



**White rafting at its finest, expertly guided, exciting fun**

## Rio y Montaña - From Tree Tops to Jungle White Water

by David Simmonds

You mention a Mexico vacation to most people and they think sunny beaches, shrimp cocktails, five-dollar umbrella drinks and the opportunity to dust off the old high school Spanish to show the locals just how smart and worldly we gringos are. Of course, you could do the same thing in Miami but you wouldn't be as safe. And you would have to train your ear to decipher New York-Cuban accents while eating fried-pork bagel sandwiches. Are they still wearing those gold chains?

Now I, too, have planted myself on many a Mexican beach over the past 35 years doing nothing more exertive than bending my elbow at precise one minute intervals while laboriously screwing my neck slightly in order to follow the passing scenery. After all, there are almost 6,000 miles of beach in Mexico and I have made it a life-goal of seeing them all. Besides the natural beauty (try Nayarit for the best), the surfing, fishing and diving can

be in the world's-best category with the small coastal fishing villages producing the friendliest and most self-sufficient people I have ever met, Cancun and Acapulco notwithstanding.

The interior of Mexico has always been an incredibly diverse region, and one I have explored with equal enthusiasm. From the Copper Canyon to the Chiapas rain-forest, from 16,000 foot Mt. Orizaba to the furnace they call the Sonoran desert, it is a country of unparalleled beauty and mystery that never fails to teach and humble me in ways that I can't explain.

It was in this spirit that I recently joined a small group of travel-related folks on a trip that took us from the steamy jungles of central Veracruz to Valle de Bravo, by a lake in the mountains north of Mexico City. My hosts were

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**The Cessna airplane made the connection professionally**

## Looking for the Real Thing

- TEOTIHUACAN

by David A. Robinson

I was in Mexico looking for original handcrafted items. On my list were Indian blankets, silver jewelry, wood or stone Maya face masks, silver money clips, leather goods and anything else that might suit my fancy and my budget. How do you determine what is handcrafted and of artistic quality, and what is mass produced? I decided to find out.

My quest began in the small Indian commune of Mi Mexico in Teotihuaca. A short Mexican host with thick, jet-black hair greeted me. "Welcome, welcome. Quickly, come this way. Move it babies, move it," he exhorted as we were led to a cactus tree. He cajoled us to come closer. "Come on babies, come on, you haven't seen anything yet."

Deftly removing a cactus leaf, strands of fiber are removed and intertwined, creating yarn called celine. It is a renewable resource. From this yarn fabric is produced, creating clothing, rugs, blankets and other textiles. Different parts of the cactus, nearby plants, and flowers are used to show how they produce natural dyes in hues of red, yellow, green, blue and other colors.

Our host picked up a gourd and inserted one end into the cactus and sucked on the

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## más o menos

by David Simmonds

It's family vacation time for my family later this week and I'm trying figure out how I can fit that into a column about Mexico. For the third year in the past four we are going to Hunewill Ranch in Northern California to ride horses and do a little trout fishing. The Hunewill Ranch was started in 1861 by Napoleon Bonaparte Hunewill and is still a working cattle ranch owned by his descendants. They have been doing the guest ranch part since 1930, so they are pretty good at this. They know a little about cowboying.

My wife, Felice, used to go to the ranch with her family while growing up, even working there for a couple of summers during college. Some of the same wranglers are still there and are old friends of hers. This year we are taking her parents, 87 and 80, who haven't been back for some 30 years. I imagine that this will be their last time, adding a bittersweet pall to our special week. And, of course, our two kids, Tanner and Nicolette, ages 10 and 6, will be with us, learning life lessons that they would never get back home in San Diego. Caring for a horse for a week is different than cleaning your room.

