



Day of the Dead in Oaxaca

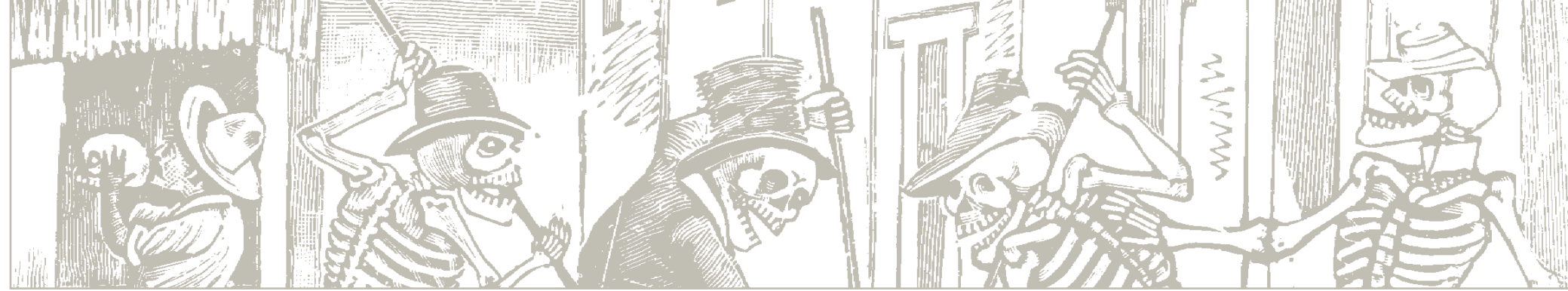
*Text and Photos by Ken B. Miller
Woodcuts by J.G. Posada, c. 1890*

Mexican people celebrate death every year. To the American sensibility, this seems macabre and distasteful, but in a country where life has few guarantees, poking fun at mortality and honoring deceased relatives provides a much needed escape from the realities of life.

The first thing you see when you step off the plane at Oaxaca airport is the mountains. Looming and magnificent, from the air they're pretty amazing, but from the ground they're breathtaking. After checking our luggage at the only baggage claim in the whole place, Mary and I were met by our tour representative. We were quickly whisked away to the heart of downtown Oaxaca City (pop. 212,900) and the beautiful Hotel Gala where our reservations were.

Oaxaca City is the capital of the state of Oaxaca in the southern part of Mexico. It is surrounded on all sides by the beautiful Sierra Madre mountains and has remained fairly isolated until recently. The native peoples are descendants of the Zapotec Indians and speak Spanish as a second language. Although the city is 90% Catholic, they still maintain many of their ancient ways. Of course, the only thing we noticed about the place was that they had a lot of Volkswagen Beetles around, apparently because they have no EPA in Mexico. There were Beetle police cars, taxicabs and company cars (could you imagine if they tried to give someone a Beetle as a company car in America?).





We were pretty hot considering that we were dressed for the weather in Pennsylvania which was 40° and here it was about 80°. The weather was perfect for our stay—it got up into the mid-80's during the day, but it was that amazing legendary “dry heat” that really is better than humidity. The Mexican sun is really brutal, though—Mary actually got a sunburn on her scalp. At night, it was a perfect 75°. It didn't rain once during our seven-day stay, and I don't recall seeing cloud cover.

Our hotel was located about 30 feet from the *zócalo* or main square and social center of the city. The square has a small park with trees, benches and a huge gazebo and is surrounded by outdoor cafés, a beautiful cathedral (called simply the “Metropolitan Cathedral”) and on the fourth by the capitol building. It is also a place of constant activity, be it animated conversation, free concerts (marimba, folk music, marching band, guitar, etc.), people selling their wares or political protest. Directly across from the capitol building were a group of squatters protesting the murder of some people from their village. They lived in the square for the entire week we were there, cooking, sleeping and using a make-shift outhouse situated next to a bench that was curiously always free, even on the most crowded nights. They had goats and chickens that ate all the shrubbery in the immediate area, and they had an effigy of the president of Mexico sticking out of a trash can with a sign on it that said “The Bastard of History.”

After checking into the Gala and taking a brief nap during which we were tantalized by the strange sounds of the street and music from the *zócalo*, we adjourned to the hotel restaurant for dinner. Still unaccustomed to the exchange rate of 8 pesos to the dollar, we were confused by the prices on the menu that were marked in dollars, and ranged from \$3 for drinks to \$25 for entrees. We asked the waitress and she assured us that the prices were in pesos, which meant that our \$80 dinner, including appetizers, drinks and two entrees, only actually cost \$10! We were starting to really like this place!

