them were further transported to the Pacific coast of Mexico. Their descendants are the AfroMexicanos now living near the Pacific coast.







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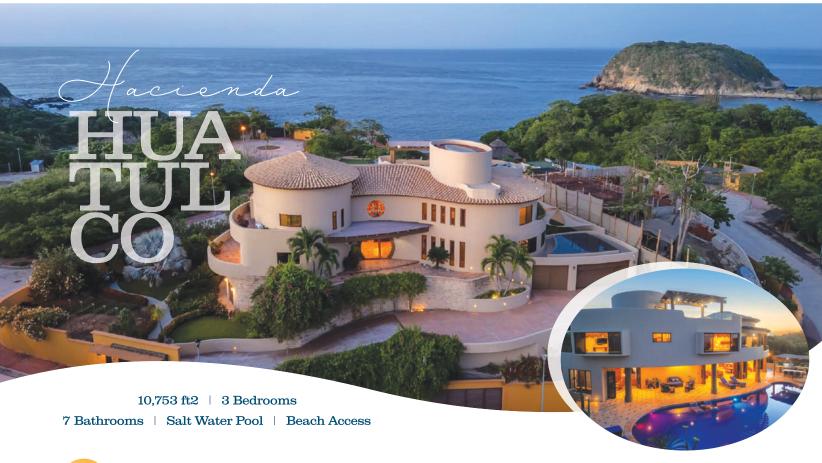
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Stumbling Steps Towards Huatulco's Pedestrian Corridor

By Randy Jackson

wo years ago, in an article titled <u>The Saga of Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue</u>), I reported on the decadeslong, start-and-stop development of the pedestrian walkway connecting Santa Cruz and La Crucecita. This corridor, signed as *Andador Peatonal* (Pedestrian Walkway), started as a project under the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006-12) through the tourism development agency FONATUR (*Fondo Nacional de Fomento Turismo*). Since that time, some buildings have appeared along the walkway, although none have been completed, as uncertainties have stalled or slowed investments.

Comparison with Other FONATUR Projects

Pedestrian tourist corridors are a standard feature of FONATUR's other resorts, and exist in Cancun (Playa del Carmen) and Ixtapa. They are all named 5th Avenue after the famous shopping street in New York City. However, starting right out of the development gate, Huatulco's 5th Avenue faced one challenge the other resorts did not: Huatulco's walkway climbs a significant hill. Yet in 2020, after FONATUR reconfigured the sizes of the lots, private developers (and likely some are speculators) stepped up to purchase all twenty-four lots available for sale, possibly buying into the notion "If you build it, they will come," made popular by the 1989 film, Field of Dreams.

Recent Developments and Challenges

That notion may eventually apply to Huatulco's pedestrian corridor. As of mid-February of this year, there were seven buildings, two of which appear nearly complete. One of these buildings has multiple retail locations with full glass storefronts; the other is a condominium near the sports complex. When sold, the lots had a covenant requiring the owners to complete their development by December 31, 2025, or face financial penalties. Some owners will undoubtedly exceed this period as most lots show no sign of construction.

Parking and Accessibility Issues

The corridor's development calls for a mix of residential and retail properties, with 30% of the lots intended for hotels. When the corridor is fully developed, it could attract hundreds of daily guests and visitors, raising the question: What about parking? Parking areas have been allocated for each end of the corridor. On the Santa Cruz end, a 7,132 square-meter (almost 77,000 square feet) parking lot will parallel Santa Cruz Boulevard, next to the Pedestrian Corridor entrance. On the La Crucecita end, two separate lots stretching along the road behind the Naval hospital will total 4,927 square meters (over 50,000 square feet). This could allow approximately 150 to 175 parking slots on each end (using an AI model for the calculation). The parking areas are owned and managed by the corridor lot owners' association, which is also responsible for ensuring security and maintaining the corridor. As of mid-February, no work has been done on the designated lots for parking.



The Present and Future of the Pedestrian Corridor

The pedestrian corridor stretches about 600 meters (about 660 yards) from end to end. It comprises a walking area on both sides of a single-lane service road. On foot, this traffic-free route is about one kilometre shorter than following the roads between Santa Cruz and La Crucecita. Many people now use this shortcut daily. And where pedestrians go, motorcycles can, regardless of the signs prohibiting motor vehicles. Unfortunately, the corridor has already been the scene of one motorcycle fatality.

Financial Viability and Investor Confidence

The surge in development along the corridor that began in 2022 has since stalled, leading to a financial dilemma for investors. For a pedestrian corridor to thrive, sufficient businesses must operate to draw customers. If the number of open businesses falls below this threshold, the financial viability of new stores, restaurants, and accommodations can be precarious until sufficient foot traffic exists. Furthermore, the earliest developments to open may face additional challenges from construction activity needed for subsequent projects, which can reduce pedestrian traffic. This would have been the rationale for having the time limit covenant for the purchasers of the lots. But that didn't work.

Speculation on Future Developments

One can also speculate on another factor dampening investor ardour: uncertainty. FONATUR is leaving the future development of Huatulco to the State of Oaxaca, while infrastructure improvements are badly needed. Furthermore, two significant tourist assets, the golf course in Tangolunda and the convention center in Chahue, are mired in legal and political muck. How Huatulco's 5th Avenue will fare in that context is far from certain.