The ranch sits on the Eastern Sierra, just outside of tiny Bridgeport, not far from the old mining town of Bodie. The mornings, watching the herd of horses thunder by our cabin, are as surreal and magical as anything I have ever witnessed this side of the border (there, I got the Mexico reference in), framed by the snow-capped peaks in the distance. Unlike most guest ranches where you ride single-file on trails, at Hunewill you do a lot of pasture rides where you let loose and gallop, the riders spread out for 100 yards wide whoopin' and hollerin'.

Cell phone signals don't reach the ranch. There is no internet access, no TV, swimming pool or hot tub. The food is fresh and plentiful, the accommodations old and comfortable. There are hayrides, fiddle music and square dances and the other visitors become your friends. I'll come home a better person. <http://www.hunewill.com/>

### Rio y Montaña *Continued*



**Manicured lawns & paths at Picocanoa**

the entrepreneurial partners of Rio y Montaña, Waldemar Franco and Alfonso de la Parra, who hatched their concept of luxury adventure travel while working as riverguides in Veracruz in 1993. They are both very fit, engaging men and take a very hands-on approach to their business. Alfonso is one of a few Mexicans to have ever successfully climbed Mt. Everest. Waldemar is a talented architect who designed their two signature properties, Picocanoa and Rodavento. One of the things that most impressed me with the entire operation, besides the brand new Cessna that they own to take you between properties, is the quality of their employees. Everyone, from the river guides to the kitchen help, was extremely helpful and, really, unusually bright. Maybe I'm just accustomed to the arrogant, entitled dolts who now cleverly disguise as employees in many businesses in the U.S. these days. (try to get a smile and thank-you from the dude who sells you a Slurpy at your local 7-11). The Rio people tend to smile a lot and if you want to know something about the local flora and fauna, they'll have the answer.

**An "elephant dance" brings smiles to all**



After flying into Mexico City from the States, we were loaded onto a comfortable van to Toluca, just west of Mexico City, whose airport accommodates most of the private planes in the area. From there we flew to Xalapa in central Veracruz, followed by a one-hour ride in an open-air safari-type vehicle to their signature lodge, Picocanoa.



**An interior view of the bath accommodations at Picocanoa**

### Picocanoa

I have spent a fair amount of time in the jungles of Mexico, sleeping in my van or in a less-comfortable hotel with fewer amenities. The inherent challenges have always been worth the obstacles as raw nature travel takes you to a level of awareness not found in the city or all-inclusive resort.

When you enter the gate at Picocanoa, on the shores of the Pescados River, you immediately sense that this will be a unique adventure. The lawns are lush and manicured and the 24 adobe casitas with the palm-frond roofs look like a Hollywood creation. Then you notice the custom-tile pool right next to an open-air bar where a blender is stirring up some cold margaritas and you know that this is going to be a different trip. But can you really experience the jungle, get dirty, sweaty and exhausted in such a setting? The answer is absolutely you can, and will, but at the end of the day you will be dining river-side eating gourmet food while kibitzing with your fellow travelers. Back in your bungalow, ready for bed, you can enjoy a hot shower, crank up the ceiling fan, and be fairly certain that you won't be sharing quarters with anything that

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## Rio y Montaña *Continued*

crawls, jumps or slithers – unless you want to.

Most guests go to the lodge for white-water rafting, where class III and IV waters snake through gorges and mango



**Interior view of a bedroom at Picocanoa**

orchards of uninhabited, gorgeous terrain. The views and serenity become dream-like, until you hit the whitewater. This is where one of our boat members (OK, it was me) bravely tried to keep the boat upright as we hit a hole while his three cowardly boat-mates and the boatman incredulously looked on, dumbfounded, as he tumbled, as in slow motion, overboard. We had been advised to immediately grab the “Oh Sh\*t” line that encircles the perimeter of raft when this occurs, making a re-entry to the boat fairly simple as your friends, between convulsive laughter, drag you back aboard. Should this happen to you, expect to be barraged for several days with ridicule and derision. You will be best prepared if you are naturally a smart-ass with a ready repertoire of snappy comebacks.

