

travel

200 miles through to Guadalajara nets tourists Mexico's lake country

By IRIS SANDERSON JONES
Contributing Travel Editor

PATZCUARO, Mich. — We are in lake country, up a cactus-fringed highway from Morelia and down a steep mountain road from Santa Clara del Cobre. If you wonder where we are in Michigan, you will wonder even more when the scenes flash by. Indian women wrapped in shawls hide their faces from the camera in the town market. An artisan transforms a solid lump of copper into a classic pitcher. Fishermen spread colorful butterfly nets across the lake.

The license plates say Mich., but move your eyes a little and you will see the full legend, "Mich.-Mex." We are in the state of Michoacan in Mexico. You may not have heard of it, but most local shopkeepers know that Mich. also is the abbreviation for Michigan.

Patzcuaro is the ancient home of the Tarascan Indians, who still live their lives here in many of the ancient ways. They farm. They create the old crafts. And they catch and sell the tiny, sweet white fish known as *Pescado blanco* or white fish.

This is the lake country of Mexico, which begins 200 miles west of Mexico City at Morelia and runs for 200 miles to Guadalajara.

The largest lake west of Mexico City, south of Guadalajara, is Lake Chapala, the largest inland body of water in Mexico. The blue patch to the east is Lake Cuitzeo, and the small blue curl in the mountains between them is Lake Patzcuaro.

The town of Patzcuaro was founded in the early 16th century by Bishop Vasco de Quiroga on the site of an Indian village that was already 200 years old.

THERE ARE THREE main tourist attractions in Patzcuaro. The fishermen with their nets on the lake near the island of Janitzio, the copper craftsmen 30 minutes up the mountain in Santa Clara del Cobre and the everyday market and the special Friday market in the downtown area.

On Friday, people from nearby towns paddle into Patzcuaro in their dugout canoes and spread their crafts and market wares out on the main plaza, one of the most magnificent treed plazas in Mexico.



Times change and most fishermen of Patzcuaro use more modern methods of hauling in their fish. These men, however, readily lift their butterfly nets for touring photographers, keeping alive somewhat the old way of catching the *pescado blanco*.

The regular market can be seen any day a few blocks away from Plaza Chica, where Indian women sit on the arched sidewalks, each among a small spread of wares: straw hats, bread, or clothing.

Tables of copper ware give way to market avenues of shawls and serapes, and these in turn to a food market fringed on both sides by fish sellers. The women who sell the fish are lined up in rows between the buildings each with her skirt spread out to cover her legs and with small lines of fish in her hand for sale.

It is a colorful sight, but one you won't easily catch with a camera unless you hide behind a doorway with a telephoto lens. The Indian women of Patzcuaro, like many people in Mexico, believe that the camera steals their souls. Those who don't will certainly expect money for the privilege of posing for a picture.

The cobblestone streets of the town are lined with shops, many of them offering the work of individual craftsmen. To see many first-class crafts in one place, visit Casa de los Once Patios, the house of 11 patios. It is a former convent half a block from the main plaza. You will do little if any bargaining and the quality of the crafts is excellent.

At sunset, drive 3.5 kilometers up to Stirrup Peak, officially known as El Estirp.

FROM HERE YOU can see the mountains and the patchwork farms running down to the lake, with the mountain island of Janitzio rising like a centerpiece in the middle of the lake. The setting sun sends the shadow of the mountain darkly across the verdant slope, and gives shades of spring green and sand brown to the farmlands and to the stucco villages below.

When the sun comes up again, you should be preparing to cross that lake to where the fishermen make colorful photographic scenes off the island of Janitzio.

The island rises in a house-stuccoed dome above the lake, a huge statue of Morelos, a Mexican revolutionary hero, rising from the top like the Statue of Liberty.

The village is extremely picturesque, although it has a reputation for being one of the less desirable places in Mexico to actually prowl around. The streets are dirty, pigs squal underfoot, and the children claw and beg.

Whether or not you visit the island, you should definitely take one of the open-sided ferries that carry about 50 people at a time to the edge of the island.

Most fishermen use modern modern methods for catching the *Pescado blanco*, but a fleet of boats is always ready for those who want to photograph the fishermen with the ancient butterfly nets and the lollipop paddles.

Your ferry guide will tell you how to pay them the few pesos they expect for the display.

The show is best seen in the morning, which gives you a nice part of the day left for uphill climb to Villa Escalante, still known to most people by its old name of Santa Clara del Cobre — Santa Clara of the Copper.

There is a reputable shop on the way into town, run by a group of master copper artisans. There are also many other shops in town, as well as factories that can be visited. Any boy on the tree main square will guide you to a private coppersmith's studio, such as that of Eteberto Ramirez.

As you drive back to town, or on to Mexico City, you will see the campesinos coming home with their horses and bullock carts across the fields and along the roads.

Men and boys in their country hats are silhouetted briefly against the sky as they top a hill. A boy rides with grass piled high on his bicycle. A man rides a burro, while a woman and child walk beside. A horseman makes a high Don Quixote silhouette against the evening sky and women walk wrapped in colorful shawls.

It doesn't look a bit like Michigan.

travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones

Looking for copper, finding a goldmine

SANTA CLARA del COBRE, Mexico — Four great mountain trees soar out of the plaza at Santa Clara del Cobre, high above the lake country of Mexico.

There is a riot of birds, the rev of a bus engine and the quiet footfalls of people moving back and forth along the village streets. We are looking for a copper craftsman and 15-year-old Eteberto Ramirez.

Officially, this village is now known as Villa Escalante, but it is known throughout Mexico as Santa Clara del Cobre — Santa Clara of the Copper — because this is the home of the best-known copper artists in the country.

