

# Life around Oaxaca drawn from landscape

## Inland Mexican communities preserve traditional ways in art and cooking

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Market day in Pochutla, a small village in Oaxaca.

**Photograph by:** Lisa Montforton, Calgary Herald

Zeny Fuentes is wielding a large, wicked-looking knife in his right hand, not so much carving the slim block of copal wood in his left hand as liberating the shape within it. The knife moves quickly, blurring the metal and scattering thin strips of wood on the stone floor.

Outside the long, low studio that sits in a small field just off the main road to Ocotlan, a light rain shower has threatened and then disappeared. The returning sun lights the shelves that line the plastered walls. There, Fuentes' brightly painted panthers prowl, cats strike regal poses and dragons spread their wings.

We're a half-hour's drive south of Oaxaca City (pronounced waha-ca), some 200 kilometres from the nearest beach and a world away from the usual perception of Mexico. But this, I think, is where the country's heart beats.

Here, in a mountain-ringed valley where more than a dozen pre-Hispanic cultures flourished and where

archeological treasures litter the landscape, the usual firm line between life and death, imagination and reality breaks down. There's no better symbol than the "alebrijes," the multicoloured wooden figures that Fuentes is carving. Born from the landscape and linked to the spirit of both artist and ancestors, some of his animals are pure fantasy, others indigenous and still others inspired by his travels.

Less an artist haven than simple heritage, the area around Oaxaca City -- itself a UNESCO World Heritage Site, thanks to cobbled streets and Hispanic architecture such as the 16th-century Convento de Santo Domingo -- is known for its handicrafts.

Each village seems to boast its own unique form: green glazed clay from Santa Maria Atzompa, black ceramics from San Bartolo Coyotepec, and wool carpets from Teotitlan del Valle.

Teotitlan lies east of Oaxaca, near the main route to Mitla -- which, along with Monte Alban, is one of two major pre-Hispanic archeological sites. En route, fields of agave line the road, the spiky fan-like plants providing the base for the fiery mescal, cousin to tequila. Before long, our small group of travellers has arrived at the Dain Niz carpet studio, where the family's matriarch, Francisca -- also known as Mama -- greets us with a Mixtec word of welcome: Siksa.

Her son-in-law, Faustino Ruiz Lorenzo, tours us around the small showroom and into the open space behind it, where a spinning wheel and loom are in action.

Mama sits and proceeds to card the sheep's wool, dragging the gnarled white fluff between the sharp needles of two paddles to create longer, more distinct fibres.

Faustino's wife, Rudivina, takes the fibres and guides them on the spinning wheel turning disparate threads into a unified strand of wool.

"We show you what our ancestors, they left to us," says Faustino. "Our grandfathers inherited this knowledge."

And he now carries it on, the focus of a larger family-run cottage industry. From natural wool comes white, beige, sand and grey--and he goes on to show us the natural dyes: pomegranates for pinks, the cochineal insect for reds, marigolds for oranges, stone moss for green.

It's like this throughout the villages and towns around Oaxaca -- family traditions live on in the crafts, horses still pull carts, and elderly women use umbrellas as sun shades as they walk down stone streets.

Pomegranate, mango and avocado trees grow beyond plastered brick garden walls, fruit hanging over into the streets.

The rhythm of the land is never far away. Ask for juice in a little neighbourhood restaurant, and it arrives frothy and fresh squeezed.

Flavoured water -- agua fresca -- is made from real fruit (watermelon or lemon, perhaps, depending on what's in season) blended and added to water, with sugar added for taste when needed.

Squash blossoms decorate plates and melt into Oaxaca's mild local cheese in a warm tortilla for breakfast.

From crafts to food, what exists today has evolved over more than 30 centuries -- making time seem somehow elastic.

The region's seven famous moles (mol-ays), or sauces, can take more than two-dozen ingredients and hours to make. A table runner woven on a backstrap loom can similarly take hours to create, and years to master.

Just as Zeny Fuentes' magical creatures meld tradition and imagination, so too does Oaxaca City preserve the old ways of Mexico -- the art, the warmth and the life.

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## IF YOU GO TO OAXACA

- **Getting there:** Mexicana Airlines ([Mexicana.com](http://Mexicana.com)), WestJet ([westjet.com](http://westjet.com)) and Air Canada ([aircanada.com](http://aircanada.com)), among other airlines, fly to various points in Mexico, from which you can hop a short internal flight to Oaxaca City -- this makes it easy to add Oaxaca to a beach vacation.

- **Staying there:** There's a range of hotels available, including the Hotel CasAntica ([hotelcasantica.com](http://hotelcasantica.com)), a converted 16th-century convent with oodles of charm and a convenient location for Oaxaca's very walkable downtown area. Ask for a room on the quieter second floor.

- **More information:** [go-oaxaca.com](http://go-oaxaca.com); [visitmexico.com](http://visitmexico.com); [oaxaca.travel](http://oaxaca.travel) (official but in Spanish only); [zenyfuentes.com](http://zenyfuentes.com).

## Five great things to do in Oaxaca City:

1. Stroll around Oaxaca City, discovering the architecture, including the baroque Santo Domingo Cultural Centre with its botanical garden, and the buildings around the central square, or zocalo, including the cathedral.
2. Indulge in archeological sites, especially the pyramid buildings of Monte Alban (ancient capital of the Zapotec people) and the intricate stone designs of Mitla (known as the City of the Dead).
3. Take a handicraft tour using one of four routes outside the city, visiting towns and villages known for pottery, rugmaking, woven scarves and table decor, tinsmithing, carved wooden animals and much more.

4. Register for hands-on cooking lessons at places such as Casa de los Sabores ([laolla.com.mx](http://laolla.com.mx)) or Seasons of My Heart ([seasonsofmyheart.com](http://seasonsofmyheart.com)).

5. Go for an eco-tour in the Sierra Norte mountains, where you can bike, hike and ride horses, using inns like eco-and cultural-tourism experts Casa Sagrada ([casasagrada.com](http://casasagrada.com)) as a base.

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