Conclusion

The development of the pedestrian corridor thus languishes. Although many people appreciate the pedestrian route connecting Santa Cruz with La Crucecita, they will have to wait longer for businesses (and hopefully more illumination at night) to line the walkway.

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The Politcial Art of José Guadalupe Posada

By Jane Bauer

ost people know this image but don't know significance—La Calavera Catrina. La Calavera Catrina serves as a critique of Mexico's upper class. Created around 1910, this skeleton, dressed in a fancy European-style hat, mocks the Mexican elite who sought to adopt European customs while neglecting their own cultural roots. The image later became a symbol of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). representing the idea that wealth and social status are fleeting.

The artist, José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) was a Mexican illustrator and printmaker known for his politically charged and satirical caricatures. His work, often featuring calaveras (skeletons), critiqued the social and political inequalities of his time. Through his art, Posada gave voice to the struggles of the working class and exposed the corruption of the elite, making his work an enduring symbol of Mexico's revolutionary spirit.





Another significant piece, Calavera of Don Quixote, reimagines Miguel de Cervantes' literary hero in contemporary Mexico. In this print, Don Quixote is in battle, much like the poor struggling against the oppressive forces of industrialization and political corruption. Posada's use of the famous character serves as a metaphor for the struggles of the underprivileged against an unjust system.

Posada's influence extended far beyond his lifetime. His work inspired generations of Mexican artists, including Diego Rivera, who prominently featured La Catrina in his mural Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central). Rivera and other members of the Mexican Muralism movement admired Posada's ability to blend art with social criticism, using visual storytelling to advocate for political change.

The Role of Satire in Posada's Work

Born in Aguascalientes, Mexico, Posada began his career as a printmaker and political cartoonist. He honed his skills in lithography and engraving, producing thousands of illustrations for newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides. His ability to blend humor with biting social commentary made his work highly influential, particularly during the turbulent years leading up to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Posada's caricatures often depicted the stark class divisions in Mexican society. He used skeletons—an iconic element of his work—not only as a reminder of mortality but as a way to strip away superficial differences and highlight universal human conditions. By portraying both the rich and the poor as calaveras, he revealed the absurdity of class hierarchies and the inevitability of death, which rendered all distinctions meaningless.

English Language Alcoholics Anonymous Every Monday at 7pm at Cafe Casa Mayor, La Crucecita Today, Posada is celebrated not only for his artistic talent but also for his fearless critique of class disparities. His calaveras remain a powerful reminder of Mexico's history of social struggle, and his legacy endures in the country's cultural consciousness. Through his bold and unflinching work, Posada continues to speak to issues of inequality, reminding us that the fight for justice is eternal.





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Things: Pluma Hidalgo

By Frances López

Nestled in the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains, Pluma Hidalgo is a hidden gem known for its world-class coffee, breathtaking views, and tranquil atmosphere. Just a short drive from Huatulco, this mountain town offers visitors a refreshing escape from the coast. Whether you're a coffee lover, a nature enthusiast, or simply looking for a peaceful retreat, here are five things to experience in Pluma Hidalgo.

1. Stay at Finca Don Gabriel

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rustic charm, peaceful setting, and welcoming hosts make it an ideal spot to unwind and connect with nature. www.fincadongabrielhuatulco.com.

2. Eat at Casa Semilla

Start your day with a hearty breakfast at Casa Semilla, a local favorite known for its freshly roasted coffee and vegan meals. This charming café serves healthy whole delicious food made with local ingredients, it is a community hub that showcases coffee, disability inclusion as well as well-being and nourishment.



3. Walk the suspension bridge

The recently created suspension bridge is more than 104 meters in length. It is located right at the entrance of the town and is a must-see stop for those visiting Pluma Hidalgo. Access costs \$100 pesos per person. Cash only.



Do you have a favorite place in Mexico?

What are the 5 things we can't miss?

Send us your list: TheEyeHuatulco@gmail.com

4. Tour a Coffee Farm

Pluma Hidalgo is synonymous with highaltitude coffee, and visiting a coffee farm is a must. Many local fincas, such as Finca El Pacifico and Finca Don Gabriel, offer guided tours where visitors can walk through coffee fields, learn about traditional and sustainable farming methods, and taste freshly roasted beans. The tours provide insight into the dedication and craftsmanship that go into producing one of Mexico's finest coffees.



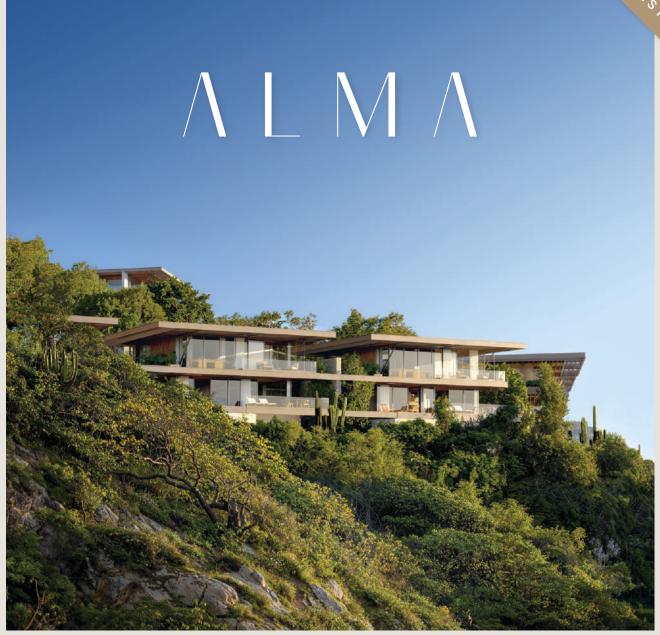
5. Hike to Cascada Arcoiris

For those who love nature, a hike to Cascada Arcoiris is a rewarding adventure. The trail winds through lush forests and coffee plantations before leading to a stunning waterfall where visitors can cool off in the crystalclear waters. The serene surroundings, fresh mountain air, and sounds of nature make it a peaceful retreat away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.