We follow Isidro down the cobblestone streets and through a gate to the Ramirez house, where we can hear the heavy tap of a hammer against copper.

It is a neat red-and-white house with a child playing on the sidewalk and a bicycle leaning against the white stucco wall. In an open-sided shed, where a car might be parked in America, Eteberto and his wife are working on a copper jug.

WE HAVE TAKEN a chance by following Isidro to this house, but we are lucky. Ramirez is a master craftsman, the head of the copper makers union and the winner of a president's medal for his work.

We ask him to show us the whole process. He starts with a chunk of smelted copper the size of a cantaloupe, scrapes it clean with a chisel and puts it into the fire. After it has been hammered into a malleable shape, it goes back to the fire to be made into a bowl.

His wife stands behind the double bellows and we watch the fire flare as she heats the copper bowl into a red-hot shape. It is rushed on long tongs to the metal arm where Ramirez hammers it — still hot — into its final rough form.

The rest of the process is delicate finishing work, accompanied by the patient tap-tap of the hammer.

Eteberto is the son and the grandson of copper craftsmen. He started to work when he was 5, learning to pump the bellows and carry loads for older craftsmen. By age 6 he was carrying hot metal and by 8 he was forming his first vessels.

He was 12 when he won his first prize in a recognized competition. Nowadays he is the owner of many prizes, including a medal from the President of Mexico.

THE GUILD HE helped to form keeps prices at a reasonable level. It prevents the jobbers from buying large lots of copper work at an unfairly low price. The guild has started a craft school, so that young aspirants can apprentice into the coppersmith trade.

You must live in Santa Clara to be admitted to the school, the art of the copper craftsman is a male trade; girls are not invited to attend.

This may be the last generation of copper artists in the Ramirez family. Eteberto wants his son to go to school and become a doctor or a lawyer.

Someday, perhaps, there will be no more copper craftsmen left in this high mountain town. In the meantime, tourists can buy hand-hammered plates and bowls and jugs at shops here, or twice the price at the Indian market in Mexico City.



Eteberto Ramirez
Master coppersmith



Indian women daily set up their stands of breads, crafts and wares in the Plaza Chica at Patzcuaro. (Photos by Iris Sanderson Jones)

TO PARIS IN the spring or to Tecumseh in April, that is the dilemma. But one easily resolved because those masters at the Louvre — Picasso, Matisse and Chagall — will be represented in Tecumseh April 16-21 on the Michigan Artfair.

The city will polish the rails, roll out the carpet and celebrate Artfair's visit with a community arts festival held at several sites around town. The festival will display the work of Lenawee County artists, public school artists, and include a model railroad exhibit, dance workshop, 8mm filmmaking workshop, organ concert and student photography show. Craftspeople include a miniaturist, stained glass designer, printer, woodcarver, potter, spinner and portraitist.

Artfair will stop at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 313 N. Evans St. with hours of 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5-8 p.m. weekdays and noon to 8 p.m. on the weekend. For a schedule of activities or more information, write the Tecumseh Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 265, 49286; or call 1-517-423-3740.

Tecumseh is northeast of Adrian and southeast of Manchester and the events are free. Paris is northeast of Detroit and a round-trip flight from New York booked 21 days in advance is about \$550, or about \$700 on the spur-of-the-moment, west pass.

tripping

THE END OF the rainbow is nothing more than a storage room in a sub basement at the Swiss Bank Corp. in Zurich, Switzerland. Travel film maker A. Philip Walker discovered it recently when filming "Beautiful Switzerland — The Beautiful Swiss Machine," which he narrates at the German-American Cultural Center at 8 p.m. Friday, April 18.

As film props for some of the scenes, Walker used ingots, bags of gold coins, bars of gold in different weights, and platinum — weighing in at a ton total — plus the currencies of the world, which were his for a signature. There was one stipulation: When filming the front of the bank, please, no face-forward shots.

The cultural center is at 5251 E. Outer Dr. in Detroit. Admission to the film is \$4. For more information, call 371-5720.

THE MONUMENT'S lights will be lit in ceremony at 9 p.m. evenings, and accommodations have been made for the handicapped and their families. A Fourth of July celebration is planned and, speaking of gold and anniversaries, the Washington figure was dedicated 50 years back.

"HISTORIC HOMES IN VIRGINIA" is the title of a guide to Virginia's historic properties. The 16-page illustrated directory lists 100 homes, plantations and estates which are open to the public. Included is a description of a property's historical claim and where to write for more information.

For a copy, which is free, write: Virginia State Travel Service, 6 N. Sixth St., Richmond, Va. 23219; or call 1-804-786-4454.

THAT BEAST will be even "badder," writes the people at King's Island entertainment center which opens on Saturday.

Improvements have been made to the year-old rollercoaster, which sports a track of 7,400 feet and hills of 135 and 141 feet. Changes include steeper

banking at several curves and on the two turns in the 540-degree helix tunnel, and a major portion of the helix has been enclosed. On Friday, the park will conduct a test for the "Guinness Book of Records" to authenticate the 70-mph coaster speed.

For information, call 1-513-241-5600.

RUNNERS, 10- and five-kilometer runs are scheduled for 9 a.m. Saturday, April 26, beginning and ending at Novi City Hall at 45225 W. 10 Mile.

The 10-km run has five classifications for men and three for women. The five-km run has a single classification. The entry fee is \$5 per person and will include a T-shirt and refreshments. Plaques will be awarded to the top three finishers in each category.

Registrations should be mailed to Novi Parks and Recreation Department, 25870 Novi Road, P.O. Box 335, Novi, 48069, 484-9197. Include name, address, phone number, age and shirt size. If you miss the April 25 registration deadline, you're running on empty.

Information for Tripping can be mailed to Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.



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