



Oaxaca Times

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OAXACA OAXACA

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Christmas a Neuer Ending Fiesta

Here in Oaxaca, where the locals are known to be more "fiesteros" (have a fiesta for any motive) than most parts of Mexico, the Christmas season abounds with opportunities to celebrate, both religiously and socially. Although one is not likely to see Santa Claus roaming around the government buildings, etc. the religious traditions provide more than enough occasions to celebrate with one's family and friends: beginning with the "calenda" street procession on December 6th, continuing through the nine days of "posadas", December 16th to the 24th, the "Noche de Rabanos" (Night of the Radishes) on December 23rd, Christmas night itself, the Feast of the Three Kings on January 6th, and all the way to February 2nd, the feast of Candelaria.

There are four occasions in the month of December when Oaxacans take to the streets to celebrate both their religious fervor and their festive spirit in a procession called the "calenda". The calenda, a procession of decorated theme cars and people carrying torches and high dancing figures, and accompanied by a band, usually takes place before an important religious feast. Three of these feasts in December honor Mary as the Mother of God: first is the Virgin of Juquila (the Immaculate Conception of Mary) on December 8th, followed by the national feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12th, and finally Oaxaca's state patron, the Virgin of Solitude (la Soledad) on December 18th. The calenda announcing each feast takes place a couple of days before: here in Oaxaca on December 6th, 10th, and 16th. The fourth, and the grandest, calenda takes place on December 24th, when calendas from all over the city of Oaxaca meet in the zocalo to celebrate the arrival of Christmas night with much joy and noise.

The first celebrations properly associated with Christmas itself are the "posadas", which take place for nine successive evenings beginning on the 16th of December. The posadas are a popularized celebration based on the Catholic religious tradition of preparing for a major feast with nine days of prayer and public worship. In what has grown to be a real social event for both adults and children, groups of families and neighbors in a particular town or colonia form a procession which is to arrive at the home previously agreed upon, where the "padrinos"



(literally "godparents") of the particular *posada* will receive the pilgrims with hot coffee and tamales.

The procession itself is a religious ritual recalling the trip of the "holy pilgrims" Mary and Joseph, who were unable to find a place to stay (*posada*) in Bethlehem, stopping finally in a cattle stable where Mary gave birth to her child, Jesus. In the modern folk representation, the pilgrims, led by children, dressed as Mary and Joseph, stop at various homes asking for "*posada*" in a ritual song, but are refused by those within who answer in song. The group is finally received at the home where prayers are said, followed by the sharing of coffee and tamales and often a pinata filled with fruit and nuts for the children. After the final *posada* on the evening of December 24th, it is common for all to share "*ponche*" (punch), a hot fruity drink which is perfect for warming up a pilgrim on a cool December evening.

In the middle of the nine days of *posadas* in

Oaxaca falls the fiesta of the Virgin de la Soledad, the patronal feast of the whole state of Oaxaca. Besides the calenda on the 16th, the feast day itself on December 18th is filled with cultural and religious expressions of the indigenous peoples from all corners of the state. There is a solemn procession and the famous and colorful "*Danza de la Pluma*" is performed outside the Basílica de Soledad in the Plaza de la Danza.

Another uniquely Oaxacan cultural expression of the Christmas season is the "*Noche de Rabanos*" on December 23rd. The Night of the Radishes is not some horror movie about giant vegetables but rather an evening in which the zocalo becomes the scene of a giant exhibition of figures sculpted from radishes of all sizes. Often the figures represent the Christmas scene of the birth of Jesus, or other figures of people and animals which express both the faith and the culture of Oaxacans.



The night of the 24th of December in Oaxaca is the setting for both city-wide celebrations and the sharing of Christmas joy in individual homes. After the celebration of the last *posada* in each local Catholic church, calendas are formed which proceed to the home of the "*madrina*" (godmother) who will provide a statue of the child Jesus for the local parish's Nativity scene. The calenda then accompanies the Child with colored torches, decorated cars, and band music all the way to the center of the city, where the various calendas meet and parade around the zocalo in festive style before returning to the local parish churches. Upon arriving back at the parish church, the community prepares to celebrate at midnight the "*Misa de Gallo*", the first Mass or worship celebration of the Christmas feast. At that Mass the statue of the child Jesus (which, curiously, is often bigger than the statues of the parents Mary and Joseph) is placed in the manger scene - the "*nacimiento*" or birth - where it remains during the Christmas season.

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4 BLOCKS FROM ZOCALO



Christmas....

