

## OAXACA: Self-Guided Tour

A beautiful colonial city founded on a rich indigenous base, Oaxaca is Mexico's most captivating destination. During its robust history, native religions have blended with Catholicism to give Oaxaca an intense and magical spirituality. Among its colorful streets and harmonious baroque architecture, Oaxaca's scores of churches are considered the most stunning in Latin America.

Set in a plateau enclosed by mountains, Oaxaca is surrounded by traditional indigenous villages and by archaeological treasures including Monte Alban, the oldest city of Mesoamerica and Zapotec holy site. Village artisans produce extraordinary carved and painted animals, various styles of intricate pottery, and prized rugs among many woven items. Bustling weekly markets and exuberant fiestas unfolding in the streets infuse Oaxaca with color and charm, adding to its allure as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Also known as the culinary capital of Mexico, Oaxaca is home to truly hospitable people who will share their talents and welcome you with their warm hearts.

### *IF YOU HAVE TWO OR THREE DAYS*

Start with hanging out in the **Zocolo** to feel the pulse of the city, enjoy Oaxacan family outings, grandparenting, courting, live music and biweekly ballroom dancing. Plenty of vendors are selling their wares and various causes are championed. Extend your visit with a meal at the balcony of the upstairs **Asador Vasco—best** are their Oaxacan specialties. Head south another block to peruse the 20th of November Market, savoring another taste of local life and interests. A couple more blocks south and west you will find the colorful Artisan's Market.

Absolutely don't miss **Monte Alban**, the first city in Mesoamerica. Spring for a guide-- If Clemente is available, he will include spiritual aspects of life in the Zapotec Classic period. Go in the morning when the sun is less intense, and stay for lunch at the café overlooking the city. Then, back in the Centro, follow up by seeing the treasures from Tomb 7 on display in the **Cultural Museum** next to Santo Domingo (museum closed Mondays).

To complement Monte Alban and the Cultural Museum, stop by the **Rufino Tamayo Museum** with this world famous artist's collection of prehispanic art (closed Tuesdays).

Numerous gorgeous churches exemplify the grandeur of Colonial Oaxaca. Don't miss: **Santo Domingo**, Oaxaca's **Cathedral**, the Basilica of **Soledad**, **Carmen Alto** and **San Felipe Neri**. If you have time, travel 20-25 minutes south to experience the contrasting 16th Century open-air church at **Cuilipan**. (For commentary on these churches, see the syncretism paper "The Soul of Mexican Catholicism.")

The **Ethno-Botanical Garden** behind Santo Domingo has tours in English on

Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 11. While focused on its flora, you learn much about Oaxaca's peoples, their history, culture and spirituality.

A valuable quick stop is the **Benito Juarez Museum** on Garcia Vigil (across from Carmen Alto), the restored family home where, in 1819 at age 12, the future and now beloved President of Mexico, was welcomed after walking alone over 40 miles from his mountain village to the city (closed Mondays).

Another quick stop is the elaborate European-style **Opera House** (Teatro Macedonia Alcala) on Independencia (corner of 5 de Mayo) which houses the local symphony and piped Met performances.

#### IF YOU HAVE A COUPLE MORE DAYS

Be sure to visit some of the artisan villages surrounding Oaxaca where families are working together to produce the variety of crafts on display in city shops. The artisan village visits can coordinate with local market days and charming country churches.

Eastern Route: Sunday is market day in **Tlacolula**, where you can buy ox bows or colorful embroidered aprons along with fresh produce and any other household necessity. Then also visit **Teotitlan del Valle**, the rug weaving village. The Ruiz family gives a quality demonstration in English and has beautiful rugs at reasonable prices. With its Zapotec culture intact and language widely used, Teotitlan is popular with anthropologists. Do visit the church where El Senor de Esquipulas (the Black Christ) is prominent. A 16th C church in nearby Tlacoahuaya is also worth a stop. On the same route, you will find the ruins of **Mitla**, and the **Tule Tree**, oldest and largest in the western hemisphere.

Southern Route: Friday is market day in **Ocotlán**, home of renowned artist Rodolfo Morales. Be sure to visit the lovely church restored by Maestro Morales, and the Rodolfo Morales Museum, adjacent to the church in the former convent. If you are particularly adventurous, also stop at the Friday morning animal market where you could add to your collection of cattle, oxen, pigs, or horses.

On the way to Ocotlan are three artisan villages, all great experiences. First is **San Bartolo Coyotepec**, of black pottery fame. Visit the Museum there (except on Mondays) whose staff can guide you to the workshops of particular artists whose work is displayed. That of Miguel Fabian and his son Omar is a personal favorite.

