



Oaxaca Times®

The inner life of Oaxaca

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Guelaguiza

A taste of "the real Mexico"



Mexican and foreign tourists alike are drawn to Oaxaca by its diversity – both in terrain and in culture. Tour guides recommend the state for an encounter with "the real Mexico," whatever this might mean. As a matter of fact, any corner of the country is an example of "the real Mexico," whether a modern building, a rustic cabin or an outhouse; but

people tend to associate the idea of authenticity with the indigenous world.

Before the Spanish Conquest, the land of Oaxaca was not known as Mexico. Its inhabitants didn't have a national concept that united them, especially not the word indigenous, as this was an idea introduced by the conquering

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Tlayudas

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Restaurant

Temple

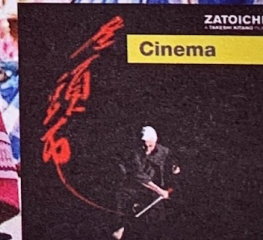
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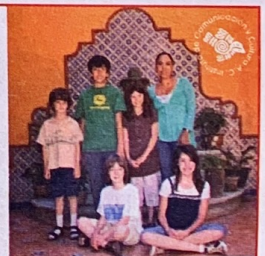
three

REASONS TO CHOOSE THE ICC:

1. THE INSTRUCTORS have advanced academic credentials to teach Spanish as a second language and are carefully selected and supervised. Other schools train individuals from the community, regardless of education.

2. THE TEACHING APPROACH uses advanced techniques to go beyond the grammar and structure of Spanish and includes a more functional and communicative approach to learning. The focus is on "speaking" Spanish.

3. THE CULTURAL INTEGRATION COMPONENT of the program helps you meet and mix with Mexicans while you get involved with Mexican culture, thus reinforcing your use of Spanish at the same time.



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Spaniards. Thus the word indígena evokes not authenticity, but rather draws attention to the chasm between those who lived before the conquest and those who lived under the conquerors' rule. In truth, Mexican history is only 200 years old; before that it was New Spain, and prior to that it was a collection of independent nations. So, in fact, the rich "authentic" Mexican culture that travelers seek out is not a result of purism, but of mixing. The syncretism, or combination, of the vastly varied pre-Spanish traditions with Western ways is the foundation of many beloved Mexican traditions: the Day of the Dead, the Virgin Guadalupe and the Guelaguetza, to name a few.

The Guelaguetza is a centuries-old tradition that dates from the colonial time. Officially, it is said that its origin was a Christian festivity related to Corpus Christ, celebrated at the Carmen Alto church. Later on, local indígenas joined this celebration – not to worship the Western god but their own Centeotl, goddess of corn. As time went by, people from the seven regions of the state came to celebrate the spirit of Guelaguetza, which is a Zapotec word meaning "partak-

ing or cooperation." In the original celebrations, each group of people came to share their produce, their traditional music and their dances. It was an open air festivity in which anybody could participate.

True to its adaptive nature, Guelaguetza has changed a lot since the colonial times – it has transformed according to the general spirit of the country. Today, the modern concept of capitalism has turned the cultural celebration into a major tourist lure. The festival is no longer for everyone to participate in – now, dance troupes rehearse for months before the event and spectators must buy a ticket to see the show. Traditionally, Guelaguetza was always celebrated the first Monday after July 16th, and then repeated the following Monday. Today, tourists can watch year-round "guelaguetzas" at hotels and restaurants, which are basically traditional dance shows devoid of any deeper meaning. This might lead one to wonder whether the "real" Mexico is to be found in fancy costumes and pineapple dances, or in the exploitation of whatever has an indigenous flavor (including the revolutionary tourism of Chiapas).

For those who wish to see for themselves, this year Guelaguetza will begin with the street parade of the dancers on Saturday July 18th. They will march from the Conzatti Park to the Alameda de León and then through the restored Zocalo. The shows will take place at 5 p.m on Monday, July 20th, and at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. p.m. Monday, July 27th. Tickets can be purchased through Ticketmaster or at the Alcalá Theatre (Independencia and 5 de Mayo).

