



**LORETO —  
THE BEST TOWN IN BAJA**

by David Simmonds

The Baja peninsula is in the process of being discovered – once again. The first tier of American boomers has begun receiving their gold watches and pension promises, with the fortunate ones finding that they have a good chunk of equity in their homes and inheritances. Although they now “keep on trucking” with the help of Vioxx, Lipitor and glucosamine, they were the backpacking vagabonds who hitched and railed around Europe, certain that their generation was the chosen one, the ones who would be, as Dylan promised, forever young.

Now, nearly four decades later, after raising families and burying parents, the hopes and dreams of their youth are a hazy memory, extinguished by life events resulting from a few bad decisions, untimely bad juju, and all too often, bad people armed with too much power. But they do remember the dream and now that the hard work is done they are thinking about finding the “place” – that spot where they can hang their hammock and maybe wind back the clock to a less complicated and hopeful time. A place to be the person they still see in their

**A view of the Cove at Isla del Carmen**

dreams, the dreams that never died. For many, Baja California is looking like that place, the place to rediscover the dream that got sidetracked by...life.

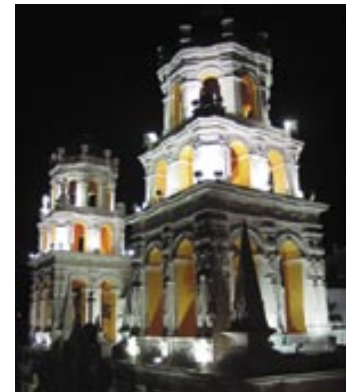
The largest real estate explosions now in motion in Baja are the seventy-mile corridor from Tijuana to Ensenada

on the north Pacific shore and the twenty-five mile stretch from San Jose del Cabo to Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip of Baja. A good infrastructure, improving services and easy access to the U.S. make it an easy move for value-conscious buyers. But for my money, I like the smaller villages not yet over-run with expats and speculators. Now, after having driven the peninsula many times the past 30 years, the old town of Loreto is my favorite.

The towns of Baja have a unique feel to them, a wild-west personality not found in mainland Mexico. The Mexicans who have lived there for generations are not descended from indigenous bloodlines, since most of the early pre-Colombian inhabitants were wiped out by disease and murder. It seems that their forced conversion to Christianity was not enough to save them. Many of the long-time families around Loreto are named

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**A night view of one of Puebla's most beautiful baroque cathedrals as seen from the roof of the Hotel Colonial**



**Something's Afoot in Mexico, Part II**

by Lynne Doyle

*Lynne Doyle is a frequent contributor to Mexico File, with a number of book reviews and accounts of her searches for Mexican folk art. She hails from Maine. This is the second part of a two-part series.*

The next stop on our trip was Puebla, a city I have been to many times, but always with a long agenda and limited time and never with an opportunity to wander and absorb the atmosphere. We have always stayed at the Hotel Colonial de Puebla, a long block off the zocalo, and been completely satisfied with its accommodations, prices (\$55 a night for a double) and services. We tend to lean towards hotels converted from colonial-era structures, and the Colonial is no exception with its spacious rooms, graceful arches and antique furniture. Perhaps the hotel's most delightful feature is the panoramic view of the city to be seen from the easily-accessible roof. The service is gracious, the food excellent, and there is an inexpensive computer room with internet access for the use of hotel guests. Best of all for me, this

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Arguably, Fernando Valenzuela, the great Dodger (for most of his career) pitcher is Mexico's most accomplished athlete. Twenty years ago Fernandomania transcended the U.S./Mexico border and gave Mexico a sense of national pride at a time that they needed it most.

You probably haven't yet heard of Lorena Ochoa, but you will soon. Just 23 years old, Lorena may soon be the best woman golfer in the world. Born and raised in Guadalajara, she started playing golf at age five, winning her first state tournament a year later. At age seven she was winning national tournaments by large margins.

She enrolled at the golf powerhouse University of Arizona in 2000, and while trying to learn the language and take classes, all she was able to accomplish was to be named NCAA Player of the Year that year as a freshman and again the next year. Tiger who? In 2002 President Fox presented her with the prestigious National Sport Award, the youngest recipient ever. While at U of A she played in 20 tournaments, winning 12 and placing second in 6 more. Her eight consecutive wins is an NCAA record, long held by Nancy Lopez.

