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Away from the crowds

CHIAPAS IS CHEAP. But the affordability of Mexico's southernmost state is compounded by its relative obscurity. Few North American tourists venture there

In Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, green is never simply green. From the air, green rolls over the unending mountains, intense and damp where there are forests and nubbly like rough felt when the trees end. In the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the hill town in the middle of Chiapas's central plateau, it's a shiny layer of Kelly spread thickly across the facade of a Spanish colonial home. In the church of San Juan de Chamula, it's the toasted green of pine needles strewn across the floor, and it's the thin threads woven almost invisibly into the white wool tunics of indigenous Chamulan men.

PHOTOS: MATT GROSS NEW YORK TIMES



A street vendor sells corn, a favourite snack in Chiapas, outside the club Revolución in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Chiapas green is the golden green of fair-trade coffee beans ready for roasting, and the translucent olive drab of banana leaves wrapped around steaming tamales, and a Day-Glo pear growing in a backyard orchard. Nowhere have I seen so many variations of the colour, and yet there was one place in Chiapas, which I visited over 10 days in October, where green served little to no purpose: my wallet.

Chiapas is cheap – as is much of Mexico. But Chiapas' affordability is compounded by its relative obscurity. Apart from the packs of post-collegiate backpackers experimenting with Maya mysticism, few U.S. and Canadian tourists venture there. Perhaps it's a fear of the Zapatista rebels, whose 1994 seizure of five Chiapas towns gained them worldwide headlines. Or maybe it's simply the state's

inaccessibility – at least 12 hours by bus from Cancun, Oaxaca or Mexico City, and even more by air from Montreal.

Either way, the lack of crowds means that, for not much more than \$50 a day, mildly adventurous travellers have unfettered access to lovely colonial towns and indigenous cultures (Indians make up a fifth of the state's 4.3 million people), to the ancient Maya ruins at Palenque, Bonampak and beyond, to lush, isolated rain forests, to good coffee, to quirky and affordable hotels and even to the shadowy Zapatistas themselves.

I began, as most Chiapas visitors do, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the nearly 500-year-old Spanish colonial hill town that serves as base camp for exploring the state. Or rather, I would have begun in San Cristóbal if there were regular air service to the city. Instead, I flew into the state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez and took a taxi at a fixed fare of 220 pesos (about \$19) from the airport to the bus station, where I paid 26 pesos (\$2) for the hour-long bus ride to San Cristóbal. It left just before sunset and was remarkably comfortable. Outside the window, the valley darkened into a deep red glow as we climbed 2,100 metres above sea level into mountains cut through with rivers and illuminated by the clustered lights of villages.

By the time I reached San Cristóbal, I was energized by the crazily consistent beauty of it all, invigorated by the chilly mountain air and in love with my 550-pesos-a-night accommodations at Na Bolom. Built in 1891 as a hacienda, Na Bolom is a charming hotel compound with mustard-yellow arches, scarlet balconies and more courtyards than I cared to count.

San Cristóbal had me joyously roaming its streets from morning till night. The lanes, paved with hexagonal stones and laid out in a rough grid, climb up and down gentle hills until, at the far reaches of this small valley, they end in a ring of green mountains – “crouched all round like large and friendly dogs,” as Graham Greene put it in his travelogue *The Lawless Roads* – whose distinct peaks locals use for orientation.

More than anything, what distinguished the streets of San Cristóbal were the indigenous people, who wore the traditional outfits of their native towns. As I sat on an outdoor table at the Yik Café, watching the colours swirl around, Chiapas felt like a place out of time.

“The only place it compares with is maybe Tibet, Nepal years ago,” said Walter Morris Jr., a grey-bearded U.S. anthropologist who has lived in San Cristóbal for 35 years. “In terms of leaving your normal space and being with people who truly think differently and who do interesting things, this is about as exotic as you can get within a few thousand miles of the United States and a short plane ride.”

Morris is an expert on Maya weaving and tracks the accelerating evolution of indigenous styles. What I'd thought of as traditional outfits, he told me, were actually innovations: embroidery was a great rarity three decades ago, the dyes are artificial and the designs now change with the seasons.

“Every six months they have a festival,” he said, “and if you're stylish, you weave up an entire new set of costumes for your family, and have it embroidered at the last minute to decide the palette.”

The place to buy those fashions – whether au courant or so last year – is Sna Jolobil, a weaver's cooperative in the Templo de Santo Domingo complex. These are the highest of the high end, organized by town of origin and priced according to the amount of work that went into them, with bedspreads reaching into the thousands of dollars. Frugal fashionistas may, however, prefer the artisans market that has grown up in a churchyard, where similar work costs much less.

Artisanship in San Cristóbal also shades quite smoothly into art. At Galeria Studio Cerrillo, Basque artist Gorka Larranaga was showing his light-box paintings of exploding buildings and bridges.

Around the corner, three artists – an American, a Swiss and an Italian, all of whom had spent more than a decade in San Cristóbal – were working to open Elisa Burkhard, a hybrid museum/gallery that will showcase local artists as well as their own. Kinoki, a cultural centre and café, showed Spanish documentaries as well as U.S. films.

It was the failed revolution of the Zapatistas, properly termed the Zapatista Army of National Unity, or EZLN, that has given Chiapas a frisson of danger. A decade ago, that reputation was well-earned, thanks to the Mexican military's pursuit of the EZLN, the massacre of Tzotzil Indians in the village of Acteal and frequent unrelated but frightening raids by bandits who cross the border from Guatemala.

Today, however, the revolution is below a simmer, invisible except for the occasional tortilla shop named “1 de Enero,” a reference to the Jan. 1, 1994, uprising. The revolutionaries still exist, living in autonomous collectives throughout the state, tolerated by the government but limited in their