For more information visit:
www.oaxaca.com/guelaguetza



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Alebrijes

Figures from the beyond

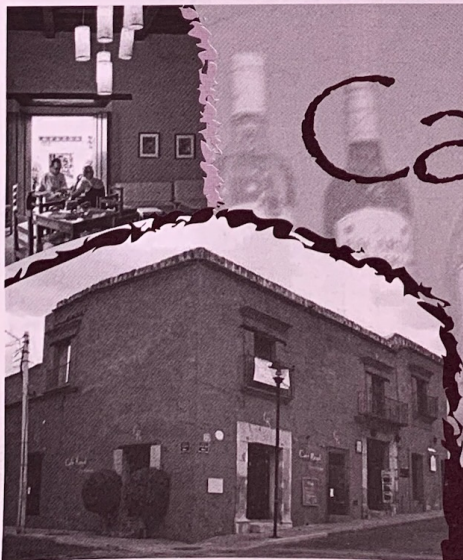


A green donkey with horns, a purple iguana, a blue polka-dotted horse, a porcupine with red and yellow spikes – who would have thought these curious and colorful animals which prowl on street corners and in markets had been inspired by a nightmare? Named alebrijes, (gypsy slang for “a difficult tangled thing, shaped in confusing or fantastic figures”) were invented by Pedro Linares in Mexico City as a result of fever dreams. He dreamt of being in a strange and foreign world populated by bizarre and unfamiliar creatures with wild colors and designs. When he recovered, Linares wanted to share these animals with his family, so he began molding them in paper. Manuel Jiménez, a talented carver of Arrazola, was inspired by Linares’ creations and began

carving alebrijes in wood. He experimented with different kinds of wood and found that Copalito was best because it has a small heart and no layers, so the animals can be carved in one piece without splitting. At first he was the only person in Oaxaca carving alebrijes. Later, he was discovered by an American patron, and soon his pieces were famous all over Mexico. Other carvers in Arrazola followed suit, and soon there was a boom in the little animal industry. After 1985, many other artisans joined the trend. Today, the villages of Arrazola and San Martín Tilcajete are famous for the magical alebrijes.

Zapotecs have always been carvers, making toys and masks, and alebrijes open up a world for the imagination. Artisans began

creating all kinds of fantastic beings: devils, angels, aliens, naguals, mermaids, and every kind of animal, real and imaginary, decorating them in all varieties of color and design. Motifs tend to change monthly depending on demand as well as the restless inspiration of the artists. What you see in an artisan’s workshop one month may not be repeated the next, though there are standard favorites, such as the iguanas and armadillos. Quality varies greatly, not only among the artisans but in the work of individuals. With some artisans, each piece is unique. Others hire staff to reproduce a popular design. In the US and elsewhere, alebrijes sell for three to five times what we would pay for them here, and you will find everywhere from sophisticated art galleries



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to cheap markets.

It is fascinating to watch the artists at work. All the carving is done with machetes and kitchen or pocket knives, which must be sharpened several times a day. A dull knife is more likely to cause cuts—a definite hazard of the job. Most alebrijes take one to five days to carve, and a week to a month to paint, depending on the design. Little ones cost less because tourists expect that, however, in some cases they are more difficult to make than larger ones..

Most of the people in Arrazola and San Martin Tilcajete are involved in making alebrijes; it is a family affair.

Generally, the men carve and the women paint, but both jobs are equally important. Knock on almost any door in these villages and you will find artisans at work. I recommend visiting many studios – it's fun seeing the different styles of the artists. One of the favorites are, Jacobo Angeles, www.tilcajete.org, , María Jiménez Ojeda and brothers. 10 Ignacio Allende St., Juventino Melchor, 14 Reforma St, Ventura Fabián, 13 Reforma St. all of them from San Martin Tilcajete.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Both San Martin Tilcajete and Arrazola are about 45 minutes from Oaxaca Centro.

You can get to Arrazola by bus or colectivo from the Central de Abastos. Collectivos direct to San Martin leave from an off-the-street parking lot a few blocks below the Zocalo on Arista Street (the College of Medicine is on the corner). Alternatively, you can take a colectivo from the Central for Ocotlan and ask them to let you off at the entrance to San Martin. It is opposite a big restaurant called Las Asucanas, where you might want to stop for lunch. From there, you will have about a fifteen minute walk into town..

To contact the artists about their work, you can visit the pueblos in person .



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