**San Martin Tilcajete** specializes in alebrijes (painted wooden animals); the best workshop is that of Jacobo and Maria Angeles. They also own the excellent restaurant at the highway turnoff, **Azucena Zapoteca** (Chiles in Nogada are especially unusual and delicious, and for vegetarians, their signature dish is Azucena Zapoteca).

Just past San Martin, **Santo Tomas Jalieza's** specialty is back-strap weaving. Visit the collective market and ask to be directed to the workshop of the Mendoza family, Artesanias Abigail.

To accomplish all these stops in one day, be sure to get an early start!

Southwest of Oaxaca: Another day, If you wish to combine a visit to **Cuilipan** with an artisan village, **Arrazola** is nearby. Arrazola's specialty is also alebrijes and there are numerous quality workshops happy to welcome you. Look for Armando Jiminez and Antonio Mandarin.

To the Northwest: **Atzompa** is the home of intricate pottery with a natural or glazed finish. There is a collective market on the right as you drive into the village. Three workshops, those of Irma Blanco, Angelica Vasquez and Enedina Vasquez are particularly impressive. A recently excavated archaeological site in Atzompa is open to the public.

Back in Oaxaca's Historic Center, there are additional small museums that are worthwhile. The **Textile Museum** on Hidalgo and the **Alvarez Bravo Photography Center** on M. Bravo (corner of Garcia Vigil) are standouts. Philatelists, stop by the **Stamp Museum** on Reforma. Across Hidalgo from the Textile Museum is **San Pablo**, a restored monastery housing a research library and featuring cultural and art exhibits.

#### IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME OR DIVERSE INTERESTS

Check out **eco-tourism** opportunities in the Sierra Norte, Pueblos Mancomunados. Day or overnight trips can be arranged with most local tour agents. The more distant waterfall, **Hierve del Agua**, is beautiful and popular.

**Indigenous traditional healers (curanderos)** offer a holistic approach to physical, emotional and spiritual health. Limpias (spiritual cleansings), temezcal (herb steam bath), and spiritually guided massages are provided, and general introductions to their practices can be arranged. The best resource is Claudia Schurr at Tierra Ventura ([www.tierraventura.com](http://www.tierraventura.com)). Tierra Ventura is a good resource for eco-tourism ventures as well.

**Horseback riders** can sign up to ride with Mary Jane Gagnier in Teotitlan del Valle (<http://www.horsebackmexico.com>).

**CaSa**, in San Augustine Etla, is a 19th C architectural delight, restored by another renowned Oaxacan artist, Francisco Toledo. It was formerly a textile and a paper factory and is now an arts center.

The **cochineal**, a little red insect parasite on Oaxacan cactus, produces a strong red dye which was highly coveted and sold world-wide before the advent of artificial dyes. The wealth produced for Oaxaca during this time funded her glorious, ornate colonial churches. Just south of Oaxaca's airport is a cochineal

farm and museum to elucidate curiosity seekers.

For your day trips, you can join an organized tour, or consider hiring your own car and driver to tailor your opportunities.

Oaxaca is known as the culinary capital of Mexico and is especially famed as the home of seven moles. Try your new skills after a **cooking school** session. Good ones are **Susanna Trilling's** Seasons of My Heart (located in Etna) and **Pilar Cabrera's** La Casa de Los Sabores, in the Centro and affiliated with **La Olla**, her very good restaurant on Reforma.

## MORE FUN RESTAURANTS

In addition to those mentioned in the narrative above, **Los Pacos** will provide a sampler of all seven moles, then you choose one to three of them for your meal. The Los Pacos option across the highway in Reforma is preferred to the branch in the Centro.

**Itanoni**, also in Reforma, is known locally as the "corn restaurant." Very popular with locals, it is unpretentious, unbelievably economical, and offers all varieties of local corn (white, yellow, blue, red) in all kinds of combinations. Breakfast and lunch only, closes about 2.

For upscale Mexican fare, **Los Danzantes** is a favorite. It is on the Alcala, but hidden behind an Oro de Monte Alban (jewelry store), a little south of Santo Domingo.

**La Catedral**, on Garcia Vigil closer to the Zocolo, also has upscale Mexican fare and an excellent Sunday buffet comida.

**Calabacita Tierna** on Porfirio Diaz is popular with vegetarians and vegans.

## READING SUGGESTIONS

Charles C Mann, 1491 Amy Butler Greenfield, A Perfect Red J.M.G. LeClezio, The Mexican Dream

**Amate Books** on Macedonio Alcala, about two blocks south of Santo Domingo, has an excellent selection of English books, specializing in topics on Oaxaca, Mexico and Latin America. Bookseller Henry Wangeman also stocks a good selection of contemporary and classic literature.

Attachments: Centro Historico street map, background reading on indigenous-Catholic syncretism.

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# City of Oaxaca

Central Historical District

www.tomzap.com