After dinner we walked over to the *zócalo* to see where all the music was coming from, and there we found a mariachi band playing rumba music and dozens of couples dancing beneath the gazebo. There were dozens of children throwing enormous 15-foot balloons up into the air and catching them next to a beautiful cathedral, and an army of people selling inflatable Disney characters. There were blankets of handcrafts set up all over and everything was cheap if you knew how to haggle in Spanish because nobody spoke English at all. We sat down on a bench and tried to figure out why we had been living in such a boring place our whole lives.

La Turista

The only thing we were really afraid of was Travelers Diarrhea or *la turista*, which comes from (of course) drinking the water. Many people don't realize that you can't just not drink the water—you can't brush your teeth with it, or eat any fresh vegetables that haven't been peeled because they have been washed with it, or even have ice in your drinks unless it's been purified. As a preventative measure, we were

taking Pepto-Bismol every morning by the direction of Mary's sister Amy, who is a doctor. Of course, every meal we ate came with fresh vegetables, usually toothsome tomatoes or luscious lettuce, and we were careful not to eat them or anything that had touched them. Of course, I got really sick on the fourth day, possibly from eating guacamole. I had a fever, a violently upset stomach and I vomited, but at least the Pepto-Bismol did prevent diarrhea. Unfortunately, it also prevented any sort of normal bowel movement for a week, in combination with the lack of produce it was painful.

The Sights

We saw the beautiful stonework of the ruins at Mitla, and the grandeur of Monte Alban, where the ancient Zapotecs flattened the top of a mountain around 600 B.C. to build their ceremonial center that modern archaeologists don't understand at all. Among the ruins are Olmec reliefs that appear to be medical diagrams of such things as dwarfism, breech birth and kyphosis (hunchback—apparently the ancients didn't have much calcium in their diet), leading some to believe that part of it was once a hospital. The Zapotecs also built an observatory that is oriented to both the magnetic north and true north.

We also saw the giant *El Tulé*, a colossal 2000-year-old cypress tree that has a 150-foot diameter trunk, which our guide claimed to be the largest in the world (not the tallest or the oldest, but damn if it ain't the widest). This is the thing that people who look at our pictures are most impressed with because it's just so... well... BIG.

Due to the high density of Catholics, Oaxaca features dozens of beautiful

cathedrals. The most notable is Santa Domingo, which is absolutely breathtaking. Every inch of wall and ceiling is covered with ornate gold leaf and sculptures of saints, and there is an altar that must be seen to be believed. All of the churches in Oaxaca are so overtly tacky that they are charming, but Santa Domingo is simply spellbinding. Mexicans take their religion very seriously, and the Mexican Christ is made to suffer beyond belief—blood dripping down his arms and knees, and horribly gnarled.

Consume! Consume!

Aaaah, so many things to buy, so little suitcase space! Everything was really cheap, especially if you bargain with the vendors. Rugs, jewelry, hand embroidered clothing, the famous Oaxacan black pottery and beautiful folk art are all plentiful and for sale at bargain prices.

Carved and painted figures are among the most popular handcrafts for sale in Oaxaca. Usually animals, demons, insects or reptiles, they are beautiful and intricate, and no two are the same. Many artists make the same types of creatures, but each artist has his or her own style, and some of them are amazingly complex and fancifully painted. There was one porcupine that I became obsessed with. It was enormous—about 18” long with about 150 hand-carved quills that were all painted blue and white. After three days of hemming and hawing, I finally bought it for \$30, which seemed really expensive at the time. A simi-

Santa Domingo Church is one of Mexico's finest examples of Baroque architecture. This photo shows the ceiling with the exquisite “Tree of Saints”



Oaxaca's Metropolitan Cathedral was originally constructed in 1640. The ornately-carved façade depicts the Rising of the Crowned Virgin



Every home and business creates an altar for deceased friends and loved ones. Along with humorous depictions of skeletons, there are food and drinks for the ghosts who will visit.



lar but much less interesting piece was being sold for \$150 in Philadelphia.

The food was great—aside from the fact that we were afraid to eat any fresh vegetables. Stuffed chili peppers, tortillas, refried black beans and anything involving that great Oaxaca cheese were all heavenly (*Queso Fundido* is the Oaxacan version of cheese fondue with big strips of melted cheese and a pile of tortillas to put them on). Pizza was surprisingly good, and so were the pastries. The local *chocolaté* drink was divine, with a hint of cinnamon and an entirely different kind of chocolate. Fruit flavored sodas or refrescos are really popular, including pineapple, lemon and apple flavored. The apple soda's called "Manzana Lift" and it's made by Coca-Cola, possibly left over from the days of "Aspen," the failed American version of the same drink.

Helado is Mexican ice cream and it's made with loads of fat, so it tastes incredible. A cone costs 4 pesos (50¢) in the *Zócalo*. Fat is a main ingredient in Mexican food, and

that makes it taste much better than its American counterpart. Everything is fried in lard, which makes a big difference in the taste—French fries are unbelievable.