The raft trips can last for just a couple of hours to a full day, depending on the run and the water level. The winter months can produce low water, resulting in a swift ride, but in many places too shallow, diminishing the necessity to row. The summer rainy season brings the water level up, but be prepared for hot, humid days with afternoon showers. The perfect season is Fall, when the terrain is lush, the rivers full, and the rains are on the wane. Personally, I like the rainy season, which produces sky and foliage colors rarely seen back home in SoCal. I like the bugs, the mud, the contrast

and the challenge. I even enjoyed the unexpected river swim.

Another favorite offering is the “Tirolesa,” or zip-line. This is a system of steel cables running from wood platforms high in the tree tops. On the platform (there are seven) you are hooked up to a couple of pulleys while you sit in your canvas seat that will hurdle you to the next platform. In most cases you can’t see the next platform so you pretty much have to trust the system. As I said, I do like the rain, but the storm that blew in just as we were beginning the zip-line was not welcomed. For one, thunder and lightning aren’t the best conditions to be hanging out in tree tops. Also, there is really no braking system as you fly from tree to tree except for a rope that attaches to the back pulley you can pull on to slow down a bit. This, however, is useless when wet.

As you approach your platform destination at a high speed, the pulley runs into a roadblock on the cable about 20 to



**Dave zips along the “Tirolesa”**

30 feet out. The pulley comes to a sudden halt and the passenger’s momentum sends his/her legs flying upward. That’s how you stop. Someone on the platform has a rope to pull you the rest of the way in. It is a safe and consistent system, except, of course, for one of my flights. For some reason, the rope that would pull me in the last 30 feet on one of the longer runs (maybe 100 yards) became entangled in some lower tree branches, leaving me dangling 100 feet above the floor. I was able to propel myself manually by a hand-over-hand-on-the-cable technique, slowly toward the platform. However, after a short time the cable was tilted uphill and I was running out of gas. My main concern



**Melissa Chiaro smiles her way down**

at this point was that the next person in line would be sent not knowing that I was hanging on the cable, and if they were sent I was hoping that they weighed about 50 pounds. I’m yelling, “Don’t send the next guy,” who we can’t see beyond the tree branches, while the operators have a whistle system of communication. Hmm, should I jump or get slammed? Not confident of surviving a 100 foot fall I opt for the possible collision, preparing to protect my head and maybe just breaking some ribs.

Fortunately, these operators are a smart, capable group who were able to untangle the necessary rope and reel me in, with the help of Chris Lowenberg, who toils in Phoenix for the United Dairymen of Arizona. Much to the delight of our adventure group, particularly Lowenberg, they had another reason to needle me for the next few days, piling on particularly hard during pre-dinner tequila concoctions. Did I mention that you laugh a lot on this trip? Camaraderie is an infectious by-product of a shared experience, even for one who thrives on independent, solo travel. We had a very good group.

Although remote, there is a small village, Jalcomulco, just upriver from the lodge where you can get an authentic cultural view of life in rural Veracruz. You can walk into town, explore it from end to end, and be back for breakfast in an hour’s time. As I

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open end. He poured out what must have been over a quart of cactus juice. We were then invited to sample the juice of the cactus. It is sweet with a refreshing citrus flavor. Out came a bottle of Tequila. Slices of lime were given to each person.

He demonstrated – lick your open palm by your thumb, add salt, hold lime in left hand between thumb and forefinger. As our shot glasses were filled with the amber liquid, he addressed each of us and we downed the shot, licked the salt, and squeezed lime juice in our mouths. Caution: doing this procedure in a continual repetitious motion could lead to injury and possibly an altered mental state. Now that the government warning is out of the way, let's continue with the story.

An Indian was nearby, working a loom with both his feet and legs, constantly moving them in a forward and backward motion, like the Nordic Track ski machines on television. He continually fed different colored yarn through this machine, using only body power to create fabric.