Lorena left college in 2002 to join the Ladies Professional Golf Association, playing in the Futures tour as is common for new players. Of course, she finished first in earnings, gaining her exempt status for the 2003 LPGA season. As a rookie in the big show she made the cut in 23 of 24 tournaments and finished in the top 10 eight times, earning \$823,000 and ranking 9<sup>th</sup> at season's end. After four tournaments this year Lorena has placed in the top 10 three times. She has played 15 rounds and scored under par 9 times. Maybe this *Tapatia* has a future in this game.

Keep an eye out for this 5'6" young woman from Mexico. If she plays a tournament in your area, go out and give her some *amigo* support and ponder the improbable journey she has made to tee up with the world's best.



## Loreto *Continued*



**The Loreto Town Center**

Davis, Fischer, Drew and other European surnames brought by settlers in the mid 1800's, another period of Loreto discovery.

The first thing that you notice about Loreto and its 10,000 citizens is the green vegetation, giving it the look of a mainland town in the sub-tropical region of Mexico, a mini Mazatlan. The town sits on a huge, ancient artesian well aquifer, enabling you to drink the water right from the tap without bringing on an intestinal meltdown. That may have something to do with why the Jesuits built the first mission in Baja there in 1697, and it is still in use today. This cobble-stoned, colonial-era section of town is movie-set perfect, offering a quaint setting where locals and visitors gather in family-owned cafes, stores and bars, sharing stories and building a sense of community. I noticed no graffiti, street gangs, Armani suits or nose rings in attendance. I did observe a place of serenity where hard-working local fishermen shared equal space and footing with business owners and *gringo* sojourners. Not once was I approached to buy a time-share or asked for spare change.



**Mision San Javier**

Loreto, to the surprise of most, was the first capital of all of the Californias. After a devastating 1829 hurricane the capital was moved to La Paz the following year, where it remains today. After the hurricane, Loreto was pretty much deserted for about 20 years when a group of immigrants, many from Europe, settled in and rebuilt what remained of the town. It wasn't until after WWII that the town was used as a base port for commercial fishing. Soon after, the sport-fishing enthusiasts were the next group to, once again, discover Loreto.

## A Protected Park

After some 50 years of commercial long-liners and net fishermen working the waters, the fish population was in serious jeopardy. Then in 1996, with much pressure being applied by the local people of Loreto, President Zedillo established The Loreto Bay National Marine Park, an area approximately 35 miles in length by 30 miles off shore. No commercial trawlers, purse seiners or netters are allowed to enter the protected area, although local *panga* fishermen can still earn their living from the sea that has been their lifeblood for generations. It is estimated that 80 percent of the local economy is based on the sea. With limited financial help from the federal government, the citizens of Loreto have taken the responsibility of policing the park to ensure that the rules are not broken. They are very serious and vigilant in that regard, paving the way for a healthy sea for their children and beyond. Other sea towns would do well by following the example set by the people of Loreto, before its too late.

After the park was established, the fish came back rapidly. Yellow tail, dorado, rooster fish, sea bass, tuna, bill fish, and, most importantly, the sardine population that attracts the larger species, have returned, if not to the levels of the 1960's, certainly to a huge improvement from a decade ago. On a recent trip, schools of jumping dolphin and sixty-foot fin whales were easily spotted from our *panga* en route to Isla del Carmen, nine

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**The Front Entrance of Mision San Javier**

miles off shore. There are several other islands nearby, all providing protected anchorage for passing boaters as well as secluded beaches as fine as you will find anywhere.

### San Javier

Two and one-half hours, but only 22 miles by dirt road west of Loreto, high in the Sierra de la Gigante, sits one of the more awe-inspiring sites in Mexico, La Misión San Javier, founded in 1699 by the Jesuit Father Francisco Maria Piccolo. Father Juan de Ugarte took over in 1701, introducing cattle breeding, agriculture, and wool threading to the native peoples, who naturally provided the back-breaking labor in construction of the church.

Today, the amazingly well-preserved stone church is still in use by the 300 inhabitants of the town and the many others who pilgrimage to the site, most often during the week ending on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, San Javier's patron saint day.

I'm not an expert on church interiors, being an infrequent visitor, but I was surprised at the quality of the art and artifacts here, including a golden alter piece with five oleos brought from Mexico City in the 1700's as well as museum quality paintings. We had a very fine meat taco lunch at a picnic-tabled restaurant to the right, just before reaching the church. This is a trip that should not

be missed, and includes some cave-paintings on the way there. The road partly follows a riverbed and can be impassable during rains. A high clearance vehicle is recommended under any condition. This is the rugged view of Baja that defines the true nature of this one-of-a-kind spit of dirt. You can see first hand why it remains one of the most unpopulated areas in North America.