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Christmas in Oaxaca is first and foremost, as in other cultures of the world, a source of joy for children. The major part of the planning of the big folks is dedicated to providing for the little ones a sense of wonder and excitement. Many children look forward to preparing in their homes a little Christmas tree (not a big one) on which is hung little boxes, such as matchboxes, decorated with colored paper. Because the indigenous peoples have been so poor for so long, immense joy is drawn from simple communal events such as the breaking of the pinata. On the days of the posadas as well as on Christmas night itself, the pinata, a clay pot filled with candy, fruit, and nuts and decorated in the form of some animal, is hung from a rope; children take turns trying to break the pinata with a stick while blindfolded, until finally it is broken and all the children present scramble for the goodies. The pinata scene itself is enough to bring a smile to the faces of young and old and make one forget the day-to-day struggles of life.

The fiesta in Oaxaca, of course, is not limited to the days leading up to the 25th. The twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th, is still celebrated here and in other parts of Mexico as the Feast of the Three Kings: the day when, according to the Bible, three men from the orient came to honor the child Jesus as a king with precious gifts. From this story comes the tradition of giving children small gifts - toys or sweets - on this day. In some areas the idea of Santa Clause bringing gifts on December 24th has invaded the indigenous family tradition, but most families still celebrate the Three Kings with at least a meal shared with compadres and their children. A special ring-shaped loaf of bread, called a "rosca", is eaten on this day, with a special significance: in the rosca are hidden tiny images of the child Jesus - maybe two or three, or only one - and the person who receives one in his or her piece of the rosca is then obliged to host the fiesta for the final celebration of the Christmas season, the Candelaris on February 2nd.

Forty days after Christmas, which is February 2nd, Catholics celebrate the day when, according to Jewish tradition, Mary presented her child to God in the temple forty days after his birth. Based on this tradition, many families dress up a small image of the child Jesus, usually seated on a throne, and bring it to their local church for a



blessing. Because candles for use in the home are also blessed on this day, the feast came to be known as the Candelaria. As with the other feasts of the Christmas season, family and friends gather in homes more for "pachanga" (party), hosted by those who found the "nino" in their part of the Rosca de Reyes on January 6th. Curiously, but much more in keeping with the "manana" tradition so strong here in Oaxaca and throughout Mexico, some families present their "nino" at church weeks later, some as late as April or May. The important thing is to fulfill the obligation which comes from tradition: the "when" is not so important.

For the children of Oaxaca, especially the indigenous, the material aspect of Christmas is not so important, and they don't notice whether their small gift is sponsored by Santa Claus or the Three Kings. What is important is the family tradition, combining Christian faith with indigenous values of sharing with one's pueblo or colonia. Children anticipate the dressing up of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, the processions through the streets, and the few moments of the joy of the impoverished when the pinata is broken and the riches of God's nature pour forth. Simplicity is the key: but in Oaxaca, rich with its indigenous past, simplicity becomes lavish in the Christmas season.

A MESSAGE TO THE READERS OF THE OAXACA TIMES FROM THE OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL DIRECTOR OF THE TOURIST BUREAU

Esteemed Visitors:

We are pleased and proud to join in the celebration of the third anniversary of the Oaxaca Times, Oaxaca's English language newspaper. Thanks to the efforts of the publisher, Sra. Yolanda Garcia Caballero, and her staff, the Oaxaca Times has become an effective means of sharing Oaxaca's rich culture with the rest of the world, but particularly with those of you who are in search of the "real" Mexico. We hope that, as visitors to our beautiful and beloved city, you will have the opportunity to experience all the wonders of Oaxaca and that you will tell your friends and your families that they too might appreciate our prehispanic legends, our colonial inheritance, the diversity of our artists and craftsmen, the richness of our cuisine, and the happiness and hospitality of the Oaxaqueño people in general. Oaxaca contains the best of Mexico. During your stay with us may your experiences provide you a deeper understanding of what makes Oaxaca so special - her people with heart, and a past that is intertwined with the present.

Arturo Lomez Ramos
Director, Federal Tourist Bureau

Village market-days and specialties

MONDAY: Miahuatlañ, Mezcal, bread, leather

WEDNESDAY: Etla, meat, cheese and flowers

THURSDAY: Zaachila, meat and nuts
Ejutla, Mezcal and embroidered blouse

FRIDAY: Ocotlan, flowers, vegetables and meat

SATURDAY: Oaxaca, the Mercado de Abastos, largest of the markets

SUNDAY: Tlacolula, ceramics
Tlaxiaco, leather jackets, blankets and "ardiente"

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