"How do you determine what a quality mask is supposed to look like?" our host asked, as he picked up a mask and began to explain. "This rock face mask was made in a factory. See the nose, mouth, ears, eyes. They all look the same. Each mask will look the same, highly polished stone with no individuality. Our masks," (he led us over to a table with two Indians creating the facial features of masks with the help of mechanical grindstones) "all have slightly different features." We were ushered into the store (like little babies). "These masks are masterpieces."

I admit. They were impressive. My gaze fell on a face mask of black stone, inlaid with greenish black tile on the head, ears, and below the mouth. Facial features were inlaid with varying shades of brown, light tan and red copper toned tile. Eyes were white onyx with wide multi-hued lips and an open black mouth. Ears were totally square and long with dark tile.

Our host quickly ascertained I appreciate artistic quality and told me to pick it up.

"How much is it?" I timidly asked.

"Three thousand pesos, not 3,000 dollars, about \$300.00."

I liked it, but it was a little more than I planned to spend.

He continued. "Well, let's put it behind the counter before someone else buys it." I continued to look at it. "Come here, I want to show you something." He opened a book and pointed to a face. "Your mask is an exact reproduction of this, plus it comes with a certificate of authenticity."

Another stone mask was placed on the counter. It was made with swirled bluish white stone, and though attractive and less expensive, the first mask drew me back. Two figurines were placed next to it. "Look, you can buy the blue mask and two figurines as gifts for the same price as the other mask." This was becoming too hard of a sell for my taste. I wandered away to look at other items.

As I prepared to leave, he approached and stated he could do a little better on the price. A saleslady escorted me back to the counter. I looked at the mask and tried to determine how badly I wanted it. It was quality.

"I want 20% off."

"That's a lot, but I'll take 15% off – if you pay cash."

"No, 15% off, and I put it on my credit card." The mask was carefully wrapped in bubble plastic and then newspaper. I remember thinking, I hope I like this as much when I get home.

My next stop was a Mayan ruin. Everything was for sale – stone, wood statues, beads, necklaces, clothing, pottery. Walking past the outdoor stalls to enter the ruins, I observed these products and more. Before and after each climb and descent of a pyramid, the vendors were there.

Looking at an item meant a sure sale. A vendor approached with two small black stone figurines.

"Look at these, it doesn't cost anything to look. Hold them, see they are heavy, turn them in the sun." I did as I was told. "See, they change colors – only \$100.00 dollars for two." Nothing unusual about this.

The mineral content in some strata will cause stone to change colors as light is reflected off. Remember fool's gold? I declined.

"Look, it's been a slow month, \$50.00 for both. Listen, I have to feed the kids, buy shoes. \$35.00 for both?"

I told him no thanks. I suspected they were mass-produced in a factory someplace and probably cost \$3.00 each, wholesale. Sadly, this constant badgering was repeated at most major ruins I visited. To look is to buy.

At the Indian village of Chamula, they made beautiful blankets of wool and cotton. A golden beauty inlaid with raised blue embroidery of different designs fascinated me. The color was warm and inviting. I asked the price – \$120.00 and the Indian girl explained the features. If only I could speak Spanish, or was it an Indian dialect? I replied in a non-committal tone. As she continued, my tone became more guttural. I decided it was not wide enough for my bed and I left.

I was told I might be able to get a buy on an Indian (Mayan) blanket at the outdoor market in Oaxaca. One stall had queen size blankets. But it was closed. I did buy a fairly nice painted wood mask for about six dollars.

In Merida, as I window-shopped and explored places for dinner, a merchant said to me. "I have a shirt that will fit you." This should be interesting, I warily thought (I am six feet three, 312 pounds with a 52-inch chest – a giant by Mexican standards). My traveling companions told me as I walked in local markets and streets, all eyes were on me. I am sure it had nothing to do with my safari hat and wrap-around sunglasses.

I entered his store and tried the shirt on. "Only \$35.00 American."

