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Semana Santa *The Holy Week in Oaxaca*

By SARAH SACKS-IRVINE

Sunbathing at the beach, observing religious masses, or enjoying an ice cream at the Zócalo... How will you spend *Semana Santa* in Oaxaca? This traditional Catholic holiday, which commemorates the last week in the life of Jesus Christ, begins on Palm Sunday (April 1) and culminates on Easter Sunday (April 8). Generally a somber holiday, *Semana Santa* in Oaxaca

has a more lively and celebratory feel.

In 2006, between 11,000-12,000 tourists came to the city during that week, and as many are expected this year, according to the Tourism and Economic Development office in Oaxaca. Most of these tourists are Mexican students and family members who live in other parts of the country and come to visit their relatives.

But many foreigners also choose the beginning of April to

travel to Oaxaca. In fact, *Semana Santa* is the second busiest season for Oaxacan hotels, after *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) in the fall. At the luxurious Hotel Camino Real, each of the 91 rooms was reserved between 2-6 months in advance.

Travel agencies throughout Mexico and the United States are given the schedule of events months in advance and actively promote trips. As trav-

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elling that week has become increasingly popular, few hotels won't increase their rates and low season prices are not likely to start before the Monday after Easter.

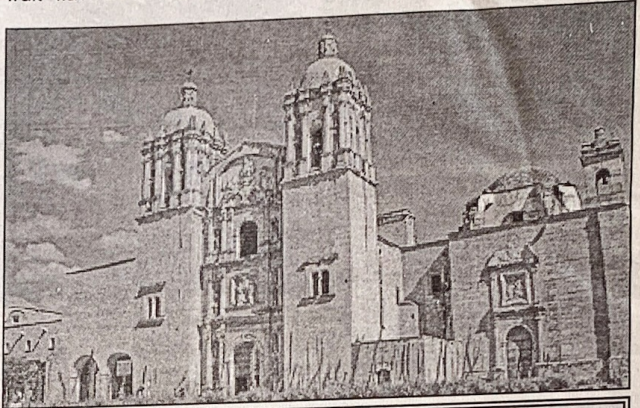
As thousands of visitors pour into Oaxaca, many locals take off to the beaches, Puebla, the Isthmus, or Chiapas. Since Thursday and Friday before Easter are paid vacation days and Easter Sunday is a national holiday, most workers, including government employees, receive the whole week off with pay. Therefore, for many *Semana Santa* is the annual week of vacation.

However, many Oaxacan religious families prefer not to travel on Saint Days and stay at home. Observance of *Semana Santa* in Mexico dates from the Spanish conquest, but as with other traditional Catholic holidays, elements of indigenous customs have been incorporated throughout the years. In some parts of Mexico, self-flagellation and real crucifixions (without nails) are practiced. In all pueblos, silent religious processions occur almost nightly.

In Oaxaca, church members perform elaborate re-enactments, rehearsed for months, and streets are taken over by festive carnivals, religious artwork exhibitions, and fireworks. Vendors sell refreshing spring-time treats like *Aguas frescas*, fruit flavoured waters, *Raspa-*

dos, shaved ices, and delicious *Dulces regionales*, regional sweets and candies made of coconut and tamarind.

If you chose Oaxaca to celebrate *Semana Santa*, you won't lack options. And whatever you decide to do, you won't be alone!



Lent seasons & Holy Week's Highlights

For a complete listing of *Semana Santa* events, visit the tourist kiosk on the north end of the Zócalo. Also check the Casa de la Cultura for alternate activities.

- March 9: 3rd Friday of lent - Music & Flowers Llano Park 8am.
- March 16: Good Sanmaritana day - Music & Flowers Llano Park 8am, all churches of Oaxaca 12 am.
- March 23: Señor de las Peñas Day - All day in Etla town.
- March 30: Music & Flowers Llano Park 8am.
- March 2: Dolores Friday - Music & Folck art Cathedral church.
- March 4: Palm Sunday- Visit San Antonino, Ocotlán to witness a traditional celebration 10 am to 3 pm.
- March 11: Easter Sunday
- March 21: Benito Juárez Birthday (Banks will be closed)

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Under The Blanket of Time

Exploring ancient San José El Mogote

By Dick Rothschild

After guided tours of Monte Alban, Mitla and Teotitlan are you ready to explore further on your own? A perfect starting place is San José El Mogote; a small thriving Zapotec community founded a thousand years before Monte Alban. You can reach El Mogote easily from Oaxaca in a half hour, using public transportation. The Festival of San José a four day celebration beginning the third week in March is a further incentive.

An easy, inexpensive way to get to El Mogote is by the bus from Navareno which leaves from the north side of Perferico, just east of where it intersects with Privada de las Flores. Many buses stop there, so be sure you board one with NAVARINO on the windshield. Tell the driver to let you off at El Mogote. The bus heads northwest along Highway 190 and at the sign to Navareno turns west on a secondary road, crosses railroad tracks and reaches your stop, a concrete bus stop shelter on your left. Busses from Navareno back to Oaxaca pass here as frequently as every fifteen minutes...