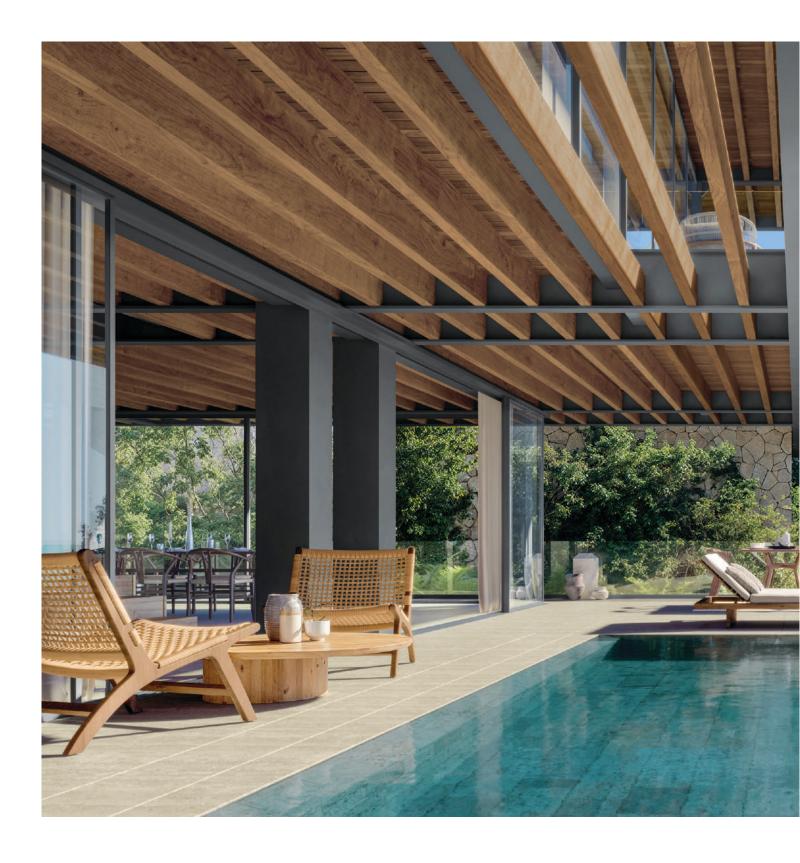
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While **feeling completely secluded**, enjoy a short **4-minute nature drive** to the conveniences of **Santa Cruz**, and an **8-minute drive to La Crucecita**.

Huatulco's first sector dedicated to modern architecture integrated into nature will forever remain quiet and preserved thanks to the presence of the National Park, as well as low density and low height regulations. Bike, walk, jog or drive into town easily via a scenic road in perfect condition, all while relishing the silence of a one-of-a-kind neighbor: Huatulco's National Park.

INQUIRIES: www.alma-huatulco.com

Social Class in Mexico: From Skin Color to Show Me the Money!

By Deborah Van Hoewyk

hen you watch Mexican television, do you look at the ads? Who do you see? Pale people. When you walk outside in Huatulco, or Santa María, or Oaxaca City, who do you see? Brown people, all the glorious shades of brown people.

Skin Color and Social Class in Mexico

It turns out that skin color is – and always has been – one of the major components of social class in Mexico. The most requested type of actor for commercial advertising is "international Latino" – dark hair and eyes are okay, but skin must be light. According to social anthropologist Juris Tipa, a professor/researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University-Iztapalapa, the whole notion of "international Latino" is "reinforcing the imagery of a 'Europeanised Latin Americanity' at the expense of the average Mexican."

Official statistical research in Mexico is carried out by INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography). Traditionally, adhering to the general notion that Mexico is a nation based on *mestizaje* – racial/ethnic mixing – INEGI's surveys have not included questions on race or skin color. (A question on African ancestry started appearing in 2015; see the Chaikens' article on slavery on page 8, as well as Julie Etra's article on page 26.)

Given that the Conquest left Mexico with not only slavery but a caste system based entirely on racial and ethnic classifications, the ideology of *mestizaje* would seem to be a political fiction. Even though the War of Independence replaced the caste system with a hierarchy based on wealth and education, the preference for that pale-skinned European look persisted (President Porfirio Díaz, whose dictatorial ways led up to the Mexican Revolution, was a noted Europhile). Academic research has now begun to look into the relationship of skin color and "life outcomes," i.e., social class.

After two centuries of independence, our findings provide compelling evidence that the colonial caste system, which liberal, conservative, authoritarian, and democratic elites have condemned for centuries, remains very much in place.