The shirt was too tight. "Listen, I forgot my wallet." I realized I had left my wallet at the

hotel.

“How much do you have?”

I emptied my pockets. “About three dollars in Mexican coins.”

“You take the shirt, I’ll take the coins.” This was becoming surreal. “Look the shirt is too small, but here’s a dollar for a coffee, on me.”

He looked pleased. (I know you’re thinking I am the last of the big spenders, the big tippers, man about town, but hey, when you have this reputation, I try to live up to it.)

“Is there anything else you need?” he ventured.

“Well, I am looking for an Indian blanket, queen size with a design of a setting sun, with temples and pyramids.”

“I have just the one,” he exclaimed. Quickly crossing the sidewalk, he reached into an idling car and pulled out an Indian blanket. I was dumbfounded. Stretched out on the floor, it was at least a queen size. Mayan temples, rows of pyramids and a setting sun stared back at me. “This is handcrafted, made with cotton, wool, polyester and celin. Only \$150.”

It was pretty, but as I touched the fabric, it felt too slippery and too stiff. I could just imagine this blanket sliding off my bed each night. I tried to excuse myself, but he wouldn’t take no. “\$75.00.”

“Let me stop by later, and we will talk. I have to get my wallet anyway.”

I met with two of my traveling companions as we began the hunt for dinner. I crossed the street to avoid his store. He spotted me. Damn.

“When you coming back?” he yelled.

“Later.”

“How much later? I’ll be closing soon.”

“Much later!” I hollered and hightailed it down the street.

Many cities and towns had lively open air markets. Situated in or near plazas, these shopping centers were a maze of stalls divided by wood barriers. Their storefronts were simple textiles, hard goods and foodstuffs on

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## Rio y Montaña *Continued*

did this the first morning with Scott and Melissa, I asked them what the first thing was that they noticed different about the town as we strolled down the center of the street. No cars! There are a few in town, but certainly more chickens.

The grounds also offer a *temescal* (sweat lodge), a kids club playground, an open-air restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, and an adjacent compound very similar to the one where we were staying in a more rustic setting.

## Rodavento

The next stop on our journey was another Cessna flight back to Toluca, then an hour’s van ride to Rio y Montaña’s other lodge, Rodavento, near the lakeside town of Valle de Bravo, an old town built primarily in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though the areas inhabitants date back many centuries. The Valle de Bravo lake was created in 1946 as a result of the Miguel Alemán Hydroelectric System, built to provide electricity for an ever-expanding Mexico City. The central part of the valley was flooded, relocating hundreds of families to higher ground to grow their crops, leaving their homes and land that they had cultivated for generations. But hey, they could now fish, water-ski and go yachting.

Since the town was in place before the lake was created, the doors of the older houses face away from the lake, designed instead to face the village center. The area



**Yoga by the waters at Rodavento**

has developed into a favorite destination for the wealthier residents of Mexico City, who have built expensive vacation homes, a couple of golf courses, fine restaurants, and some luxury hotels, creating a

desirable escape away from the big city smog and traffic. For the most part, the gringos have not yet descended on Valle as they have Lake Chapala and San Miguel de Allende, so it has retained a pure Mexican flavor to it. I doubt that it will stay that way forever as more and more gringos flee the U.S. looking to make their retirement incomes provide the lifestyle that they envisioned while working their entire adult lives. It is unknown how many have already made the move, but the numbers are growing rapidly. A couple can live very well in Mexico on \$2,000 a month, and you can get good, basic health care for around \$300 per year. Real estate taxes are nearly non-existent.

Rodavento is located on its own private lake, in a pine forest, just a couple of miles from Valle de Bravo at over 5,600 feet elevation. Also designated as an adventure resort, it is primarily the luxury that you notice. With just 14 well-appointed suites – I want to call them cabins, but that doesn’t nearly convey the quality – are well spaced overlooking the lake. The restaurant, housed in the main building, is a nearly all-glass architectural masterpiece located on the lake shore, where the food is as high quality as you will find in Mexico. The large grounds offer miles of mountain bike and hiking trails, more of the zip-line “Tirolesa” runs, kayaking, yoga, a rappel platform, a climbing wall and a full-service spa. You can also horseback ride in the area, golf, take an ATV into the mountain trails, or just walk the streets of Valle de Bravo.