From the shelter a leisurely five minute stroll on the fieldstone



Pyramid Steps

paved road will take you to an authentic rural Mexican village before the advent of tour buses and souvenir stands. Unless there is a special event in town, the quiet will only be broken by barnyard sounds and bird song. The welcoming committee is likely to be a few sleepy dogs lazing in the sun.

Of course something special, the Festival of San José, will be going on if you are lucky enough to visit between March 16th and March 19th. On the Friday the 16th, festivities get underway with La calende, a spirited parade with moji-gan-

gas (momos), huge papier mache puppets, twirling around to the music of a brass band. On Saturday the 17th there is a fireworks display and on Sunday, dancers in native costumes will hold sway in the hacienda courtyard. On Monday the festival winds up with the installation of the new Majordomo, presided over by the town's mayor. Just past the basketball court and church on your left you will come to the Museo Comunitario Del Mogote, housed in the restored old ranch, Hacienda del Cacique. It is a treasure chest containing treasures, rare and ancient. But, it is likely to be locked and you may first have to find the keepers of the keys, Natalie or her papa, Israel, to unlock it for you. To find them continue along the main drag past the museum, taking the right fork and then turning left into the first intersecting street. Near the corner, on your right is the small solid black Iron Gate to their garden. Natalie or Israel will happily open the museum for you and collect the nominal 10 peso admission fee. The exceptionally well preserved, attractively displayed heads, figures jewelry and artifacts in the

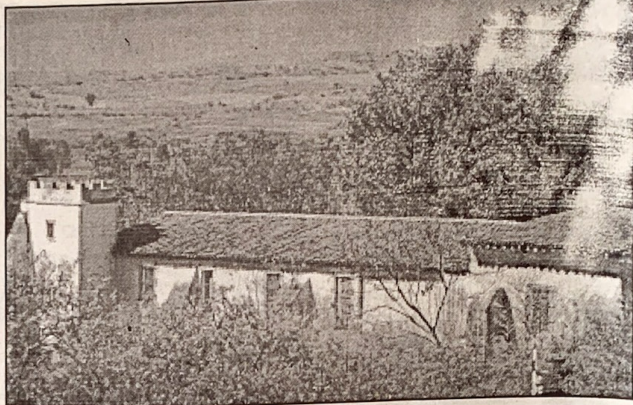


Pyramid, Narrow Stone Stairway

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museum all were found in El Mogote, which is the earliest of all the Zapotec pueblos in Mesoamerica. It dates back to 1300 BC. You will come face to face with a two-foot high cinnabar painted clay head of a Zapotec nobleman known as, "El Diablo Enchilado" (The Irascible Devil) whose headdress forms a ritual brazier. Don't miss the large urn with the seated likeness of the deity, Cocijo, or the small clay figures found in tomb 10 or the extraordinary sculptured Jade figure of a man (100 BC- 150 AD). These treasures are as rare and beautiful as their more highly publicized cousins in the Santo Domingo Museum. The fully restored hacienda housing the collection is just as fascinating. It was once the headquarters of a large ranch founded at the end of the eighteenth century on lands sold by the town of Etlá to Spanish families in Oaxaca. The story of its workers' struggle for a living wage, better working conditions and the right to buy land is movingly depicted in two of the museum's rooms. As late as the 1930s El Cacique's Patron, Domingo E. Torracelli, worked his 'trabajadoras (workers) twelve hours a day, paying them only 1.25 pesos a day plus housing, water and what they could grow for themselves on a hectare of his land. Understandably, during the 1930's the ranch workers revolted, initiating "la lucha por la tierra" (the fight for the land) which they continued for years until they finally succeeded in forming an agrarian union and wresting a legal document from Toricelli entitling them to a minimum wage and the



Hacienda El Cacique

right to buy land from him.

El Mogote's archeological site which includes a partially excavated pyramid and an unexcavated ball court is close by, behind twin water towers at the west side of the basketball court. Enough of the pyramid steps, walls, walkways and narrow stone staircases have been uncovered and restored to give you a sense of what the large sophisticated community of El Mogote was in its heyday. The short climb to the summit on which huge pipe organ cactuses and guaje trees have taken up residen-

ce, will rewarded you with unforgettable views. To the east and west, fertile valley fields stretch as far as the eye can see. To the north loom the towering smoky ridges of the Sierras. On a clear day looking east you can make out Monte Alban. Millennia ago, El Mogote were able to communicate with Mote Alban, using smoke signals.

Standing in this quiet, extraordinarily beautiful place one cannot but experience a sense of peace and, a sense of the human struggle and sacrifice undergone to achieve it.



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