The Mexican Color Hierarchy
Guillermo Trejo, Melina Altimirano
American Political Science Association 2016

In 2010, Andrés Villareal, then at the Population Research Center at the University of Texas, was the first investigator to look at how skin color affects an individual's "life chances." He found that the darker your skin, the less education you had. The darker your skin, the lower your occupational category. The darker your skin, the more likely you were to live in poverty, although this relationship was not perfect – if you had light brown skin, you could make it into a more affluent category. Remember, the richest man in Mexico, Carlos Slim, has light brown skin!

Researchers from the Department of Sociology at Princeton University followed up on Villareal's research in 2012; their work added the finding that "class origin" – that is, the social status of your family – could moderate the effect of skin color. Interestingly, they found that high-income individuals are perceived to be white, regardless of the color of their skin. Overall, they found that skin color and class origin work together to reproduce social inequality in Mexico – and the class origin component works to set your fate even before you enter the labor market.

In 2018, using an 11-shade "palette" of skin colors, researchers at the Center for Economic Studies at the Colegio de México in Mexico City, found "profound social stratification by skin color." The lightest-skinned people have a year and a half more schooling and more than double the hourly earnings than those with the darkest skin color. Lighter skin brings more "social mobility," i.e., light-skinned people can move up the socio-economic ladder, while the darkest people actually dropped in socioeconomic status.



Does Skin Color = Social Class in Mexico?

Does this truly mean the caste system is alive and well? Not completely. Even though skin color can influence your access to advantages such as education, those advantages can moderate the effects of skin color. There's education (especially whether or not you speak English), along with professional skills and background. In a 2023 study in the *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies*, Thomas Stringer, a professor at Tecnológico de Monterrey, argues that the intersection of skin color, English proficiency, and intergenerational wealth determines your social class in Mexico.

The Mexican Association of Marketing Research and Public Opinion Agencies, otherwise known as AMAI, has developed a seven-level system of socioeconomic status (SES); the system is based on four characteristics: (1) education (how much professional or post-graduate study), (2) living situation (*vivienda* – how many bedrooms and how many cars), (3) Internet connectivity, and (4) technology (how many computers). AMAI places no emphasis on skin color – like all good marketing authorities, their system seems to be based on consumption.

So ... Show Me the Money!

It is interesting that Mexico does not have a standard definition of socio-economic status, and that perceptions of who is "middle" class are so fluid (see the article by Kary Vannice on page 6). Underlying all the SES measures noted above? Money. You want a nice house? You have to have the money to buy it or build it. Higher education? You have to pay tuition. Intergenerational wealth? Your family had to get it somewhere.

Money in Mexico, however, is not available to all – the World Inequality Report of 2022 ranks Mexico $12^{\rm th}$ in the world for the disparity between those at the economic top (1% of the population held almost 50% of the country's wealth) and bottom (50% of the population held only a bit more than 9% of the wealth).

Under the 2018-24 presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), however, income inequality actually decreased. AMLO shepherded successive 20% increases in the minimum wage, which sweetened union contracts as a bonus. He tightened outsourcing laws, retaining more manufacturing in Mexico – a policy that moved more than three million people into formal employment. Overall, the "multidimensional poverty rate" (income plus "social rights" – access to food, medical care, sanitation, etc.) dropped by over 5% in AMLO's first four years, with 8.9 million people lifted out of poverty.

When millions of people escape poverty, the country benefits enormously. But escaping poverty does not necessarily change your social class, nor does it provide access to the advantages of upward mobility.



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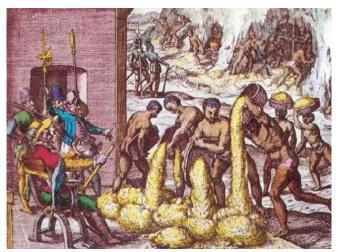
Encomienda and the Caste System in Mexico

By Julie Etra

Encomendar = Entrust

Spanish Origin

This legal system of forced labor originated in medieval Spain after the Reconquista in 1492, when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wrested control over Andalus (also known as Andalucia, a region of southern Spain). The system was established to extract tribute from the defeated Moors (originally from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco), many of whom were expelled to North Africa—an estimated three



million people. Some returned and converted to Catholicism, becoming known as Moriscos. The system rewarded soldiers and financiers who had contributed to Spain's conquests, including those of the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa.

Exportation to the New World and the Philippines

The *encomienda* system was first introduced to the newly conquered Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti) in 1502 and later to Mexico and the Philippines, where it took on slight regional variations. In is 2009 study The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521-1555, Robert Himmerich y Valencia, Associate Professor of History at the University of New Mexico provides an excellent description of the encomienda: "a grant of "a grant of the Indians of a prescribed indigenous polity, who were to provide the grantee (the encomendero) tribute in the form of commodities and service in return for protection and religious instruction."

New Spain needed free labor for its silver mines and religious conversion efforts. Officially approved by the Spanish Crown in 1503, the system expanded southward to Spanish colonies in Central and South America and throughout the Caribbean. Initially, the right to encomienda was granted to an *adelantado* or *encomendero*, a conquistador awarded the opportunity to conquer new territories on behalf of the Spanish Crown. This system was later extended to adventurers, colonizers, and even municipalities. It was essentially slavery under a different name—a legal arrangement that did not allocate land or other physical resources, such as mines or haciendas, which came later. The only distinction from outright slavery was that the indigenous workers could not be sold or inherited. The adelantado retained 80% of acquired wealth, while the Crown received the remaining 20%.

