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VISITING THE MAYA OF CHIAPAS

by

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This changed everything.

Eight days before New Year's Day 1994, I was on a bus heading out of the Mexican state of Chiapas, with notes and information on visiting there and especially on making contact with the local Maya populations. While the locals had staged some marches and were collecting money along the roadways, there was no overt indication of what was to come.

An armed conflict began on Jan. 1 of that year with the then-unknown Zapatista rebels, which has been calmed, if not fully resolved over the years.

Chiapas is an excellent destination, and should be relatively safe for travelers. If you kept up with the news at the time you are probably familiar with the state of Chiapas. Located in the southwest corner of the country and consisting of a variety of terrains, Chiapas is Mexico's poorest state. The central highlands are home to many different agriculturally based Maya groups, who have been living there for centuries.

The best place to start is in the small provincial city of San Cristobal de las Casas, located in the mountains in the center of the state. This lovely town is perhaps best known for the Maya market, where the indigenous people come from the surrounding mountains to sell their colorful weaving, clothing and accessories. The market is also a good place to try to get friendly with them and try to learn a few words of Tzotzil or Tzeltal, the languages of the dominant groups in the area.

Another must-see is Na Bolom, a house/museum/library built by a Swiss anthropologist/photographer and her Danish archaeologist husband. Franz Blom died in 1963 but Trudy Blom was in her 90's and still fiery in December of 1993. (She passed away a few years later.)

Take a tour of the house and ask lots of questions. Spend a few hours in the library, where perhaps one of the world's greatest collections of books on the Mayas awaits on dusty shelves. While the library is generally for students and researchers, it seems anyone with an honest interest is allowed to have a look.

Tours to local Maya villages can also be arranged through the tourist office or Na Bolom. A group also departs mornings from near the tourist office. Most of these groups visit the nearby villages of Chamula and Zinacantan, both Tzotzil villages. While life in these villages may not be as traditional as it is farther out in the mountains, it is a good introduction into the local customs and culture.

It is very important to know that most Mayas do not like to have their photos taken, and you can bring yourself grief by walking into a market and blowing off shots of the local color. Always ask first. Usually if they consent they will ask for money or expect it afterwards (five pesos is the going rate).

Roads radiate out in all directions from San Cristobal and most lead to and through Maya villages. The tourist office puts out a nice brochure on the local weaving cooperative, "Sna Jolobil". On the back is a great informational map with larger village names, the group which lives there and their specific weaving pattern.

Armed with a map or two, a few words of the local dialect and as much other information as you can dig up, pick a village and head out. It can be difficult to arrange round-trip transport in the same day to many outlying villages, since there may only be one morning in-bound bus, and one out-bound at night. The cheapest practical rental transportation is a Volkswagen "bug", which rents for \$40 a day with 100 free kilometers.

There are bikes for rent but they can be dangerous on the narrow, rutted mountain roads. One shop in San Cristobal rents tiny motor scooters for a high price and does not allow them out of the greater city area.

Hiking is also a possibility and the best way to see the tiny hamlets near the villages, where life is most traditional. The mountains are webbed with networks of rough footpaths, most eventually leading to the local village. The villages, mostly interconnected to each other and eventually San Cristobal by paved roads, serve as the political-religious centers for the hamlets.

If you want to stay overnight in a village, you can try asking at the church, the school or the clinic. You can also ask around to see if someone has a room to rent for the night. The same for food: if there is no restaurant ask if someone provides meals. Even the smallest villages have some sort of shop selling bread and sodas.

I got by in the small village of Chalam this way. I showed up at night and sat on the church steps. I was goofing around with some kids playing marbles and a man came by and asked me if I needed a place to stay. He took me to a woman's house nearby where I got a bed six inches shorter than I was for less than \$2. In the morning I asked around again and a boy showed me to a house where a woman served a great breakfast of eggs, tortillas, goat cheese, beans and wonderful coffee for just over \$1.

I may not have been so lucky, though. In the couple of smaller villages I had walked through towards dusk the night before, the locals seemed happy to keep me moving along toward the next village.

Do not expect village children to run out to meet you and happily take you to an accommodating village headman's house. As you might expect given their history, the Mayas seem to have a healthy mistrust of outsiders and can often be standoffish. Nonetheless, with perseverance and a few words of their language you can get to know a little about their day to day lives and what they think of the world. At the very least you must be able to speak some words of Spanish.

Be prepared for anything from marginal friendliness to indifference or mistrust. The Maya of Chiapas are diverse and their receptivity to outsiders will vary from group to group and village to village. The bottom line will be making the most of it and hoping for dumb luck.

A case in point: I was hitching from Palenque to San Cristobal and was picked up by two Mexican doctors who worked in different Maya villages. I visited their clinics in both villages and even attended the first doctor's wedding: quite a cross-cultural experience (Mexican/Mayan/Gringo). Dancing with an old Maya woman who was only tall enough to look into my belly button will always remain as a fond travel memory.