### The Villages of Loreto Bay

This is what I came to see on this recent trip, a daring new concept that, should it succeed (and it should), will be the best planned development in Mexico. The area is actually five miles south of Loreto in Nopolo, where roads and infrastructure were laid down in the 1970's for a project that never was completed. The Villages of Loreto Bay is a project partnership between a respected Canadian company called the Trust For Sustainable Development and Mexico's FONATUR (Federal Tourism Promotional Fund). Following Cancun, Los Cabos, Ixtapa, and Huatulco, Loreto is the last of five communities originally selected for development by the Mexican government. But this time, FONATUR's partners are The Trust For Sustainable Development and the Loreto Bay Company. The Trust is under the guidance of its chairman, David Butterfield, one of Canada's most prominent developers. American real estate expert, Jim Grogan, is president and CEO of the Loreto Bay Company. Grogan is known for his accomplishments in land development, homebuilding and commercial investments. Butterfield's expertise is in "town making." "When building a community, the most important factors are economic development, social responsibility, and ecological protection. When these factors come together, you have what is called a sustainable development," Butterfield explains.

The trust has control over about 8,000 acres

### A View of Isla Coronado



**The Original Loreto Capitol Building**

along the coast, 5,000 of which will be preserved as open space and recreation areas. The project, to be built over 12 to 15 years, will have 5,000 homes, two golf courses, a medical clinic, boutique hotels, and a sport fishing center and marina. A high priority also calls for areas of art, culture and learning. There will be no high-rise structures.

The plans call for a series of walkable seaside villages, designed in the old-Europe village style, built around a town center. Cars will be prohibited. Energy will be provided by photovoltaics and solar technology, and environmental waste discharge systems will be built.

Home sites, priced from around \$160,000 (includes the house) recently went on sale, and by all accounts, business is brisk. Prices are one-half of what you would pay in Cabo, and the vision in design and utility is far superior to any of the other planned communities I have seen. The artery roads and utilities are already in, as well as two existing hotels, a Camino Real and Whales Inn, as well as an 18-hole golf course (needs some work) and a John McEnroe tennis complex. This is the Woodstock generation taken to its communal living, 21<sup>st</sup> century metamorphosis. What JFK called "idealism without illusions."

I have very high hopes for this concept and what it stands for. I have met the principals, and I believe them to be good, honest players. This is a huge undertaking and not without considerable risk in a part of the world that is tough to conquer. I have the feeling that they see that old dream coming into clear focus, dusting off long held ideals and youthful aspirations. Check it out at [www.loretobay.com](http://www.loretobay.com).





## BOOK REVIEWS

### Where the Sky is Born - Living in the Land of the Maya

by Jeanine Kitchell  
Enchanted Island Press, \$15.00, 217 pages.

Reviewed by David Simmonds

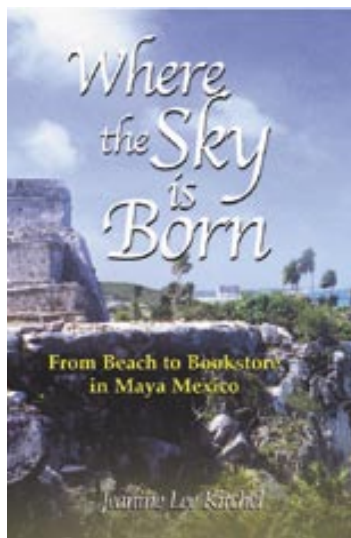
I met Jeanine a few years ago in the bookstore she and her husband, Paul Zappella, owned in the small town of Puerto Morelos, a little south of Cancun. They were a likable, friendly couple, so we exchanged emails and I began sending her this newsletter.

Later, she contributed a couple of articles to *The Mexico File* that I liked. They were well-written, but nothing I gave a whole lot of thought to. So when I heard from her about a year ago and she told me about this book she was writing I wished her luck, really didn't expect anything special, and had doubts about it ever being published. How many people have I met who are working on a book that, well, never quite get completed?