Structure

There were 506 encomienda grants in Mexico. Though granted for life, they were not inheritable, and most reverted to the Crown upon the encomendero's death, with small provisions made for surviving family members. The size of the population tied to a particular encomienda varied, averaging around 2,000 family units, though these units could differ in composition. Some encomiendas were much larger—for example, Hernán Cortés's encomienda included over 23,000 family units.

Smaller encomiendas were adequate for property improvements and cultivation. They also allowed a settler to build a home, feed his family, and maintain a small entourage of salaried personal followers (*paniaguados*) to protect his holdings from rebellious native groups and marauding Europeans. Additionally, encomenderos were responsible for paying the parish priest.

Decline

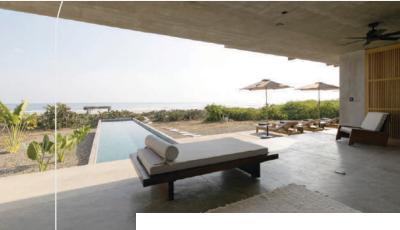
The system was short-lived, with major reforms attempted in 1573. It was perceived as abusive and counterproductive, especially as the population of New Spain had declined drastically—from approximately 22 million in 1500 to just 3 million by 1550 due to disease and forced labor fatalities. Additionally, there were not enough licenses available to meet demand, and there were too few indigenous workers left to sustain the system. As a result, the Spanish Crown decided to place control of the conquered population directly under royal authority instead of under the powerful encomenderos. The system was officially abolished on September 17, 1721, when the issuance of new encomiendas in all of Spain's colonies was prohibited. However, remnants of the system persisted in parts of Mexico until the early 18th century and lingered in the Yucatán Peninsula until the 1780s.

Repartimiento

The *repartimiento* system replaced encomienda, shifting labor control from private individuals to the Spanish colonial government. Under this system, Spanish colonists and municipalities were granted the right to extract forced but low-paid labor from local communities in conquered territories. Designed to replace the inefficient encomienda system, repartimiento was eventually limited to crucial industries such as food and textile production and precious metal mining.

For further reading, see Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken's article on slavery in Mexico on page 8.







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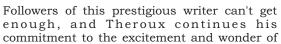
By Carole Reedy

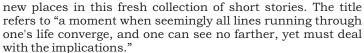
his month we offer a variety of genres by noted authors to satisfy the full spectrum of our readers' tastes. Perhaps a title outside your comfort zone will pique your interest too?

All books have been recently published except for the last two, which will be published in May.

EXOTIC AND DOMESTIC STORIES The Vanishing Point by Paul Theroux

From his books *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975, my personal favorite) to *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* (2008), Theroux has taken us along on his adventures across the globe.



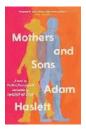


Theroux's short stories are reminiscent of the styles of Maupassant and O. Henry, complete with surprise endings.

GAY FICTION

Mothers and Sons by Adam Haslett

The premise of the novel, as you may have guessed, is a reunion after many years of mother and son. Readers have been both pleasantly and unpleasantly surprised by the trajectory the book takes, which should be no surprise coming from this established writer of fiction.



PAUL THEROUX

VANISHING

Haslett's first book, a short-story collection titled *You Are Not a Stranger Here* (2002), and his second novel, *Imagine Me Gone* (2016), were both finalists for two major awards, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Maybe the third time is the charm.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE Open Season by Jonathan Kellerman

I can't believe I'm writing this: *Open Season* is book number 40 of the popular and obviously compelling series starring the duo of psychologist Alex Delaware and homicide cop Milos Sturgis. The juxtaposition of classic crime procedures and the mysteries of human behavior make the series incomparable and



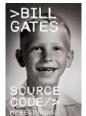
compelling. In this title, the action takes place in Los Angeles where brutal and mystifying murders occur.

Kellerman's novels consistently appear on *The New York Times* bestseller list, and Kellerman himself received a PhD in child psychology at age 24. His first published book was *Psychological Aspects of Childhood Cancer* (1980). In 1985 he published his first Alex Delaware book, *When the Bough Breaks*. And the rest is history.

MEMOIR

Source Code by Bill Gates

Memoirs, for me, are much more readable and interesting than autobiographies, which can tend to be self-aggrandizing. A review in *The Guardian* calls Gates' memoir "refreshingly frank. There is general gratitude for influential mentors, and a wry self-deprecation throughout."



This book takes us only through Gates' childhood and adolescence. Stay tuned for later life discoveries in the next volume. Of his childhood, he writes that "if I were growing up today, I would probably be considered on the autism spectrum," and now regrets some of his early behavior, though "I wouldn't change the brain I was given for anything."

ESTABLISHED WRITER

Three Days in June by Anne Tyler

"Joyful" is the description *The Guardian* gives this latest novel from Tyler, prolific writer of books and short stories. *Three Days in June* is one of her shorter books, easily demonstrating her ability to bring us a "feel good" read without being insincere or unctuous.



A wedding is central to the story, the estranged parents of the bride the main players. Readers of Tyler know what she can do with this combination.

