



# Oaxaca Times

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Free

## A tropical paradise

Zicatela—a Nahuatl word meaning "place of great thorns"—now a beach known for its high rolling waves, was the old territorial boundary between Mixtecs and Zapotecs and the original name for Puerto Escondido.

Practically on the same latitude as Hawaii, Puerto Escondido in the state of Oaxaca has a population of about 50 thousand who live on fishing and tourism, and is a surfer's paradise, particularly between August and November.

But Puerto Escondido is not limited to surf alone. It has something for everyone: quiet beaches where the sea has hardly a ripple, four-star hotels with spacious, comfortable rooms, good food, sport fishing and something few other beaches can offer: nature virtually untouched, within your reach, in protected reserves brimming with flora and fauna.

### MANIALTEPEC: WHERE SEA MEETS LAGOON

A mere 15 minutes west of Puerto Escondido you will be exposed to the



Puerto Escondido

natural wonders surrounding this resort. You can take a boat from Las Hamacas or Alejandria, picturesque spots with cabins and a restaurant, to visit the Manialtepec lagoon enclosed by mangroves and home to thousands of friendly cormorants that are also called diving ducks (Phalacrocorax).

It took us only a few minutes in the boat to reach Gallo (Rooster) island,

selected by multitudes of birds as their breeding ground. A local anecdote claims that on the last day of the year, at midnight, a rooster crows on the island and a tunnel full of priceless treasures opens up.

But until now, no one has been able to bear out the theory: it seems

that who ever goes in becomes so bewitched he never wants to come back out. Our boat continued on to a sand bar where the sea flows into the lagoon during the rainy season. This sand bank, called Lagarto beach, mea-

sures 35 km, Puerto Escondido's largest. We swam here and watched the different ocean species paying visits to their lacustrian cousins and vice-versa. They our guide, Esteban Mendoza, took us to the Comero a corner of the lagoon thickly carpeted with white water lilies that some wine-colored dunlins or sandpipers (Limicola falcinellus) seem to enjoy walking on. Another area known as el Zacatal

**“ A local anecdote claims that on the last day of the year, at midnight, a rooster crows on the island and a tunnel full of priceless treasures opens up. ”**

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# A tropical paradise...

Oaxaca Times  
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the habitat for large white her-

## CHACAHUA AN UNCOMMON EXPERIENCE

Another morning early we left the hotel Fiesta Mexicana, our comfortable operations base in Puerto Escondido, in the direction of Cacalotepec. Our excursion turned off on a dirt road after we reached the 54 kilometer mark on the road to Acapulco, and five kilometers brought us to a small fishing community of 750 inhabitants. This was to be the starting point of our unforgettable trip through the Chacahua Lagoons National Park.

Chacahua - a pre-Hispanic Nahuatl name meaning "water that contains chacaes (shrimp)," was a coastal trading port for the local cocoa and cotton production during the viceregency and up until 1870.

In the Chacahua lagoon we paused at the Chacahua village

unprepared for the African-style huts with coconut palm fences we found there. At least 80% of the 1800 population are Blacks and speak with an accent quite different from the rest of the Oaxacan coastal dwellers, more like Cuban.

The Ministry of Urban Development and Ecology (Sedue) has a research center in the village for studying the Moreleti crocodile (*Crocodylus moreletii*) that has a short wide snout and yellowish marks on its dark back. There are currently 140 members of this species in the center. The nearby Chacahua beach has a two-for-one attraction: the water is shallow for 50 or 60 meters and then beyond that, big surf. Beating against the rocks, the waves force their way into the clefts and send a spectacular spray into the air as high as 40 meters.

### THREE LAGOONS

The National Park's 14817 hectare surface area has mixed

vegetation changing from jungle to savannah to sand dunes to mangrove thick-

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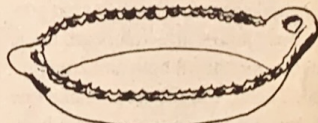
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# Evocative legacy

The archeological remains of Mitla date from the Classic Period (100-650 A.D.) and the place reached a splendorous peak in the post-Classic Era (750-1521 A.D.).

High on the list of sights to see in the state of Oaxaca, the zone is every bit as mysterious, exciting and evocative as its name suggests. Mitlán, later shortened to the present form, means "place of the dead" in Nahuatl.

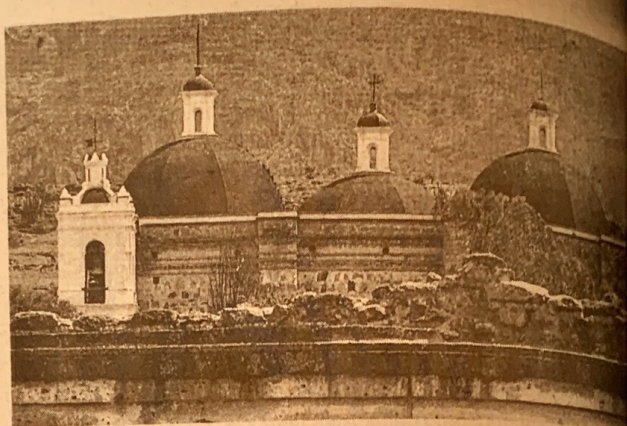
These vestiges of ancient Meso-America 46 km from Oaxaca City and semi-entwined with the village San Pablo, Villa de Mitla, are a show case for one of the most attractive features of Mixtec-Zapotec architecture in the mid-16th century.

Immediately on entering the Group of Columns (the best place to start a tour) the eye travels to the panels and lintels ornamented with frets of different shapes and motifs. In the first section of the group alone, over one hundred thousand carved stones went into the fret work.

The Group of the Columns is so named because a row of six columns runs through the center of one of the rooms, and along its axis, what were probably once roof supports. The 38-m long and 7-m wide room has access to a low roof; leading to a small square terrace with chambers on each side. More frets, more surprises, more food for thought.

The second section of the Group of Columns consists of a patio surrounded by four buildings. The one on the east side contains a three-arch portico whose jambs and lintels are made of huge stones hewn with amazing precision. These, and the frets, make one think building norms must have been pretty stiff even in those days!

Right in front of this structure, in the patio, is the entrance to one of the cruciform tombs, also fretted but this time with large slabs. There is another tomb in front of the building on the



Mitla

north side which preserves a monolithic column known as "the column of life."

The saying goes that by hugging it a person will find out how many years more he has to live. In the same structure is the "sit down stone". "Those who sit down three times on it while making three wishes, are assured of seeing them come true very quickly".

The Church Group, that gets its name from the church erected over pre-Hispanic ruins in 1590, is the second most popular part of the site for visitors.

Its decorated lintels, the multiple motives in the panels - including the right-angled fret representative of the Nahuatl god Quetzalcoatl - , not to mention the vistas blending Hispanic cupolas and walls with Meso-American walls and ornamentations, are all powerful incentives to quietly reflect on cultures long gone.

The church, dedicated to St. Paul, has a large fore court containing four capillas pozas (Small open chapels built in each of the corners of the atriums of 16th century convents) that is enclosed by merlon-shaped walls.

Take a look inside the church at the 18th-century

gilded altar piece and onyx font.

A few steps from the present Town Hall stands the Frissell Museum, with the best collection of some of the most interesting Mixtec-Zapotec art in the country.

-Written by Ricardo Díaz Muñoz

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