



# Oaxaca Times

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FREE

## THE SPLENDORS OF VILLAHERMOSA

**In neighboring Tabasco, the many treasures of a tropical city**

Throughout its history, Villahermosa has suffered from epidemics and floods, but it has emerged as a progressive city that still maintains the charm of its tradition and the unique character and temperament of its people. The central section of the city, with its provincial air and colonial touches, contrasts strongly with the northern area, where the modern architecture of the urban development project, Tabasco 2000, brings to mind thoughts of the cities of the future.

Villahermosa was founded by the Spanish in 1519, under the name of Santa Maria Victoria. It is possible that there, the conqueror Hernán Cortés received a young slave, Malintzin, as a gift. Although the Mayan culture stood out in that region, stretching toward Central America, there were previous civilizations such as that of the Olmeca, who lived in northern Tabasco, in La Venta, between 1500 B.C. and 1000 A.D.

Once conquered by the Spanish, Santa Maria de la Victoria suffered incursions by English and Dutch pirates for three centuries. This led the population to change



One of the giant Olmecan heads in the Museum of La Venta Park.

the name and location of their town from time to time, ending up at the present sight.

For a long time the region stayed isolated from the rest of the country. Nonetheless, the Tabascans lead the fight against the French in 1863, and they also were involved in the Revolution, with such great men as José María Pino Suárez, Vice President when Francisco I. Madero became the president of Mexico.

### DISCOVERING THE URBAN ENCHANTMENTS

To savor these contrasting aspects of Villahermosa, I advise starting off with a walk through the so-called Zona Luz (light zone).

Villahermosa seems to be designed for lovers of beauty and culture. The beautifully planned cultural centers are out-

standing: the area around Las Ilusiones Lake where Tomás Garrido Canabal Park, Museum of La Venta Park, the Child Development Center, and University City are located; and the Research Center for Olmeca and Maya Cultures (CICOM), on the shores of the Grijalva River. The research complex includes the José Gorostiza Art Center, the Esperanza Iris State Theater, the Carlos Pellicer Cámara Regional Anthropology Museum, and a commercial area with a restaurant, bookstore, and arts and crafts shop.

To begin this cultural journey, I recommend awakening the senses with a walk through Tomás Garrido Cabanal Park, on the shores of Las Ilusiones Lake.

This is one of the most beautiful sights that a visitor can enjoy. The pedestrian walk follows the irregular silhouette of the

*Continued on page 2*

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4 BLOCKS FROM ZOCALO

**Continued**

water's edge and ends at a modern lookout tower. The view from here of the lake and the city, submerged in lush vegetation, produces a great pleasure. Also, there is a small marina where pedal boats for excursions on the lake can be rented.

Next, try a visit to the Museum of La Venta Park, an extraordinary sanctuary that houses Olmecan splendor on eight hectares of natural wilderness. There, along trails bordered by monkeys -who seem to be used to humans' passing- the visitor might encounter crocodiles, jaguars, wild boars, and deer. Giant Olmecan carved balsite heads with Negroid features dot the area, as if they were lost in the woods. Carlos Pellicer, founder of this unequalled museum, wanted to recreate the sort of countryside that is thought to have existed in La Venta, the Olmeca city constructed at the mouth of the Tonalá River. This is where the sculptures that are on display came from.

Taking the tree-lined Paseo Tabasco toward the other side of the city and then following the Periférico Carlos Pellicer, which goes along the Grijalva River, one comes to the CICOM. Here cultural activities like opera, theater, concerts, auditions and conferences are continually taking place. Food specialties include tortoise in red, green sauce, spiced armadillo, pochitoque, and crab with chiles, and salted meat seasoned with aji peppers.

**COMALCALCO**

The archeological zone of Comalcalco, a pre-Hispanic city dating from the Mayan late classical period, covers more than a square mile, and is surrounded by jungle. The beauty of the archeological remains, and the well-kept grounds surrounding them, speak of the love the Tabascan people feel for their past.



Villa Hermosa is easily accesible from Oaxaca by air via Aviaca Airlines.

This pre-Hispanic city is noted for the ingenious substitutions made for traditional materials that the Mayans used in their monumental constructions. Lacking stones, the builders used baked bricks made from a mixture of sand and clay. They used ground oyster shells to whitewash walls and floors, and to mix stucco for sculptures.

Comalcalco was one of the first cities to be built from bricks. In its architecture it

is the Mayan city which most closely resembles Palenque: note the relationship of light and dark in the rooms, the sloping roofs, the simplicity of the costumes on the decorative friezes.