My favorite Anne Tyler novel is *Breathing Lessons*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1989. In her review in The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani provides insight into Tyler's talent, which continues to ensure her position as a best-selling writer:

"Tyler is able to examine the conflict, felt by nearly all her characters, between domesticity and freedom, between heredity and independence. In addition, she is able, with her usual grace and magnanimity, to chronicle the ever-shifting covenants made by parents and children, husbands and wives, and in doing so, to depict both the losses - and redemptions - wrought by the passage of time."

LITERARY PUZZLE TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH Death Take Me by Cristina Rivera Garza

This is listed as the most anticipated book of the year by *The New York Times, Esquire, Ms Magazine,* and *Lit Hub.* You may remember Rivera Garza won the Pulitzer Prize for *Liliana's Invincible Summer.* She also is the head of the Spanish creative writing PhD program at the University of Houston.



The plot of this mystery crime novel seems topsy turvy in that the victims (a word ironically

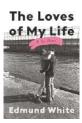
always feminine in the Spanish language) are always male. Castrated men are found accompanied by lines of verse at their sides. A professor and a detective are the investigators of these mysterious crimes.

Fellow author Yuri Herrera says "Cristina Rivera Garza does not respect what is expected of a writer, of a novel, of language. she is an agitator." That comment may be enough to motivate one to read this mysterious novel.

SEX MEMOIR

The Loves of My Life by Edmund White

Of the hundreds of books I have read, one of my favorites is *The Flaneur* by Edmund White. Subtitled "A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris," White takes us to little-known bookstores and cafes during the journey. You don't have to be a Francophile to love this book. After reading it my friends and I started referring to our daily walks and meetings as "flaneuring."



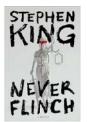
White has been a prominent writer for many years and has many bestsellers under his belt. He is known as a groundbreaking author of gay fiction and has been awarded many literary prizes, among them Lambda Literary's Visionary Award, the National Book Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award, and the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction. France named him Chevalier (and later Officier) de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1993.

Per the title, this book is obviously highly personal and honest, all written in his incomparable brilliant style.

CRIME FICTION

Never Flinch by Stephen King

Most readers are aware of King's well-deserved success. From his early novels in the 1970s (*The Shining, Carrie, Salem's Lot* and *The Stand*) to 50 years later (*Holly, Fairy Tale, Billy Flinch* and *You Like It Darker*), King's books have sold 350 million copies worldwide and provided tremendous reading pleasure. His oeuvre includes 60 novels and a plethora of short stories. *On Writing*, his 2010 book was called "part memoir, part masterclass" by amazon and a "one-of-a-kind classic" by the Wall Street Journal.

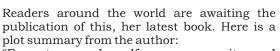


It appears that King's most recent book will feature a new cast of characters and some old favorites such as Holly Gibney. There are two plot lines: one about a killer on a revenge mission and another about a vigilante who is targeting a celebrity speaker.

HISTORICAL NOVEL

My Name is Emilia de Valle by Isabella Allende

Allende, the most widely read living writer in the Spanish language, was born in Peru but raised in Chile. Her father was first cousin to President Salvador Allende of Chile.



"Eager to prove herself as a young writer and journalist, Emilia Del Valle seizes an

opportunity to cover a brewing civil war in Chile. While there, Emilia meets her estranged father and delves into the violent confrontation in the country where her roots lie. As she discovers more about Chile and falls in love with a fellow journalist, the war escalates and Emilia finds herself in extreme danger, fearing for her life and questioning her identity and her destiny. I can't wait for you to meet Emilia."

DYSTOPIAN FICTION Gliff by Ali Smith

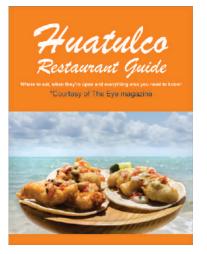
What is a gliff? Smith dedicates a page and a half to describing the various meanings. Judge for yourself which is intended when reading the book.



Smith speculates a near future in which the world is experiencing authoritarian control. The book is filled with philosophical conundrums such as meaning and meaningless.

One reader reflects: "GLIFF is a treat for the reader who enjoys wordplay, and absurdity that invokes madness and heartbreak."

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Oaxacan Women Who Shaped History

By Alicia Flores

arch is Women's History Month, a time to honor the achievements and contributions of women across the world. Oaxaca, a region rich in culture and tradition, has been home to many extraordinary women who have left lasting impacts in politics, art, activism, and indigenous heritage. Here, we highlight a few remarkable Oaxacan women who have shaped history and continue to inspire future generations.

María Sabina: The Shaman Who Brought Oaxacan Mysticism to the World

María Sabina, a Mazatec healer from the Sierra Mazateca region, became known internationally for her sacred mushroom ceremonies. Born in 1894, she used psilocybin mushrooms in spiritual and healing rituals, a practice rooted in centuries-old indigenous traditions. In the 1950s, outsiders seeking psychedelic experiences sought her out, catapulting her into global recognition. While her work was often misunderstood by the Western



world, María Sabina remains a powerful symbol of indigenous wisdom and spiritual healing.

