

Oaxaca, city and coast



On the 5th of November we arrived in Oaxaca, Mexico and went to Vinigulaza Spanish school the following Friday. Oaxaca is a beautiful 1500m high capital of Oaxaca.

Famous for alternative life and lots of culture.



Unfortunately also with lots of traffic and smog due to lots of newly bought US-american style private cars. Banks encouraged private households with cheap credits to buy their own. The city is not laid-out for such a traffic, it gets stuck, honks, stinks and is noisy. A few years ago there were far more taxis than private cars.

We visited many places of natural or cultural heritage and beauty. Mitla and Monte Alban are unimaginable beautiful Maya temple sites and only partly uncovered places of unmatched culture and art at their century.



And as always: the conquistadores destroyed the old ceremonial sites – not after admiring them first – and built their churches on the sites and with the ornamented stones of the destroyed temples. It makes me sad and enrages me to again and again see the same story and imagine how beautiful the integration of both or the fusion could have been.

Hopefully now we as humanity soon will enter a period where to integrate and not to destroy. Ojalà!

And we saw wonders like the biggest tree of the world in terms of biomass in Tule with 15 m diameter of the stem, and Hierve el Agua, beautiful, of the track mineral rich sources in the high mountains forming age old terraces to relax in.

In Oaxaca itself we stayed with a family who has been involved in the 2006 demonstration of teachers for school uniforms and books for the pupils, for higher wages, and in the end for sacking the corrupt governor of Oaxaca, Ruiz. In the Spanish school my teacher, aged 25, Jesus, was also involved in defending his Universities legal autonomy against the intrusion of the state power. No goals were fulfilled, 26 people died, 5 „disappeared“, many wounded, but the experience of solidarity, of feeding each other on the barricades, of resilience was a strong bonding for many. It was a horrible time but it left them with the feeling that



they can do something. For this I admire and envy them. Something like it would have been unthinkable in Germany since the sixties.



Masunte and Zipolite

We went for some days on the beach, after 10 days in Oaxaca, drenching ourselves in tropical beauty and rest. With Pelicans, Fregatt birds, huge sea turtles, beautiful butterflies, Pacific waves, coconuts and tropical water temperatures. Each time I (Achim) step into the water, I am surprised how warm it is, always expecting a little chill. I guess it is well above 26°C.

We followed old tips I had to a very lonely place on the coast near Salina Cruz. The bus dropped us off out of nowhere. La carretera was empty and the village small and shaggy. Two shops on the road with the same packaged stuff that cannot spoil plus bananas. It took long until someone picked us up the five km dust road to the playa congrejos. It was strong wind, storm, that sometimes threatened to push one over. It carried lots of dust.

The driver asked for the same money as a taxi, almost half as much as the 120 km with the first class bus from Pochutla to Morro. On the beach pretty run down palapas, but some new little tourist huts out of concrete. Due to the storm we chose those after a bargain.



Days pass without much meaning to the official time, with many km of untouched beaches to walk on if the sun or the wind are not too much. The water is about 8 to 10 degrees colder than only 100 km further west, maybe due to the wind. We relax once more, adapt to country

and temperatures and have time to learn more Spanish. It gives me, Achim, the chance to cure my flu and cough. Learning Spanish is difficult here, people are not patient enough to converse with someone who does not speak well and motivation is low.



Juchitán, ciudad de las mujeres

Juchitán, little known in Oaxaca, only for the fact that here “the women order” and not the men. My lonely planet travel guide only knows “la tirada de frutas” a fiesta where women are on the roofs of the buildings and through fruits at the men in the streets below. In Germany, thanks to Barbara Benhold-Thomson and another women anthropologist, we have the chance to know more. Juchitán is known for the remnants of an old zapotec matriarchal culture of the Istm of Tehuatepec with all its qualities in economic wealth redistribution and a strong social net. Their language is zapotec. Life, communication and contact all center around the

market which is situated under and all around the streets of the city parliament (where the men sit).

May, when temperatures rise most and working is impossible during the day, is the month of celebrations. Fiestas every night and rest in the heat of the day. Clad in beautiful colour cloths which take months of manual labour to produce, the wealthiest are asked to hold fiestas and pay for food, music, beer etc. It is a social honour and duty. Everybody is invited to come and dance, eat as much as they want and drink. Wealth is redistributed by the services paid to the fiesta. Often leaving the donor with much less money after the fiesta. This is one trade of matriarchal cultures I know of. The other is the tolerance towards gay inclinations. Gay men were accepted into the social web and often wear womans clothes. They can come out freely, which is a big surprise in the machist mexican society.

Third is that work separation is great. Each trader (originally only women) will only produce one thing (e.g. tortillas or tostadas) and buy everything else they need in food and services from the others. They will rarely cook themselves but eat in one of the many food stands. There communication is high also. Also they will not saw, or wash their clothes even when they could do it. The turnover of money is huge as only complementary currencies can dream of.