The weather is generally cool in this area, and usually sunny. Like Picocanoa, the team at Rodavento will make you feel very welcome, especially the general manager, Jose Carlos, or JC. He’s a smart and personable guy who you will discover is an artist at heart, but has years of experience in the luxury hotel market, having also run Hotelito Desconocido, the well-known boutique hotel on the coast south of Puerto Vallarta.

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# THE CAMINO REAL OAXACA

by Lynne Doyle

*Lynne Doyle is a longtime Mexico File subscriber and contributing editor from Maine. The object of the Las Joyas de Mexico feature is to highlight for MF readers some of the lesser-known but most rewarding of Mexico's geographic, human and artistic treasures. Lynne can be contacted at LinfordD@aol.com.*

As I sat down to write this column, Katie Couric was on television in the background lamenting the horror that has befallen London today. I had several topics I was contemplating writing about, but given the events of the day, I fell to wondering about the most peaceful place on earth I could wish myself to be. Perhaps not surprisingly, that train of thought led me first to Mexico, and then to the courtyards of the Hotel Camino Real in Oaxaca.



**One of my favorite views from the central courtyard from one of the outdoor restaurants. To me, it is the epitome of beauty and peace.**

It has been my suspicion for some time, as I have talked to friends who have visited Oaxaca without a stop at this magical place, that many people avoid it for fear of the astronomical prices connected with the Camino Real chain of hotels throughout Mexico. If so, these folks would not be wrong. This group has some the country's premier offerings accompanied by

correspondingly appropriate price tags. Additionally, most of the hotels in the chain are new, and while beautiful and luxurious in the extreme, are really nothing all that special. However, the Camino Real in Oaxaca was once a 16<sup>th</sup>-Century convent, and given Mexico's laws regarding the renovation of historic structures, it retains most of the beauty and atmosphere of its origins.

Unlike many of Mexico's regulations, those that govern the restoration and change of use of its colonial-era architecture make the best kind of sense. These buildings may be repaired and made safe, landscaped and improved upon only so long as no part of the remaining original structure is altered in any way. Therefore, what remains of the former Convento de Santa Catalina de Siena's original courtyards, chapel, frescoes and stone porticos evokes the exact aura one would expect from such an edifice.



**The classic thick walls of an interior portico. Camino Real is particularly beautiful and mystical by candlelight.**

A two-foot-thick stone wall faces the pedestrian-only portion of Calle Cinco de Mayo on which this hotel stands and they prevail throughout the building. There are several different courtyards in addition to the central, flower-strewn area one sees upon entering through the main arches of the registration area. One courtyard to the left, a local favorite for wedding ceremonies and receptions, has a still-functioning original fountain surrounded by abundant flowering plants. It is one of my most favorite things to drink tea at one of the surrounding tables and watch the many white doves that live here play in the bubbling water. Directly behind this courtyard, separated by a long porticoed walkway, lies another courtyard containing the convent's original lavadero (laundry), an imposing,

picturesque stone structure containing huge carved wash tubs and an ancient, intricate drainage system for draining the dirty water.

To the right of the main entrance is the vast early chapel area of the convent. This room is massive, a full open two stories of stone arch with wrought iron sconces and chandeliers that cast mystical light over the Oaxacan stone floors and the remains of the building's original frescoes. Used now for weekly Gueleguetza performances and large formal dinners, the chapel when empty has a unmistakable spiritual ambiance that inspires reflection and peace.