Read more from our previous article:

 $\frac{https://theeyehuatulco.com/2015/05/01/maria-sabina-and-magic-mushrooms/}{}$

Lila Downs: The Voice of Oaxacan Heritage

Grammy-winning singer and activist Lila Downs has used her music to celebrate Oaxacan culture and advocate for social justice. Born to a Mixtec mother and Scottish-American father, Downs has blended traditional



indigenous sounds with contemporary influences, bringing Oaxacan identity to a global stage. Her music often highlights themes of migration, indigenous rights, and female empowerment, making her a cultural ambassador for Oaxaca and beyond.

Beyond her musical career, Downs is also known for her activism. She has been a vocal advocate for the rights of indigenous and marginalized communities, using her platform to bring awareness to issues such as poverty, racism, and gender inequality. Her lyrics, often infused with historical and political narratives, serve as a bridge between past and present, urging audiences to reflect on social injustices. Through her powerful performances, distinctive style, and dedication to her roots, Downs continues to be a beacon of cultural pride and resistance. She has also collaborated with various artists across genres, ensuring that Oaxacan and Mexican traditions remain relevant in contemporary music.

Eufrosina Cruz: A Trailblazer for Indigenous Women in Politics

Eufrosina Cruz grew up in a Zapotec community where women were traditionally excluded from political participation. In 2007, she made headlines when her election as municipal president was annulled simply because she was a woman. This injustice fueled her determination to fight for gender equality and indigenous women's rights. She later became the first indigenous woman to preside over the Oaxacan Congress and has been



instrumental in pushing for legal reforms that empower women in indigenous communities.

Her advocacy has led to groundbreaking changes, including legal amendments ensuring women's political participation in indigenous communities where traditional customs had long barred them from leadership roles. Cruz has traveled internationally to speak about gender equality, sharing her journey from a marginalized rural community to becoming a symbol of empowerment. Her work extends beyond politics; she has been involved in educational programs aimed at fostering leadership skills among young indigenous women. By challenging deeply rooted patriarchal structures, Cruz has opened doors for future generations of women to take on roles of influence in both government and society.

Natalia Toledo: Poet and Guardian of the Zapotec Language

Natalia Toledo, a poet and writer, has dedicated her career to preserving the Zapotec language through literature. As the daughter of the legendary Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo, she inherited a deep appreciation



for indigenous culture. Her poetry, written in both Zapotec and Spanish, explores themes of identity, nature, and tradition, ensuring that the beauty of her ancestral language continues to thrive in modern literature. One of her most well-known works, *Guie' yaase'* (Olivo negro, Black Olive), is a bilingual poetry collection that captures the essence of Zapotec traditions and worldview. Readers interested in her work can also explore *The Black Flower and Other Zapotec Poems* (tr. Clare Sullivan, 2015),, which offers a glimpse into her lyrical and evocative storytelling, bringing the richness of Zapotec language to a broader audience.

The stories of these Oaxacan women demonstrate resilience, creativity, and the power to challenge societal norms. Whether through music, politics, poetry, or spiritual traditions, they have each left an indelible mark on history. As we celebrate Women's History Month, may their legacies continue to inspire future generations to embrace their heritage and push for positive change.



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From the Archives March 2012

Benito Juárez Life and Legacy

By Brooke Gazer

arch 21 marks the 205 anniver sary of the birth of Benito Juárez. It is astounding that from his humble beginnings in Oaxaca, he became one of the most respected figures in Mexico's history. Orphaned at age 3 and raised by his grandparents, Juárez moved to Oaxaca City at the tender age of 13. He arrived in the city illiterate and speaking only Zapotec, the



language of his Indian heritage. He must have been both brilliant and charismatic to have acquired a Law degree, married a woman of high social standing and had a triumphant albeit turbulent political career.

Arriving in Oaxaca City, young Juárez was employed by the Maza family where his sister was also a servant. From there he was introduced to Antonio Salanueva, a lay member of the Franciscan order, who first tutored the boy and then helped with his admission into seminary school. Rather than taking religious vows upon graduation, Juárez entered law school. With his law degree began a political career as an antiestablishment Liberal representing poor Indian communities. Nine years later Juarez married Margarita Maza, the daughter of one of Oaxaca's wealthiest families and his former patron. In spite of the wide gap of both age and socioeconomic class, theirs was a strong marriage. She supported him in his endeavors to help the poor and, despite severe hardship, during his political banishments from Mexico.

While, serving as governor of Oaxaca from 1847-52, Juárez reduced corruption, built roads, public buildings, and schools. He reorganized the state national guard, and when he left office, the economy of Oaxaca was in good standing. His state government became renowned throughout Mexico for its honesty, public spirit, and constructiveness.

In 1853 the dictator Santa Anna returned to power and Juárez was one of several liberals expelled from Mexico. His time in exile was not idle. He worked in a cigarette factory in Louisiana while participating in a widespread movement to overthrow Santa Anna. In 1854 troops marched into Mexico City and General Alvarez, who took over as president, appointed Benito Juárez as his minister of justice. It is ironic that this former illiterate boy who was educated by the clergy was responsible for the "Juárez Law," which severely limited the clergy's jurisdiction.

In 1857, Juárez was elevated to Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The same vear a new constitution was adopted guaranteeing social equality, free speech, and further limiting the powers of the church. This so enraged the opposition that they formed a coup, ultimately dissolved congress and removed the president from office. As Chief Justice,

Juárez was next in line for the presidency in the event of the President's death or unlawful removal from office. Juárez declared himself president, triggering a bloody three year civil war, pitting liberals against conservatives.