The People

Of course, part of the reason everything is so cheap is that Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico. At the outdoor cafés, we were constantly bombarded by people selling things—shoeless children selling friendship bracelets for 25¢, Indian women selling handmade shirts for \$5, children who would shine your shoes for 8 pesos (\$1), wandering guitar players who would ask for money and old beggars. We're from Philadelphia, so we're used to homeless people and panhandlers, but the poor in Mexico are so much more desperate than the poor in America. The old Indian beggars could hardly walk and would come up to you with their hand on your shoulder and silently cup a hand in front of you. One little girl who was selling bracelets didn't ask us to buy one, she only wanted to share some of our pizza.

Why The Desk Clerk Hated Us

Well, it started with the ceiling fan. We marched down shortly after checking in and announced that the ceiling fan wasn't working. For three days it still didn't work, despite me pulling all the chains. Then one day I found the switch for it that was hidden behind a lamp. Minutes after telling him about the ceiling fan, I accused him of trying to pass off "old pesos" on me. Several years ago, the Mexican government converted all money from "old pesos" to "new pesos." All of our travel books warned us that old pesos were worthless—1000 of them are equal to 1 new peso. The books didn't say that Mexico stopped printing the words "*nuevos pesos*" on the new pesos in 1994. When the desk clerk tried to give me perfectly good bank notes that weren't marked "*nuevos pesos*," we thought he was ripping us off and demanded "*nuevos pesos*," much to his frustration. We took our \$20 back and marched upstairs where we read that we had just rejected perfectly good money. We sheepishly returned downstairs after memorizing the Spanish phrase for "I'm sorry." The next morning, we demanded to know where our tour guide was because he was 30 minutes late. "That tour is at 10:00," the same clerk said. "Well, it's 10:30," we told him. "No it's not—read this sign," he said, pointing at one of the little signs that were all over the lobby of the hotel—signs that I had ignored because they were in Spanish. On the back, in English, it said that clocks would be turned back an hour for daylight savings. We finally understood why our 8:00 wake-up call never came. Two days later we tried to go to Monte Alban. That was the morning I became sick. With the help of the desk clerk (again, the same clerk) we rescheduled for later in the day since I was feeling better. Then later in the day rolled around and I felt much worse, so with the help of the same clerk, we rescheduled it for the next morning, and both times we accidentally hung up the phone on the tour agent. He looked pretty glum all week, but when we checked out, he actually smiled.



One day we had a tour of the workshop of a renowned rug maker. He showed us how he raises a particular type of cactus parasite to make his red pigment, and demonstrated how he ground and extracted all of his colors from various other natural substances. One of the pieces he had for sale was a reproduction of a famous Picasso painting called "The Bather," but it was much too expensive. Two days later we saw a street vendor selling a similar reproduction of the same painting, and out of curiosity, I asked him how much it was. He told me the price, which was quite reasonable, but we really had no intention of buying the rug. We thanked him and left. Unfortunately, this move is a crucial part of haggling—pretending you have no intention of buying something and walking away to get a lower price, so the man cut his price in half. I told him we really weren't interested, but he grabbed my sleeve and wouldn't let me leave. "Name your price," he said repeatedly in Spanish. I told him that I only had about 20 pesos, but he thought I was lying. "I really need the money," he finally said in English. Since we really did only have about 20 pesos (\$2.50 U.S.), we had to tell him no and leave, which made us feel horrible.

Despite what many people led us to believe about Mexico, nobody tried to steal anything from us (aside from the hotel maid who took \$1 in change... thinking it was a tip) or cheat us in any way. Everyone was honest and pleasant, although many of the vendors were quite aggressive if they detected that you were at all interested in what they were selling. Even if you look at what they're selling, they'll never let you go.

We also met an American woman named Janice who was from the same

area that we were from, and she shared the same travel agent that we had. We went with her on the tour and hung out with her a little bit. She was taking a class in Mexican cooking which included learning how to make *Molé*, a Oaxacan specialty. You might know the most famous, Guacamole.

The only people we didn't like were the American Tourists (actually, there were lots of Germans who were nearly as annoying, and there were lots of Spanish-speaking tourists too, possibly Mexicans, looking at the same handcrafts we were looking at) for reasons I will discuss in the *Días de los Muertos* section. We also had a run-in with the local police when we decided to play Scrabble outside the cathedral in the *zócalo*. A group of meter maids ordered us to play somewhere else for

Children in costumes parade through the streets of Oaxaca. Common costumes include simple masks, vampires, skull face painting and the ubiquitous devils.



reasons which will never be known to us because they spoke no English and I couldn't figure out what they were saying except for "not here." The only reason we can think of for them to torment us is that they didn't know what Scrabble was and they thought it was some kind of gambling game, which should not be played next to a church.

