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THE AMAZING TEHUANTEPEC

by YOLANDA GARCIA C. & Stephen Anderson



A visitor to Oaxaca is often amazed at the variety of ethnic populations coexisting in a relatively small region and impressed by the tenacity with which they've kept their traditions and languages alive.

One of the most remarkable of Oaxaca's 16 ethnic populations stands out because it is run by women - directly against the grain of Mexican machismo. These people occupy the south coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico's narrow waist between the Pacific and the Gulf, and are called Tehuantepecans.

Visitors lucky enough to be in Oaxaca in April and May have a chance to see manifestations of this unique culture, especially in the velas, or festivals, for which they are justly famous.

Mexico has always been quite conservative in social mores and customs; and the people of Tehuantepec are not much different in that respect. But within that context, Tehuantepecans are Mexico's "liberated women".

While the men stay close to home and tend to many domestic chores, the women of Tehuantepec are out taking care of business, running the affairs of the town, and trading in distant markets. In other Oaxacan communities, the young men are mobile, often leaving to seek work elsewhere. The young women are encouraged to stay home. In Tehuantepec, it's just the opposite.

Another unique feature of Tehuantepecan culture is an open acceptance of homosexuality. One of the meanings of Mexican machismo is that in this country there is no gay rights movement, no gay pride, and no toler-

ance for gay lifestyles. But in Tehuantepec gay men are not only tolerated, but perhaps even celebrated. A mother may "show off" her gay son to others, and gay men in female clothing are not an unusual sight on the streets.

The women of Tehuantepec are assertive, take charge types, used to getting what they want. If a girl of courtable age has her eye on a man, the common belief is that he doesn't have a chance against her wiles, her charms, or even her magic potions. For that reason, many women of Oaxaca are loathe to see their husbands visit the region on business.

Many Tehuantepecan women are accomplished entrepreneurs. In April and May, mangos hit the markets of Oaxaca, brought from Tehuantepec and sold in abundance. If you see an ethnic woman in the marketplace who seems to be more self assured, who sits or occasion "like a man," one leg up on the other, and if she pleasantly cajoles you into buying something, chances are she's from Tehuantepec.

The openness and warmth of Tehuantepecans affects life in many ways. For example, in the Mexican countryside, if a boy seduces a girl and then drops her, it's a serious matter, and he had better watch his back. In Tehuantepec, he can get off with a modest fine negotiated between the two sets of parents.

The most impressive spectacle of Tehuantepecan life that an outsider can witness is the vela, a festival held to honor a saint, a hero, or a harvest. No one plans a vela more seriously than Tehuantepecans, and no one has more fun once its under way. Velas are so called after the candles lit in the church in a ceremony which initiates the festivities. After the ceremony comes the procession, and then an all-night party of eating, drinking, dancing, and celebrating, in which the whole town participates.

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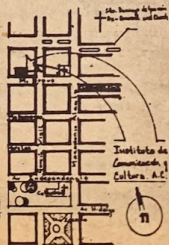
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THE EAST VALLEY

There is a major group of important ruins to be found on the east side of the City of Oaxaca along the Pan American Highway. The visitor who only has a day for the east region of the Valley could visit Dainzú, Lambityeco, and then Mitla, in the morning. In the afternoon, on the return journey to Oaxaca, one can make a short detour to visit Yagul. If it is possible, one should witness the sunset from the heights of this site.

DAINZU

The Dainzu turn-off is signposted on the right-hand side of the Pan American Highway, heading toward Tehuantepec. The archaeological zone is located at the end of a dirt road a little less than a mile long.

Although the original city was sizeable, only three monuments have been excavated. The tallest is a pyramid base with various vertical sections. It has rounded corners and lacks any panels. Originally, there were two access stairways within the walls, of a very different style from those normally found in Oaxaca. The southern most one was converted into a tomb in a later period when the Zapotecs built the central stairway, possibly in the 7th century A.D.



The most interesting feature of this site is located on the south side of the lower section. This is the stone bas-reliefs showing a series of ball players manifesting violent attitudes, along with the probable four deities of the game: two men and two jaguars, the execution of which is splendid.

Everything we are describing belong to Period I or the beginning of Period II. We can perceive a similarity, despite their great differences, to the "Dancers" of Monte Albán.

One should be warned that the climb up the hill in back of this monument requires some effort, but the engraved figures discovered in the rock at the top are well worth it. Many are only heads and one can see a sacrificial scene depicted there.

Across from the pyramid is a vast building with large patios and numerous apartments. It is bordered on the west side by beautiful, plain stone walls. There are various access stairways sometimes at an angle. One can also see there a stele bearing a human figure, and a particularly remarkable tomb. On the lintel of the facade, there is the face and front part of the body of a jaguar. The entrance jamba are two front legs of the animal.

Below this group there is a partially reconstructed ball court. The date would be about 1000 A.D. Evidently, because of the period to which it belongs, it is not related to the players in the main building.