Recently she sent me a copy (yes, it did get published) of her work and asked if I would review it for *The Mexico File*. I was typically backed up on reading, writing and traveling and it took me a while to finally get to it, again, not expecting much. I have read other attempts by the naïve gringo author who immediately lets you know that they just don't "get it" when it comes to Mexico – the country and the people. And the writing in these books – well, it does drag on and on, becoming very self-indulgent and often whiny beyond my ability to

continue with it.

As I started to read Jeanine's tale of her move-to-Mexico experience, it became clear to me right away that this book is different. This one is good! "Yes! That is the way things are, Jeanine, you understand the country," I kept mumbling to myself.



Anyway, I blazed through the book, this narrative tale of her eventual move to Mexico and all of the pitfalls that are inevitable when one decides to bag their comfortable North America life and build a home in what was essentially a third-world location at that time. The book is an honest account, very well written, that would be of value to anyone who is considering a similar move, or to anyone who just wants to be mentally transposed to this fascinating area

of Mexico that we call the Yucatan. This book is better than the other books of its kind and I highly recommend that you get a copy.

### Women with Big Eyes

by Angeles Mastretta (translated from the Spanish by Amy Schildhouse Greenberg) Riverhead, \$24.95, 372 pages  
Reviewed by Gale Randall

For those fans of Mexico City writer Angeles Mastretta's award-winning novel *Lovesick* and her equally absorbing *Tear This Heart Out*, yet another Mastretta classic, the international bestseller, *Women With Big Eyes*, has recently appeared in English. Originally intended as a memoir for Mastretta's daughter about the extraordinary women of their Puebla family, and first published in Spanish in 1990, *Women With Big Eyes* is organized as a collection of short stories, or vignettes, about the daily lives, loves and intrigues of 39 aunts, "tias" – Aunt Elena, Aunt Ofelia, Aunt Cecilia, and so on. These aunts are for the most part upper class *Poblanos* (Pueblans) living in the first half of the 20th century, and well

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### Afoot in Mexico Continued



The volcano Popocatepetl at sunset as seen from the highway between Puebla and Oaxaca

atmospheric hotel is around the corner from El Parian, Puebla's tiny but treasure-packed artisans' market.

As we settled into our room, I felt as though I was closer to "my" Mexico, and indeed, within the confines of the hotel, I was. However, the next morning, as we set out to explore the zocalo, I found that transformation has come to Puebla much like that enveloping Guadaluajara, although thankfully not so pervasive.

On a sunny Monday morning, the streets were busy with young professional people dressed in attractive suits and fashionable dresses, stockings and high heels. No quaint brush brooms cleaning the streets; rather, large riding machines sucking up litter similar to our leaf vacuums. No picturesque food stands selling tacos and rotisserie chicken – only small but sophisticated little shops selling chocolate and the candies for which Puebla is famous. Restaurants were open early and were full of people drinking coffee huddled over cell phones and laptops. No perceptible slow lane here.

Whenever in Mexico, I always search for bookstores, primarily because of the noted magazine *Artes de Mexico*, which costs \$30 an issue in the US can be had for \$17 or \$18 in Mexico. Generally I can find most of a year's issues. The store we found on the zocalo in Puebla had many old and new issues and as I produced a list of those I was missing, I was waited on by a very proficient young lady with a computer who was able to tell me instantaneously which issues were in stock. Her service was courteous but brisk and unsmiling – and, in minutes, I was on the sidewalk with my very heavy bag and very long computer printout. In contrast, though, next door was another less technologically upscale bookstore manned by a courtly older gentleman anxious to understand in which books I might be interested. As we sat around a large antique table talking, he turned out to be most helpful in discussing the history of the city and in suggesting sights not to be missed. He was exceedingly gracious

in speaking precise Spanish so that I could understand him, and in correcting my efforts. Our next stop was an information booth directing people to the various outlets for Talavera in the city. Another older gentleman speaking perfect English directed me to specific stores and advised me to avoid El Parian as only inferior products would be found there. Escorting me to the door, he handed me a sheet of paper availing me of a 10% discount in any of the stores he had recommended – a marketing tool I had never before experienced in Mexico.