Once through the chapel to the other side, one reaches the furthest courtyard containing the hotel pool. While obviously a new addition to the grounds, the pool area lies in front of the original convent library, now an indoor/outdoor lounge. It is surrounded on two sides by hotel rooms with balconies and arches and magnificent native plantings covering the green Oaxacan stone walls.



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## Rio y Montaña *Continued*



**Rodavento suite with its terrace overview of the forest**

Both of the properties owned by Rio y Montaña are ideal for corporate retreats as well as individuals. They have hosted Motorola, Citibank, Philip Morris, Microsoft, and Banamex in their teambuilding program, where they focus on teamwork, strategic planning, group risk-taking, leadership, trust and mutual support with the goal of teaching the values required in overcoming obstacles.

The company also offers off-site adventure trips including mountain climbing the two highest peaks in Mexico, Pico de Orizaba, the third highest peak in North America, and Nevado de Toluca, at over 15,000 feet, and a Oaxacan mountain biking ride that



**An interior view of a room facing the terrace and lake at Rodavento**

links artisan villages for over 100 miles of trail. I didn't do either of these, but if they run them like they do the lodges that I have written about here, which I am sure that they do, I can safely recommend them.



**Rodavento suite includes the wonderful amenities of a full bath**

## Rio y Montaña Info

Mexico's premier adventure travel specialist with luxury lodges in Veracruz and Valle de Bravo. Offering Whitewater Rafting, Zip line "Tirolesa," Mountain Biking in Oaxaca, Mountaineering.

To learn more about Rio y Montaña and to book a trip, contact Melissa Chiaro at Essence of Mexico:  
[Melissa@essenceofmexico.com](mailto:Melissa@essenceofmexico.com)  
760 485 7028



**The relaxed atmosphere of an outdoor restaurant is a tranquil retreat. It is a lovely treat to be a guest in one of the surrounding upper rooms and be able to look down on the festivities, especially at night.**



## Camino Real *Continued*



**A pool within a stone courtyard is very inviting & the large arch in the center leads directly into the chapel**

My preferred choice of places to spend time and – in my view – the jewel of this place is its central courtyard and the outdoor restaurant surrounding it. There is no adequate description, at least none that I can conjure. I have been there for lunch on sunny, still days when the birdsong and aroma of bougainvillea so overshadow everything else that I have no memory of what I ate. I have been there in the evening when the candles burning in the arches and the nichos cast shadows so mystical that I'm sure I sense the former occupants of the building moving serenely through the galleries. On one occasion, an extremely hot and humid afternoon, some friends and I stopped in for mid-afternoon drinks and sat in the sun listening to Frank Sinatra. Initially, I thought it was an incongruous choice, but as the afternoon wore on and the conversation became more desultory, it became perfect, and to this day remains a special memory of time spent in Mexico. During one Day of the Dead week, my husband and I sat in the shadows of the candles, with the statues and flowers in the nichos nodding over our shoulders as we ate, listening to Gregorian chants, and somehow, that was also perfect. Sometimes during languid afternoons, mariachis stroll the courtyards, creating such an atmosphere of beauty and romance that even the least sentimental are moved, and those occasions are also always perfect. One of the wonders of the place is that you never know what variety of perfection you will find. And the food – when I have been aware of it – is tasty, nicely presented, and very reasonably priced.



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# About Mexico

## Mexico Rejects U.S. Proposal

The United States has proposed to the OAS (Organization of American States) that they create a “democracy supervision mechanism” whereby the U.S. would monitor elections and ensure that democratic principles be upheld in OAS countries. Mexico flatly rejected the notion, stating essentially that they agreed with democratic principles but didn’t need the US supervising their affairs. Condoleeza Rice, US Secretary of State, in a seemingly ironic statement, said that countries failing to fulfill democratic principles have to respond to the U.S.