Men work the land and grow food to get into closer contact with the earth, which comes more natural for women. They work with the products, sell and trade. They have the money!

This is how it used to be. When I visited 6 year ago with Gill Emsly, we found the market already pressed by the first supermercado, by conventional shops, by technology around. But still we could feel the strong feeling of holding strength in women, even in young girls on the market. They did look back when I looked and did not hide or look away. It was a pleasure to see. But already then we could see the change inherent and unavoidable.





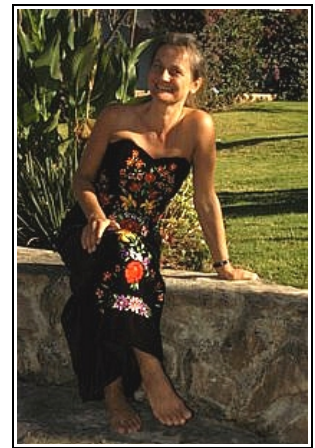
Now I came back, to see, to feel. First is that the market has lost size and power. It no longer is the beating heart of the town. The language is faded and the modern world intruded more and more with more supermercados, modern shops broken into the old houses near the market streets, and, most recently: many more private cars. Banks offer cheap credit to buy your private one. Before transport was by Tricycle, Mule or Taxi. Now streets are blocked with traffic jams and streets are aligned with fancy gadgets for cars.

It feels different, too. I imagine to feel the clash of the modern world supported by the men who want to be free, and the pressing

modernization and consumer advertised so-called needs. More garbage. But still, like before, no beggars in the streets and still the strong and friendly glances of women. AND a before not seen christianization campaign of Jesus the saviour with musik parties and demonstrations in the streets of the market and old Zapotec women

supportin signs like: Jesus lives. I feel sad

to see this culture die in such a way to be replaced by religious church fanaticism. Many christian sects fight for attention and followers here. The missioning of the christian churches has not ended yet, it is in full swing here. It is yet another colonilization.



Ina bought herself Juchitán dress from black velvet --->

On the other line a spanish company wants to build a windpark here on common land. This sounds like a good idea, but the contracts they hold say that they pay next to nothing for the land they use and the electricity is for the benefit of a global market and not for the people living around. This is bad advertizing for the first step of alternative energies in Mexico!



We also found the Foro de Ecologia. It is a demonstration center and school for Juchitán to bring ideas of environmental protection (they breed endangered Iguanas and Sea Turtles and release them) and garbage separation (composting and recycling). It is supported by a German foundation and by Barbara Benhold Thomson. It has a difficult stand as Mexico lives through a time of heaviest rejection of the old ways, and taking care of the earth is one of them.

May the (as I can only see it) aberration into christianization and fanaticism be short enough that memory of old ways remain in the social fabric of society.

Chiapas, San Cristobal

In Sancris it was cold and rainy with temperatures down to 7°C and on sunny days up to 17°C. All that with no heating in the houses – or in schools! All is fascinating as

before, sparkling alternative life, indigenous people on and around markets selling produce and preparing food on the streets (very delicious), deep poverty, and posh touristy striving upwards quarters and streets that just look like somewhere in Dresden. A deep disgust with the greatest part of the youth against everything that is indigenous, dark eyed and skinned, black haired and connected to the earth. Sons and daughters in expensive western fashion gear with mobiles and makeup with fathers at home working 10 to 12 hours a day and often not enough food to eat so that the next generation can buy the newest gadgets from multinationals. Unfortunately this is not imagination, but my teacher in school told me as she knows the families of some of them.



After almost two weeks in a cold and cheap hostel we allowed ourselves 4 days of luxury in an apartment with 3 rooms, bathtub, open fireside, oven and a beautiful sunny and silent garden to hang out in right across our school. It was fantastic and we enjoyed it a lot!



One way of living that I discovered again and again in Mexico was that life is always now. If I have money now, I spend it. If I have a restaurant and receive customers I go and buy what I need then and not in advance and only as much as I need. In Germany we have a deeply ingrained saving culture. We save everything for later. Money, goods etc. Here in Chiapas or Mexico it seems to be different, seems to be for now. Sometimes, if someone receives guests, they go out and buy tortillas etc what they need then. Some shops or street vendors are always available. It is the mentality of: when I need something, it will be there. We in Germany could use something of this attitude and the Mexicans could use a little bit of our foresight and planning.

Chiapas has 25% of indigenous population. Their numbers are growing. Most women have a child in their arm and at least one walking at her side. This creates with the churches wanting, a big and poor labour force of cheap human labour. If there were contraceptives in easy reach, abortion and poverty would not be such a question. I know this is not the full answer, but an important aspect.