Being me, I headed directly for El Parian, and while most of the Talavera found there was unsigned, I did not find it to be particularly inferior, or particularly inexpensive, either. What I did find was the first glimpse of the Mexico I know as I chose a large Tree of Life from the noted Flores family of Izucar de Matamoros in one small shop and found it to be covered in several layers of dust and priced at only \$29US. I also found a large assortment of high-quality popote boxes, pictures both large and small, unusually shaped crosses and terra cotta plates with popote centers. For the uninitiated, the art of popote, also known as straw mosaic or straw painting, is a series of dyed pieces of straw arranged in various forms and designs, unfortunately a dying art in Mexico. To my knowledge, there are only three significant popote artists working in Mexico today – Arturo Hernandez in Puerto Vallarta (overpriced and undergood – in my never-to-be-humble opinion, his work is redundant and not terribly well-executed), Jose Miguel Santealla in San Juan del Rio (an extraordinary artist in this medium who is very shy, retiring and impossible to find unless you hit the right day and he is selling in front of the church), and this unknown but very prolific artist – whoever he is – working in Puebla today. No one seems to know his name, or no one is telling, but his work is phenomenal – large, intricate, totally unique and easily-identifiable stylistically. To my

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**The entrance to the old fort that is now a museum and memorial commemorating the Mexican victory over the French army on Cinco de Mayo, 1866.**

## On the Loreto Scene

by Lisa Coleman

*Lisa Coleman is a freelance writer specializing in Mexico. She has published over 200 articles on Mexico and won the 2000 Pluma de Plata Award. Lisa is also an instructor for the nationwide "Mexico Expert" travel agent seminar program put on by Destination Ventures. She recently wrote and published the book, 25 Years in Paradise... Hotel Villa del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Her book is available at [www.hotelvilladelsol.com](http://www.hotelvilladelsol.com)*

Compared to most small Mexican towns, Loreto is pretty far ahead of the pack. Considering it takes less than ten minutes to drive the whole place, it's amazing to find so many options in terms of quality dining and lodging.

As far as hotels go, the choices pretty much run the gamut. On the high end of things, the **Posada de las Flores** stands alone. This Italian-owned boutique hotel is definitively quaint. With ten standard rooms and fifteen junior suites, it is considered by far the most elite property in town. Known for its rooftop pool (whose glass bottom is also the ceiling of the lobby!), spectacular views and colorful interior, Posada is for those who aren't afraid to step up to the \$140 per night per room price tag. ([www.posadadelasflores.com](http://www.posadadelasflores.com))

Next in line would be the **Camino Real Loreto**. Located about ten minutes south of town in Nopoló, it's a bit far off the beaten path if you want to spend your evenings in town. Designed in a stark, but attractive, Mexican-Mediterranean style, it is considered "the" beach resort property in the area. With 155 rooms and suites, a nice rooftop bar and plenty of open space, it's the perfect choice if you really want to be away from it all. ([www.caminoreal.com](http://www.caminoreal.com))

The **Villas de Loreto** is on the edge of the main town and sits directly on the shores of the Sea of Cortez. Owned by Canadians Ron and Wendy Bellerive, it actually consists of twelve intimate rooms and casitas. Great prices, great atmosphere and wonderful food at their own Restaurant Amore. ([www.villasdeloreto.com](http://www.villasdeloreto.com))

The **La Pinta Hotel** is a solid choice. Simple, clean, spacious and affordable, it's well known as a "fisherman's hotel."

Forty-eight oceanfront rooms are a perfect place to start for long walks on the beach and your patio offers the best sunrise in town. ([www.lapintahotels.com](http://www.lapintahotels.com))

On the nightlife side of things, Loreto is certainly a relatively quiet town. There are plenty of local haunts for the bar crowd, but the real knockout is the food. The restaurants here are nothing short of spectacular – an unusual triumph for the middle of the Baja! Wedged between the mission and the capital building, **Canipole** is a Mexican icon. Local owners Sofia and David make everything from scratch, including the incredible mango salsa. Don't be in a hurry – just enjoy the beauty of dining in someone's home.

Located at the end of the main plaza, **Pachamama** is a tiny treasure. You may want to stop by earlier in the day or the night before to make a reservation – the six tables fill up fast! A magical blend of flavors from Mexico and Argentina makes it one of the best in the Baja.

Good seafood is a Baja staple, but **Loreto Islas** is particularly good. Try the Bostonian Shrimp for a real treat (it's big enough for two!) **El Rey Tacos** are a must (get there before 1:00 PM or you may miss out), **Café Ole** is the gringo hangout for breakfast and lunch with fantastic egg dishes and strong coffee, and drive just past the town of Nopoló and try the fresh clams at **Vista al Mar**. If you like them raw.... It just doesn't get any better!