## Obrador Offers Free Medical

Mexico City Mayor Andrea Manuel Obrador has announced plans to provide free home care for all of his city’s 350,000 elderly. His proposal also includes a monthly stipend for the elderly. The program is to be staffed by 200 doctors. Obrador has announced that he will resign as mayor on July 31<sup>st</sup> in order to run for Mexico’s presidency. He currently leads in most of the polls by wide margins.

## Mexico First to Support UN Initiative

Mexico is the first country to commit its government and all of its agencies to the principles proposed by Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations. The proposal, termed the Global Compact, is designed to challenge businesses around the world to take a greater responsibility in society and to support human rights, labor rights and the environment. More than 200 companies in Mexico have voiced their support, as have another 400 in Latin America.

## Tourism Rising

Mexico’s Tourism Secretary (SECTUR) has announced that international travel to Mexico in March generated \$1.91 billion in revenues, 30.6% more than in March of 2004. The number of tourists totaled 2.16 million for the month, up 18.7% from last year.



## Teotihuacan *Continued*

wood pallets, tables and benches. Many vendors only had patches of bare ground, covered with plastic to protect their merchandise, piled high with wares.

Many tarps covered the whole area, acting as temporary protection from sun and rain. I had to continually crouch since my head would scrape the roof. At places, the tarps did not meet, and sky would stream through. I could then walk upright for a few seconds – being alone, with crowds rushing past me, their view was below and mine above – looking over a sea of tarps. In the distance, my pupils focused as churches and other buildings came into view. Simply following a myriad of passageways, one could become disoriented, lost, and find the unexpected treasure.

Oaxaca, for example, is famous for its chocolate (actually several kinds of loose cocoa for making chocolate bars and drinks). I could not find my favorite candy - taffy on a stick, surrounded by a hot pepper. The deep fried or roasted grasshoppers were crunchy, spicy and they provided a punch. And there were fantastic selections of breads and pastries, cheeses, fruits, fresh-butchered chicken, beef and pork (the beef was chewy, but flavorful, probably grass fed and not pumped up with antibiotics). The best places for fish and shrimp tacos were located in Ensenada on the harbor. Try different vendors to find your favorite place.

Fresh-cut flowers, straw hats, baskets, textiles, blankets, pottery and a cornucopia of goods were cheap in a local market. My last purchase of the trip was an intricately crafted and designed, woven doily mat for pots and pans. It is made of celine, fibers taken from the body and leaf of the cactus tree – durable, strong and heat resistant. I use it to protect the wood finishes on my dining table and countertops. Cost was about seven dollars.

Silver money clips can be a reasonable buy. I bought two – one a design of the Mayan sun calendar, and the other embedded blue lapis stone – both rated .925 pure silver content. Buy your

watches and electronics in the States, unless you know exactly what you are getting.

When visiting Mexico for leisure and shopping, bring your walking shoes and solar protection, a willingness to haggle (but not too much – everyone is entitled to a livable wage). MasterCard is not widely accepted. Your Visa card is preferred.



## Camino Real *Continued*



**Los Lavaderos – the washing fountain – in one of the rear courtyards at Hotel Camino Real, Oaxaca. There is a stone fountain in the center and several huge carved stone basins around the edges once used for the washing of clothes and linens in the Convento Catalana de Siena. Today, this beautiful spot is home to a flock of white doves and is decorated with candles at night.**

I have to admit that for many of us, the \$200-\$400/per night price of staying at the Camino Real is cost prohibitive, and also – to me – generally not worth it, since nothing about the modern, beautifully-appointed rooms bring to mind thoughts of anything ancient and mysterious. Although I have to say of my one stay there, the service was beyond miraculous. However, this is a place that warmly welcomes non-guests to any function they have, and the service remains flawless whether you are a guest or not. In my never-to-be-humble opinion, time reserved for at least one meal, or even just a stroll through the grounds, will always be an integral component of a visit to this marvelous city, if only to put you in better touch with its history and origins. An afternoon spent over coffee and pastries, however, will always be a better choice, and is absolutely guaranteed to offer perfection of a kind found nowhere else.