Chamula

Chamula is a small indigenous town near San Cristobal at about 2400m high. The special thing about it is that they through out the priests of the big church there some 20 years ago and took control of it themselves. Today the church is heavily used for mayan rituals and visits of curious tourists. It is surprising to enter and always meet many people inside doing their different rituals. When we were in there were about 10 to 15 different rituals happening. Healing sessions with shamans, prayers and many, many candles offered and burning, copal smoking and drinking of Cola in order to burb well t get rid of bad spirits. At the same time someone was cleaning the wax of burned candles from the floor and empty glasses of candles from the tables in front of the formerly catholic saints. There are no benches in the church and the open floor is covered with pine needles



that nowadays replace the formerly used leaves of the Ceibo, the sacred tree of the Maya. Today, only very few of these magnificent tall and large trees is left. Instead the stupidity of imported pines grow where once was rich jungle. Pines increase the risk of forest fires as they dry out the soil and burn well.

On the pine needles all the families including many children sit and pray, joke, talk with one another. In between all of this self organizing "chaos" walk tourists curiously, watch, listen are surprised. But nothing hinders the other. All seems to be a flow of life happening and concentration is high. We sat, listened, watched, meditated. It touched me deeply to see and experience that nothing excludes the other.

In most other indigenous communities different christian churches and sects took over the old beliefs once they were weakened by modern life. There are churches, big and beautiful, in the smallest villages and show who has the money. People belonging to one of the congregations are expected to give 10% of their income and lots of free time. San Cristobal itself is 100% catholic, they say.



At the markets you can find many things and among them also Leucaena seeds for sale to eat raw. Leucaena is a fast and big growing tree native to central America. It loves lime soil and is nitrogen fixing. I tried to introduce it in Portugal for reforestation many years ago, without success because of the acidity of the soil. It is great to see it here still used for protein rich nutrition. We went to Chamula riding on horses which was at least for me (Ina) a torture... because of a saddle out of pure wood. It took a week to cure my buttom.



Oventic



We made a visit in one of the 5 Zapatista Caracoles, self organized regions. We traveled one hour by minibus to Oventic for less than 1€. There we had to show our passports to people disguised in pasamontanas (the black Zapatista caps), had to register and explain why we came and were met by two men answering our questions. Even though we asked for the recent developments in the last months because we see

ourselves as kind of well informed about the history, we heard a lot about the beginning in 1994 and the goals and hardly anything about now. There seemed to be a lot of nostalgia about the beginning, the power and the support they received.



The phase they are in now is less romantic is hard work of daily change, change in the relationships between men and women etc. And to tell about this is not so easy, I know it from my own experience!
Still I liked their humbleness and gentleness very much. It was a rainy and grey day which did not show the village in its beauty.

Toniná – archeological site



Palenque – archeological site



Brüllaffe



Yaxchilán – archeological site



women washing clothes on the guatemalan banks of Rio Usomacinto



Bonampak – archeological site



Fluffy seed capsula of a Ceibo found at Toninà archeological site (the Ceibo was the sacred tree of the Maya)

Agua Azul



Lime waterfalls



Misol Ha



Selva Lacandona - Jungle



We stayed one night at Lacanja, one of the three settlements of the Lacandon people. They were put in contact with western civilization after WWII. So where we were they lived in "stone age" only around 60 years ago. Then came explorers and misionarys, modern cloths, electricity, television with soap





operas, cheaply made US-american violence adoring movies and advertisement. Our host, Kin Bor, had still learned to live without iron in and from the jungle. He taught his son, Paco, who is now 15. 22 years ago came the first road, a dirt road and 12 years ago came a tar surface road. The road brought the settlers from other areas, brought loggers and farmers and where only 15 years ago was deep original and variety rich jungle that fed its people well now you see grassland and single trees with cows and cornfields.

Where it once was fertile, wet and rich it starts to become poor, dry and monoculturish. Kin Bor had long open hair until one year ago, as it was the tradition and few year earlier the clothing of tree bark that they had used for hundreds of years. He still knows the rituals and prayers, but rarely follows them. His father now prays to Jesus and abandoned the old believes completely.

Today Kin Bor is driver of a van for tourists, wears jeans and T-shirt and has short hair.

We stayed in a beautiful cabin next a clean stream to bathe in and were led into the forest by Paco who told us what the ancestors did and what they ate. We tried some of this and it seems that life was rich. One did not keep storage but trust and know that there is always something ready for me to eat or drink, when I need it.



Waste

Like in many countries of the earth until 100 year ago (in some countries it is longer in some less) there was no waste. All things used were orgnic. Here for example the ropes were made when needed from the bark of the cortiza tree, things were wraped in banana leaves. There were no anorganic materials like plastics, metals etc. All things when used where thrown into the forest onto the earth and transfrmed into good soil. So for tribes that come into modernity from "stoneage" within one generation will naturally continue to throw things they do not use anymore into the forest. The understanding that this is not adequate anymore which was good for thousands of years needs to grow. It needs a lot of abstract thinking to understand how anorganic things are developed and why the cannot decompe by themselves. So in my eyes the waste problem is a problem of our modern civilization and not one of these tribes.