So much to do, so much to see..... Who to call? The team of Cecilia and Cecilia will plan any and everything you need..... Seriously, if you want to find out how to do it in Loreto, these are your gals. Call them at C and C Ground Services and Tours. (From the U.S. 011-52-613-135-0525 or 613-133-0151.)



**Offerings at a Local Restaurant in Loreto**



before the women’s movement had made even a blip in Mexico. The sketches often find the characters at pivotal moments in a woman’s life and Mastretta does a marvelous job of revealing what’s going on in their interior lives. One of my favorite stories concerns Aunt Cristina, a woman apparently destined for lifelong spinsterhood. Cristina surprises all by marrying by proxy a mysterious Spanish stranger, returning a cheerful widow to Puebla only a year later – and to rumors that her marriage was pure fabrication. Or the story of Aunt Valeria: “Never was there seen in Puebla a woman more in love or more solicitous than the ever robust Aunt Valeria.” Her secret: “You need only close your eyes,” said Valeria, “and make of your husband whoever most appeals to you: Pedro Armendariz or Humphrey Bogart, Manolete or the governor....” And then there is Aunt Leonor, from all accounts happily married with three children to a much older notary public, that is, until she reconnects with Sergio, her cousin and childhood playmate with whom she was warned she had no future, since “cousins can’t marry each other, because God would punish them with children who acted like drunkards.” Following these women through their daily lives – in their exquisite tiled mansions, in the markets, or trying to survive on haciendas half-ruined by war and revolution, the stories of *Women With Big Eyes* evoke the sights, sounds and aromas of a Puebla that probably no longer exists, but they make wonderfully escapist reading for any romantic contemplating, or not even contemplating, a future trip to that fascinating city. Though a bit rocky in spots, the English translation comprises the first half of *Women With Big Eyes*, the second half containing the original Spanish version, *Mujeres de Ojos Grandes*.



**The Day of the Dead procession of the Virgin at Iglesia de Jalatlaco, Oaxaca**



**Jacobo and Maria Angeles Ojeda of San Martin Tilcajete, Oaxaca – widely reputed to be two of the hottest alebrije carvers working in Mexico today**

astonishment, the prices are reasonable and affordable, so I was able to load up. To my intense pleasure, when I asked for a receipt, after some dithering, the amounts were written in pencil on the bag containing my purchases.

El Parian, as artisans’ markets go, is very small – only one moderately long aisle – but it is surrounded by what has become known as the Artists’ Quarter of Puebla, which consists of several blocks of relatively high-end shops selling primarily Talavera and clothes, but occasionally some textiles and other products. The prices are reflective of the higher operating costs involved in individual shops with English speaking staff, clean public bathrooms and computerized inventory. The courtesy of the staff found in stores is very typical of my Mexico, but you don’t get the fun and small talk found in the markets.

We were fortunate enough to find a very knowledgeable gentleman, an architect by profession, to show us around the city. For me as a history teacher, a must-see was the hilltop where a very undersized Mexican force defeated Napoleon III’s vastly superior army and drove them out of Mexico on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May in 1866, effectively ending the reign of Maximiliano and Carlotta. There is much to understand of this decisive battle, and much territory to explore, and once he recognized our interest, Ruben Carvajal Corte pretty much covered the city of Puebla with us, including a mole factory, the noted Exconvento de Santa Monica

(whose nuns continued to operate in secret for 77 years after Benito Juarez closed all of Puebla’s religious buildings in 1857), and the celebrated Exconvento de Santa Rosa, with its intricately tiled kitchen where Puebla’s famous mole is said to have been invented by the nuns to surprise their gourmand bishop. Sn. Carvajal Corte was a bonus for us – dignified, courteous, extremely well-informed and enthusiastic about showing us his beautiful city. He spent a great deal of time with us for not a lot of money and was patient and considerate of my constant stopping to take pictures. All in all, a nice taste of old Mexico in contrast to the new atmosphere.

From Puebla, we proceeded on to Oaxaca for the annual Day of the Dead celebrations. Whenever I am in Mexico, I try to spend at least a few days in Oaxaca, and on this trip, I was fairly confident that I would find nothing changed in this most special city. However, while the changes are subtle, they are there. For the first time in my history with Oaxaca, when entering an exclusive bookstore I often frequent on the Alcala, I was asked to check my shoulder bag behind the counter while I shopped. In another shop, we were told that no photos could be taken of the *offrenda* set up at one end. In still another shop on Calle Garcia Virgil that I never miss when in Oaxaca, for the first time, there was no *offrenda*. There was a small tribute to Frida Kahlo in the front window, with all art relating to Frida stacked around a portrait of her, but no traditional *offrenda* such as they have always had in the past.