HOLIDAYS

- May 1 Labor Day
- May 5 Puebla's Battle Celebration, Civic Ceremony.
- May 15 Teacher's Day
- May 10 Mother's Day
- May 23 University Student Day
- May 24 The Famous "Vela of San Isidro in Juchitan" which is 274 Km from the city, 5 hours by bus.

HOW TO CHOOSE A LANGUAGE SCHOOL

In the summertime there seem to be a lot of schools offering classes to foreigners. Beware! Many of these schools are out to make a fast buck. Low prices do not necessarily mean quality education. When choosing a school, be sure to select one in which the teachers are university trained to teach Spanish as a second language.

In Mexico, university degrees are very much a status symbol; but having a degree in literature, chemistry or anthropology does not qualify one to teach Spanish as a second language.

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CULTURAL EVENTS



FREE EVENTS



- 5 Latin American Music-In front of the Cathedral-7p.m.
- 10 Concert-Primavera Orchestra-Cultural Center(calzada Madero corner with Tecnologico Avenue 10a.m.
- Concert-Cultural Center"Flores Magon"-On the 3rd street of Alcala-7p.m.
- 11 Cultural Activities-from 10 a.m. to 1p.m.-Santo Domingo Museum.
- Guelaguetza-By children of the Mujica elementary School celebrating mother's day-6 p.m.
- 12 Tehuantepec's regional food-Try the famous shrimp and iguana tamales-typical dances from Tehuantepec-At noon.
- 13 Photo-exhibition-By Armando Romero Gil-Tehuantepecan Artist-General Library-Morelos St.corner with Alcala. 7 p.m.
- 14 "The Huaves" A lecture about The Huaves ethnic group-Same place as above-5 p.m.
- Concert-Primavera Orchestra-In front of the Cathedral 5 p.m.
- 16 French movie-" With innocence"-Cultural Center "Ricardo Flores Magon" On the 3rd St. of Alcala.-8 p.m.
- 17 Traditional Vela-Deportivo Oaxaca-Get the tickets there-9 p.m.



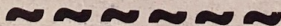
From page 1

The procession is a wonder to behold. Ox-drawn wagons are beautifully arranged with trees and flowers, and look like rolling gardens. From them young women throw treats to the crowd. The procession, and indeed every detail of the entire vela, is directed by the gushána, a sort of religious sorority invested with the responsibility of carrying on the traditions of the vela and doing it right. These women, pillars of the community, are prominently featured in the procession. They wear long, full dresses of dark velvet meticulously embroidered with bold floral designs - making one can take years. They carry baskets of fruits and sweets on their heads - symbols of

the bounty their way of life and their hard work provide. And around their necks are layers of gold jewelry, symbols of wealth that escape the bank vault only on these rare occasions.

The vela is carefully planned by the gushána starting a year ahead of time. One member is chosen to be the mayordomo, or director, for that year. Being mayordomo is a coveted privilege and an awesome responsibility. She is expected to pay many expenses out of pocket, and it's not unusual for her to spend the equivalent of 15,000 U.S. dollars.

The vela culminates in an all-night potluck fiesta. To gather the crowd, a band strikes up at the house of the mayordomo, and then proceeds to the houses of each of the other members of the gushána, where friends and relatives have gathered to await their turn. Everyone contributes something special - shrimp tamales, say - and a few cases of beer. After a night of dancing and merrymaking, the band strikes up again for the last time, and escorts everyone back to the home where they began.



If you care for to experience an incredible time in one Vela you have to visit Juchitan from the 18 to the 25 of may. The people is very helpful you just have to ask at your hotel desk or in the offices of the Major of the city of Juchitan they will tell you about the events.

HOW TO GET THERE.

By Cristobal Colon bus line.
To Juchitan will cost you \$17,500 it makes 4 hours.
To Tehuantepec \$13,900 pesos 3/1.2 hours
The bus lives at 8 & 10 a.m. at noon and 2 & 4 p.m.

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Bienvenidos amigos

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OAXACA TIMES aims to provide you, the English-speaking visitor, with valuable information which will enhance and enrich your stay. Write, call (6-3443), or come by our office M.Bravo #210 (some maps have N.Bravo which is incorrect) with your tips and recommendations about Oaxaca.

Our office is 4 1/2 blocks north of the Zocalo at the Institute of Communication and Culture, A.C. Come by and get acquainted.

But, above all, enjoy our beautiful Oaxaca.

Yolanda García C.

Publisher.

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The origins of the unique traditions of Tehuantepec are lost in the past. Like the rest of Mexico, they're a mix of conquest and indigenous cultures. But it's evident that the matriarchal aspects of Tehuantepec tradition may be closely tied to an ethnic group called the Huaves, concentrated in several small towns in the area, unrelated ethnically to the Zapotecs, having arrived, some think, from either Peru or Nicaragua shortly before the conquest.

To witness the velas of Tehuantepec one must go off the beaten tourist path a bit. But in turn, it's not that far to the Isthmus, and well worth the adventure.