Comalcalco, about 34 miles from Villahermosa, has a museum where the pieces found in the ruins are displayed. The first explorations were made in 1957 and the digging increased in 1982. But according to Candelario Osorio, expert and guardian of the archeological zone, 20 percent of this pre-Hispanic city remains to be explored.

Clearly, it takes a long time to admire so much beauty, but it's worthwhile. The state of Tabasco and its people offer much more than simple tourist spots. To appreciate it, one has only to listen to the



Detail from a limestone frieze, Palenque.

words of its poets, like these of Carlos Pellicer: "This is the part of the world/where the foundation is still being laid/ We who are born here have our own ideal/ of what the soul and the body are made."

**PALENQUE**

Palenque, the natural entrance to the Maya culture, is located in the State of Chiapas only two hours by bus from Villahermosa. If you wish to stay at least two or three days in order to walk through this very impressive place, you'll need a very comfortable hotel with all the facilities for resting and meditating about the splendor of Palenque we suggest the hotel "Plaza Palenque", located just 5 minutes from the ruins, where you have the feeling of being in permanent contact with nature.

For reservations call: (934) 5-05-55 Fax: 5-03-95. Address: Carr. Catazaja Palenque. Km. 27 Palenque Chiapas México. Apdo. Postal # 58.

You might also visit the "Agua Azul" Waterfalls, which are located two hours from Palenque. The travel agencies will charge \$ 7 to \$ 10 U.S. per person.

We found the rutas del usumacinta travel agency to be most helpful.

They can be reached by calling 91-931-31915, or faxing 91-931-50227.

They also know the best restaurants around the area and they simply will make you feel at home.

Our suggestion as to restaurants is la Chiapaneca, which serves excellent authentic Chiapas cuisine, accompanied every day at lunch time by a marimba band. La Chiapaneca is located at kilometer # 3, en route to the Palenque ruins.

**Villahermosa Best Hoteles**

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- HOTEL HYATT VILLAHERMOSA - 106 Juárez Ph 3-44-44 4-44-50 Fax: 5-12-35

# LIVING GODDESSES OF TEHUANTEPEC

May is one of the most exciting months of the year in Oaxaca.

During May there are fiestas held in Tehuantepec, Juhitan, Salina Cruz and Espinal every Saturday until June. These fiestas are called "Mayordomias". A group of people is specially selected to take charge of the organization of the festivities. They will sell their animals, tools and other possessions even though it may mean their financial ruin. However, they will have their reward as they walk at the head of the procession knowing that everyone is admiring and envying them and secretly hoping that it will be said that their fiesta was the most successful yet.

One neighborhood after another honors its patron saint for an entire week with feasting, dancing and parades. Though the fiestas are similar to those found in many other parts of the country, nowhere else are there Indian women even remotely resembling the fabulous Tehuanas. Tall, willowy and graceful, they look like bronze Greek goddesses, and their beautiful carriage is the envy of many aspiring fashion model. In the matriarchal society over which these proud beauties preside, the men are practically useless individuals.

They are delegated to performing the menial chores around the house, acting as messengers, and singing to the offspring. They are seldom entrusted with money and are never permitted to run any of the business establishments or to handle the family finances.

The dress of the Tehuana is one of the most awe-inspiring to be found anywhere and may be instrumental in keeping the men in a place of secondary importance. The skirts are long and full and of brightly colored cotton print. At the bottom of each skirt is a white ruffle, twelve to sixteen inches long, starched and pleated with thousands of minute creases that would drive the most precise laundress mad. The shorts, square blouses or huipil are of vivid red, purple, yellow, or blue decorated with elaborate geometric designs. For ornaments they use neck-



laces, bracelets, and earrings of gold coins, and it is not unusual to see a Tehuana walking down the street decked out in a thousand dollars worth of gold pieces.

For fiestas the Tehuanas wear skirts of silk, satin, or velvet embroidered with

**Where women rule,  
visual extravagance  
is power.**

bright colored flowers copied from Chinese shawls and ending in the same pleated ruffle. They use matching huipils and wear a white lace headdress which is the most enchanted becoming of feminine adornments.

Actually it is a child's dress with a large ruffled collar and wide pleated border at the bottom of the skirt and sleeves. When attending mass it is pulled completely

over the head and shoulders so that the face is tightly framed in the neck of the dress with the ruffled collar standing out like the white petals of a daisy. The rest of the time it is worn bottom side up with the wide pleated border sweeping back from the face. Either way it is lovely, and the costume lives up to its reputation as the most beautiful regional dress in Mexico.

The procession is a wonder to behold. Oxdrawn 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 their bounty, their hard work and way of life. 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 a 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.



RUFINO TAMAYO

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