As well, there was chaos in the home of the friends with whom we stay when visiting Oaxaca. The youngest daughter of three, twenty-two years old, had just announced her intention to leave university and marry a man of whom her parents do

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**The massive offrenda dedicated to sixteen of Mexico’s most celebrated folk artists at the upscale Alcala shop Corozon de Puebla in Oaxaca**



**The Day of the Dead commemorating offrenda and sand painting of the Virgen de Soledad at the Womens Artists Cooperative on Calle 5 de Mayo in downtown Oaxaca**

not approve. She has been particularly educated and groomed to eventually run the small hotel her family owns, but her 'novio' has insisted that she have nothing to do with the family business after her marriage, due to take place in early December. This is a particularly sad situation in this family because they have been an extremely close and happy group until the advent of this young man, who for some reason is resentful of this closeness and seems determined to derail at least his fiancée's participation. On top of it all, while she is still working to some degree in the hotel, this young woman has left home and lives with her novio across the city, a phenomenon I have NEVER encountered before in Mexico. Even in the very progressive city of Cancun, where I have several young career-oriented women friends in their early thirties, one of whom actually owns her own house, it is established that until they marry, they live at home with their parents. The girl who owns a house rents it out to business associates. So I was shocked by the way events had unfolded for our friends and very saddened by their grief.

Otherwise, during a quick ride to Teotilan de Valle to purchase cochineal, we had an interesting discussion with our driver regarding some of the conspiracy

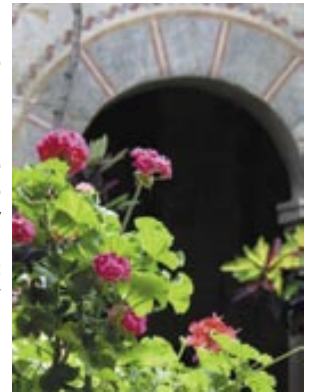
theories rampant in Mexico regarding our government's possible prior knowledge of the events of 9/11. The most popular is that the attack was Israeli-sponsored and some 4,000 Jewish workers in the World Trade Center towers were warned in advance not to go to work on the day of the attack. Sebastian seemed genuinely amazed that we had no prior knowledge of this rumor. Also mentioned was the mess of construction on the road, designed to cut the trip from Oaxaca City to Huatulco and Puerto Escondido from six hours to three when completed.

Everywhere I went in Mexico during this visit, I asked if having the PAN party in power after seventy-two years of PRI had made any difference in the country's circumstances. Where previously only very close friends would enter into such discussions with me in any detail, this trip everyone I asked had something to say. The general consensus is that while Vicente Fox was certainly well-intentioned, he had been unable to fulfill many of his campaign promises, largely because he was hampered by a PRI majority in the Mexican congress. Several people I spoke to related this to a Republican president trying to function with a Democrat-dominated congress in the US, a comparison that while valid, I have never heard made before by a Mexican. When I asked if the PAN party

**One of the many courtyards at Museo Rudolfo Morales, established in Ocotlan by the famous Oaxacan artist shortly before his death in 2001**



**An arch and remaining fresco bordering one of several courtyards in the sixteenth century former Oaxacan convent that now houses the lavish Hotel Camino Real**



would be re-elected, most thought the government would return to the PRI. Tapatios are generally very happy with their progressive PAN governor, who they feel has done a fine job for them. Oaxacans are less enthused about their state government; while they acknowledge that their infrastructure seems to be improving by leaps and bounds, they seem unsure whether this is a federal or state-sponsored benefit. Everyone I talked to had a great deal to say about President Bush and the Iraqi war, as well as venturing opinions about President Fox's failure to back Bush's invasion of Iraq and how that would impact future US/Mexican relations.