Los Dias de Muertos

This was why we came to Mexico in the first place—the Days of the Dead celebration, a wonderful custom in which Mexicans pay tribute to the deceased. It's a touching, beautiful and humorous celebration that blends pagan rituals with the Catholic tradition of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. It's a bit like Halloween, Christmas and Independence Day all rolled into one, with a big dose of black humor. Mexicans believe that during this time, the deceased visit the living, and it's up to the living to provide the dead with things they miss from our world.

People prepare for the celebration by constructing elaborate altars in their homes or work places in honor of specific family members. These altars usually contain the following items: flowers (marigolds are the traditional flower of Day of the Dead), fruit,

candy skulls, incense, pictures of the deceased, a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe or Jesus, sugar cane, paper doilies, candles, bread, liquor and little skeleton figurines. These figures are comical and usually depict what the deceased person did for a living while they were alive, from guitar players to secretaries. People spend most of October 31st setting these altars up, sort of like the way people in this country would decorate Christmas trees. Every home and business had an altar (we were told, we didn't actually have time to check for ourselves.)

Children dress up in costumes and parade through the streets. The costumes are similar to what American children would wear (demons, skeletons, ghosts, vampires, spiders, etc.) except there are no "Power Rangers" or anything like that. Usually they have a banner with the name of their school on it, and some of them go as far as to make the parade a mock funeral procession complete with a fake coffin. They are usually accompanied by music in the form of either a "boom box" or an actual band that follows the children. When they reach the town square, they all stop and the adults form a circle and the children dance. Children who can't afford to go to school don masks and "trick or treat" at the outdoor cafes. It is sad that the children of the poor are treated so badly in Mexico—they have to work and sell things with their parents on the street while children of the people with money get to enjoy a life of luxury. Day of the Dead sadly emphasized this difference as the poor, shoeless children, clad in dirty t-shirts and carrying cheap masks beg for change at the café while the other children have a parade in their honor.

The night of the 31st is when the celebration really begins. Now, in addition to the parades of children, there were groups of adults on stilts and dressed in elaborate costumes, people offering free shots of liquor and general festiveness. More than a New Orleans sort of festiveness—whole families celebrating together, and a sense of community I have seldom experienced in my life.



Community is an incredibly important part of Mexican life, even the town square represents a concept that is largely lost in American society. There was something that I have always felt is lacking in my own culture. We left the town, however, to see what happens in a place called Xoxo.

Pronounced "Hoho"

We signed up for a cemetery tour to this town, and were dismayed to find the tour bus completely filled with obnoxious and stupid American senior citizens. But even they couldn't ruin the magical experience of being there for what we saw.

The guide led us through a throng of people (mainly tourists) into the main cemetery. Once we shuffled through the iron gates behind the mob, we saw something we were totally unprepared for. Something so beautiful and magical that it simply cannot be described in words or seen in photographs, but I will try.

The entire cemetery was illuminated with hundreds of candles, and every grave was decorated or in the process of being decorated by families with many of the same things one finds decorating the altars. Despite the tourists stumbling over flowers and stepping on graves, it was the most beautiful thing we have ever seen. Incense hung in the air and families were gathered around the graves creating elaborate sand paintings, singing, praying, weeping, setting up patterns of marigold petals and sharing the experience of loss in a way that honors the deceased and at the same time pokes fun at death. It was quite a contrast to the American custom of trying to forget about people who have died, and pretending

that it won't happen to us. Mexicans confront death with a smile rather than pretending that they will live forever, which is a healthier attitude in a country where life has no guarantees.

We moved on to a larger cemetery where even more people were gathered. Children set off fireworks and people burned the weeds from the tops of long-neglected earthen graves. It is a custom that if you cannot visit the grave of your relative, you can go to the cemetery and decorate a neglected grave in the name of your relative. Due to the large number of people who visit the cemeteries on that night, we were only allowed about an hour in each one, so we were led back to the place where the bus was to pick us up to wait with the senior citizens and watch the traffic jam caused by all the tour buses, astonished as well as emotionally drained by the experience. The rest of the tour group was drinking mezcal and talking loudly about their bladder control problems, but Mary, Janice and I were simply awestruck.

Departure

There were two more days of festivities, altars, parades of *niños*, shopping, plays performed in the middle of the street, wonderful food, butterfly watching, excellent beer, wine, cathedrals and of course, gazing at the mountains. Then on the night of November 2nd, our stay ended and the tour company sent a car to take us to the airport. The driver asked us what we thought of Oaxaca, and we looked at each other for a second and then we both said, "We want to live here."

This article is dedicated to Mary, without whom these events would have had no meaning whatsoever.

The cemetery altars were as beautiful as the home altars. If people cannot physically visit the grave of a loved one, they adopt a neglected grave.