There are various Maya groups scattered far and wide through Chiapas: seeing them will depend upon how much time you have and what transportation is available. An interesting though expensive adventure can be traveling into the Lacandon rainforest to see both the jungle and perhaps the Maya bands there, said to be the most traditional of all living Maya. Trips leave from the town of Palenque and usually head for the jungle ruins of Bonampak and Yaxchilan, but you can check with travel agents there about arranging other itineraries.

REGIONAL MAYA RUINS

On the subject of ruins, there is also a wonderful ruin at Palenque near the town of the same name. Set into the hillside amongst the forest greenery, the ruins here are more inviting and cooler than their Yucatan counterparts. If you go up the hill behind the main pyramid, you may get lucky and see some howler monkeys (listen for them; their howls sound like a lion with a sore throat).

These are the best of Chiapas' Maya ruins. Others are scattered around the state and if you have an interest in the Mayas, either past or present, you should certainly include a ruin stop or two in your trip. Most ruins are either barely or only partially restored, and those in Chiapas receive nothing like the tourist hordes crowding the Yucatan.

NATURAL SIGHTS

Natural wonders to see in Chiapas include the pretty waterfall at Misol-Ha and the fabulous cascades of Agua Azul, both in between San Cristobal and Palenque to the north. Near the border of Guatemala is a lake district (Lagos de Montebello) with some ruins, temperate forest, Guatemalan refugee camps and not much infrastructure. To the west, the Pacific coast of Chiapas has over 100 miles of coastline with scattered, quiet villages.

Something different to do is ride a high-speed boat through the steep Sumidero Canyon, between San Cristobal and Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital. Get off on the main highway as you go over the canyon; there are quays on either side of the river. You will have to wait for other tourists to fill up a boat, so you might try to organize a group at your accommodation before you head out. The guidebooks suggest going to the docks at Chiapa de Corzo but it seemed some travelers had quite a wait there, too.

The zoo at Tuxtla has a good reputation although I still thought it often resembled an animal jail. Nonetheless, you will find many of the local fauna of Chiapas represented there, including the respected jaguar and the massive, monkey-eating harpy eagle.

LANGUAGE STUDY

There are a few language schools in Chiapas with a variety of reputations. Perhaps one of the better schools is run by a friendly and helpful German woman, who married a Mexican national and has lived in the area for several years. Her school is called "Instituto Jovel" and offers language as well as art classes. Homestays, weekend trips and related activities can also be arranged. Intensive Spanish classes are be arranged on an hourly (\$7) up to two weeks (\$285) basis. Contact Instituto Jovel A.C., A.P. 62, San Cristobal de las Casas, 29200 Chiapas, Mexico, phone and fax (967) 84069.

Another school to try is Centro Bilingue, at 55 Calle Real de Guadalupe, San Cristobal, 29220 Chiapas, Mexico, phone (967) 84157, fax (967) 83723.

Working for pay is hard to do in Chiapas. There may be some teaching positions in Tuxtla, and there may be some volunteer opportunities in San Cristobal. Check at Na Bolom or look around town for flyers about working with Guatemalan refugees.

LOGISTICS

Public transportation will get you to most destinations. Big buses run between cities, at least once or twice a day. There are smaller minibuses (called colectivos or combis) which can get you out to the villages but they run infrequently. If overland travel is too arduous, there are several flights into Tuxtla Gutierrez from other large cities in Mexico.

Budget accommodations include cheap hotels or guesthouses called posadas. No two posadas seem the same and they also can vary widely in prices. You may occasionally find a "casa de huéspedes", which is more or less a guesthouse. Also occasionally available are dormitorio beds, but official youth hostels are few in Mexico. Prices range from about \$5 for a dorm bed up to \$12 plus for a typical budget room (per person).

As usual, camping is the cheapest way to go although it is not quite as organized as it is in other countries. There often is not hot water, and there is not much selection when seeking camping areas: however, the price range averages \$3 to \$5 per person.

Food is nothing like the "Tex-Mex" stuff you get here. Expect a lot of eggs, beans, rice and tortillas. There are a variety of restaurants, cafes and food stalls in most areas. Don't be afraid to explore the side streets, and ask around before eating to get an honest price range.

A reasonable daily budget for Chiapas would be somewhere between \$15 and \$30 per day, per person. Accommodation prices are often per room, so couples or those in groups will get better deals than singles.

With its excellent mix of colorful, traditional groups of indigenous peoples, ancient, intriguing ruins, tropical rainforests, temperate mountain forests, lakes and other natural wonders, Chiapas is an ideal destination. The fighting means that fair-weather tourists will be deterred from visiting, but mostly things remain the same in this traditional, slow-paced state. The reality is there for you to explore.

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