On two occasions, once in Jalisco and once in Oaxaca, vehicles in which we were traveling were stopped and searched for drugs. These stops were explained by our drivers as Fox's efforts at fulfilling his promise to the US to work harder at cracking down on drug traffic through Mexico, one area where most Mexicans with whom I spoke feel Fox has expended a great deal of energy. No one, including me, seems to know if his efforts have helped, but Mexicans seem very proud of his efforts and anxious to relate experiences illustrating them. At the same time as they hasten to explain the growing of marijuana by poor farmers in the mountains as a matter of economics, they express with great seriousness their understanding of why such endeavors need to be redirected.

All in all, this extended trip around interior Mexico was a very unusual one for me. It's very possible that the changes I noticed have been evolving for a long time and I was so absorbed in the never-ending romanticization of my spiritual home that I just wasn't aware. After all, it

*Continued on page 8*



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# About Mexico

Afoot in Mexico *Continued*

## New Tax on Cruisers

In the middle of the very competitive cruise ship business, the Tourism Ministry and the Transportation Ministry of Mexico have proposed a new tax on ship passengers, with the money to be used for improving infrastructure where the ships dock. Citing the desire to see more cruise ships dock in Mexico, adding an extra expense to the customers seems like a bad decision. The Cabo golf industry employs the same reasoning. They want more revenue, so they keep raising prices, effectively discouraging business (\$250 a round!).

## Casinos May Return

Three far better proposals by the National Tourism Council of the Private Sector are to promote the legalization of casino gambling in Mexico, to eliminate sales taxes that tourists pay, and to implement three-day weekends. There were no specifics on who could operate a casino or what regulations would be implemented. Tourist hotel taxes often add 12 to 17 % to the cost of a room, money that goes straight to the government. It is uncertain how that money is spent. For the three-day weekend, holidays falling on Saturday, Sunday or mid-week would be observed on Friday or Monday.

## Airline Business Up

Mexico has increased its tourism advertising significantly in each of the past three years, and the results are positive. Mexico air traffic increased ten percent during the first quarter of 2004. Domestic traffic increased 8%, traffic between the U.S. and Mexico increased by 14%, and Europe by 8%. Eighty-five percent of foreign arrivals are travelers from the U.S. Mexican airlines increased sales by 5% during the first quarter but registered a loss of about 1.5 billion pesos.



One of the striking popote crosses found at El Parian

makes sense – as Bob Simmonds believes – that Mexico is going to change and progress, no matter what. I guess I was just startled by the seemingly headlong charge into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that seems to be taking place almost overnight. I have heard from many fellow Mexicophiles that they really enjoy the new energy found in Mexico's cities, and feel more at home because of it. I, on the other hand, don't go to Mexico to feel the same Type A atmosphere I find at home. I go for the slower pace, the absence of CNN blaring everywhere, and particularly, because absolutely everyone isn't careening down the street talking on a cell phone, characteristics that seem to be disappearing before my eyes, at least in the cities. On the upside, what isn't changing is the essential gentility and kindness of the Mexican people, the genius of Mexican gardeners, and of course, the marvelous art of Mexico. Although these days, you can order from many folk artists by email or phone before you go, once you get there, their humor and courtesy remain the same, the fruit drinks offered with knowing grins pack the same punch, and the work – while more expensive than in the past – is every bit as whimsical and enchanting, even as you are handed a computerized receipt for your pesos. Which really does work for me, in spite of my reluctance to admit it. It's good to have strong water pressure and toilets with seats, and healthy dogs with tags, and internet cafes to keep in touch with home, and it stands to reason that if the artists are making more money, they will continue to create for many years to come, which, after all, is one of my life's goals. Also, in my heart I really do want the best for the people who make me feel so welcome whenever I am there. But it's just as good to see impromptu parades of gigantes and brass bands crossing the zocalo for no apparent reason and dignified old gentlemen creating amazing sand paintings on the sidewalks, and it is a huge

comfort to me to know absolutely that I will never be rushed to pay a check and get out of a restaurant in Mexico.

I wish I could say that writing about all this has been a wonderful catharsis and I'm comfortably resolved now to accept and enjoy the fact that Mexico is moving rapidly from the Third World into an era of technological sophistication hitherto unknown. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm still afraid it's all going to change and end up being home with a better climate. But I think I have worked out that what I need to do is dig deeper, be careful to combine my visits to the cities with lots of time spent in more rural areas, where things are not changing so rapidly, and hope like hell I'm dead before Mexico completely modernizes. And understand once and for all that in spite of her growth, Mexico is never going to be, say, Japan....



One of the exquisite wax flower candles made in Teotitlan de Valle as decorations especially for Day of the Dead observations



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