

Oaxaca

A collage of culture and cuisine come together in this often overlooked gem



Oaxaca's appeal is so fundamental it's a wonder this southern state of Mexico and its mile-high capital, Oaxaca [pronounced wah-HA-ka] City, are not more traveled. Blessed with year-round temperate climate, nearby archeological ruins, distinctive cuisine and magnificent artisan handicrafts, the 16th century settlement nestles in a temperate highland valley and enjoys year-round abundant sunshine. Oaxaca's *zocalo*, its central open-air plaza, radiates the warmth of its people. Amid a hubbub of surrounding bustle and activity there is a friendly welcoming calm.



Children chase balloons under the watchful eye of an older sibling, locals sit relaxed on wrought-iron benches reading the daily news or chatting with friends. Mature shade trees shelter al fresco barber chairs occupied by men resembling vaqueros in jeans and cowboy boots. Still others are having a shoe shine. Sit or stand in this vibrant physical heart of the city and you'll soon surmise that every Oaxaqueño passes through at least once a day.

This is Oaxaca's version of a daily recharging station, a life-giving dose of warmth obvious even to a complete stranger.

Come evening, colored lights begin to blink. Strolling street musicians and *señoras* selling hand crocheted shawls ply the tables at open-air cafes surrounding the *zocalo*. Mariachis vie for attention with lively folkloric dancers. This is living theater, ongoing and evolutionary, with a different show every night.

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Sightseeing: The best way to immerse yourself in the local culture is by strolling the clean streets that fan out from the *zocalo*. Splendid examples of Baroque colonial architecture mix with brightly hued adobe buildings. Museums abound. Pressed for time, choose the Rufino Tamayo Museo de Arte on Avenida Morelos which contains a fantastic collection of pre-Hispanic art amassed by Oaxacan artist Rufino Tamayo over a 20-year period.

With 27 churches in town, the city is truly blessed. Oaxaca's crown jewel is the Basilica de la Soledad. Built to house a statue of the city's patron saint, the Virgin of Solitude, it boasts a façade 79 feet high. Another treasure is the Santo Domingo Church where more than 12 million pesos were devotedly spent. When the sun shines through the church's stained-glass window, it is said to create a golden glow over the entire interior that resembles a Baroque vision of heaven.

Just as an abundance of rich cultural heritage and history permeates the city's past, it also enlivens its present. Decades ago, the United Nations honored Oaxaca City's uniqueness by naming it a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Recognizing Oaxaca's cultural wealth, expat entrepreneurs have established art galleries, cafes, inns and cooking schools, thus managing to integrate their love of the area with enterprises owned by locals. Nary a week goes by without an opening at one of the more than 50 galleries and artists' studios in town.



The American Library on Pino Suarez is a great place to relax over a cup of coffee while meeting expats and other travelers. On Saturday mornings, local Mexicans pair up with English-speaking visitors for language practice of one hour in Spanish and another in English. www.oaxlibrary.com

Cuisine: Known as the “Land of the Seven Moles,” Oaxaca's cuisine is world renowned for its chocolate, coffee and mole, a savory dish which usually includes chocolate. Endless versions of mole exist, differing from family to family but, without question, Oaxaca is the undisputed epicenter of this intoxicating blend of chocolate, chilies, garlic, onions, nuts and more.

The history of Oaxacan chocolate consumption spans centuries. Early explorers delighted in drinking the native hot chocolate and brought the tradition home to Europe with them. In warm weather, cafes serve a chocolate drink called *tejate*. Made with chocolate, masa, flowers and fruit pulp, the ingredients are blended into a cool frothy drink, especially refreshing in summer.

High-altitude Oaxacan coffee produces a mild, sweet, complex brew that satisfies without the feeling of having had one cup too many. Simply put, in Oaxaca, one can easily become obsessed with chocolate and coffee.



Branching Out: More cultural treasures await outside the city in the three surrounding valleys ringed by Zapotec and Mixtec ruins. Centuries ago, on a mountain top high above Oaxaca City, Zapotec Indians built the magnificent ceremonial center of Monte Alban. From there, they ruled thousands of square miles of central Mexico. Their descendants still work the ancient trades and crafts today; their high quality products are prized buys.

Especially desirable are the hand-loomed carpets, elaborately painted wood carvings called *alebrijes* and lustrous black pottery. Every weekday one village or another holds a market day where gaily decorated stalls display wares for sale. Day trips to the markets are easily arranged by your hotel and are within driving distance. Markets present a great opportunity to engage in respectful negotiation with a native craftsman. Even more valuable than the purchase of a one-of-a-kind treasure is knowing you have been part of a positive cross cultural exchange. It's one of the most crucial ingredients in your future as a successful expat.

Where to Stay: Oaxaca offers a wide range of accommodations from luxury resorts to home stays.

Hacienda Los Laureles. Secluded in the privacy of gardens, this upscale early 1800s hacienda is just ten minutes from the city center. Travelers who appreciate retiring to a tranquil retreat will find it here. Guests can take cooking classes in the garden, avail themselves of the full-service spa and enjoy fine dining in the hacienda's Cypress Restaurant.

Hotel Casa Antigua: Close to town, in a remodeled 19th century house with panoramic views from the terrace, the hotel offers mid-range pricing with continental breakfast. Calle 5 de Mayo 206, www.hotelcasaantigua.com.

Las Bugambilias is a family-owned bed-and-breakfast inn with nine individual rooms all enhanced by original art works. Lovely quiet garden in a central locale. Excellent two-course breakfast included. Modestly priced. <http://www.lasbugambilias.com>

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When to Go: Year-round Oaxaca enjoys temperate climate. The best season is May through September with usually rainy afternoons and cool evenings.

Getting There: From Mexico City, Oaxaca City is just a one hour jet flight to the south. Airport shuttles deliver passengers directly to their hotels.



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