Juarez was captured in Guadalajara and it was only through the intervention of the poet Guillermo Prieto, that he escaped execution. In a dramatic moment of bravery, Prieto threw himself in front of Juárez, declaring: "Brave men do not assassinate." The soldiers lowered their rifles, allowing Juárez to flee and to continue to his battle for the rights and freedoms of the Mexican people.

In 1860 the liberals dominated and Benito Juárez was elected president. Unfortunately he inherited an economy devastated by years of bloody conflict. Not only was Juárez unable to introduce some of the social reforms he so desperately wanted, but the nation was drowning in foreign debt. He appealed to his debtors to defer the loans temporarily while Mexico recovered economically.

As one of the debtors, France saw this as an opportunity to gain a foothold in the Americas and invaded Mexico. Napoleon along with a small group of conservatives wanted Mexico to have a monarchy and the Austrian Archduke Maximilian was appointed Emperor. In 1863 Benito Juárez retreated into exile again.

The Emperor appeared to share several of the liberal views and extended an invitation to Juárez to return to Mexico City as the Prime Minister. Juárez refused to serve in an imperial cabinet and continued his resistance against the monarchy. In a written response to Maximilian he noted that he was entirely distrustful of the offer extended and that he viewed his responsibility as the Elected President to the Republic of Mexico a sacred trust which he would not abandon. Juárez, unwavering in his duty and obligations, continued to foster guerrilla warfare against the Monarchy.

In 1867 the Emperor and his forces were defeated and Maximilian was executed in June of that year. Pleas came from around the world including heads of state and intellectuals such as Victor Hugo. All begged Juárez to spare to the deposed emperor



but Juárez adamantly refused to commute the sentence. He claimed that this was in respect to the Mexicans who died fighting against Maximilian's forces, and to send a message that Mexico would not tolerate any government imposed by foreign powers. It is plausible however, that his own near brush with the firing squad steeled him in this decision. Dead men do not return to retake control as Juárez had just done.

Following Maximilian's execution, Juárez was again elected President of a war savaged country in financial ruin. Not only was the country bankrupt but many Europeans viewed Mexico as barbaric for having executed Maximilian. This made it virtually impossible to secure loans and without funds he was unable to perform many of the reforms that he had hoped would assist the poor and the indigenous.

Despite economic woes, his presidency is known for its reform to democratic principles and for taking Mexico from a semi feudal state to a more market driven one. Juarez reinstated the constitution of 1857 which both limited the power of the church and gave rights and equality to all citizens. . He reformed the electoral process, granting the vote to all males over the age of 25. He reduced the army by 75% allocating those funds to other priorities such as land reform. Finally, he was able to keep the country stable using diplomacy rather than military force.

Had Juarez not died during his fourth term as president, Mexico's history may have been quite different in the twentieth century. The next president elect was Porfirio Díaz who later became a dictator. Although Díaz did much to stabilize the economy and to modernize Mexico over his thirty-five years in power; he also reversed many of the reforms enacted by Juárez. The Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 was largely a result of the policies of repression developed by Díaz.

Benito Juarez was considered above all to be a man of principle and is best remembered by the following quotation: "Entre los individuos, como entre las naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz", "Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace." The underlined portion is inscribed on the coat of arms of Oaxaca. For an illiterate boy from a remote village he left an abundant legacy. It is fitting that he is the only president that Mexico honors with a national holiday, March 21.









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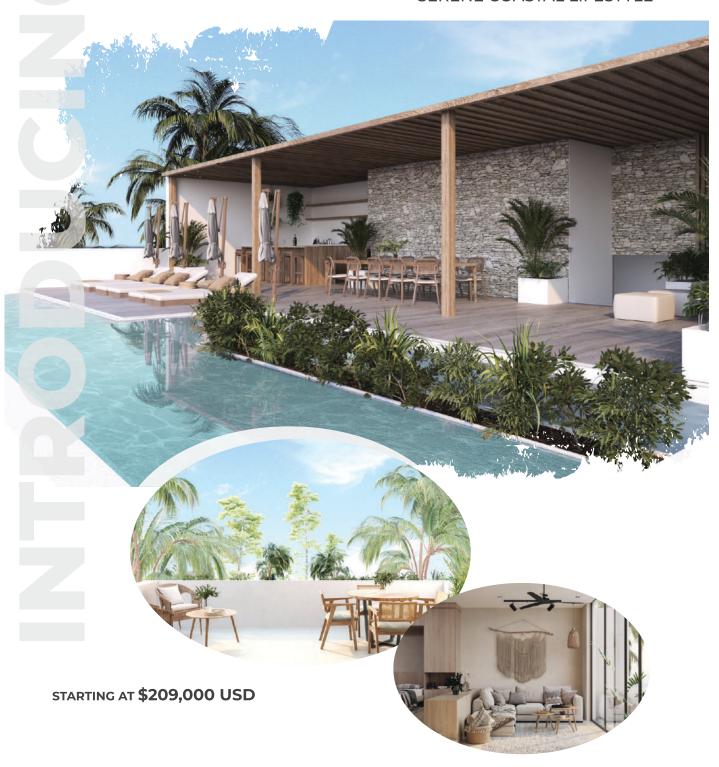
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