

TRAVEL

Livonia couple says 'si, si' to Oaxaca, Mexico

BY MARY QUINLEY
SPECIAL WRITER

Near the bustling crossroads of 20 de Noviembre and Mitla streets in Oaxaca, Mexico, wafts of a warm tantalizing aroma teased unsuspecting passersby. A sniff of the air easily revealed the culprit — it was chocolate. So when Jack and Joan Olds of Livonia followed the intoxicating scent, they ended up in the Chocolate Mayordomo shop.

Once inside, customers are invited to sample a morsel, sip a cool chocolate drink or watch as toasted cacao is blended with splashes of sugar, cinnamon, vanilla and/or almonds.

The taste of the chocolate, said Joan, is "so different from ours and very interesting."

In the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca (say: wah-HA-ka), chocolate accounted for a sliver of the pleasures enjoyed by the Olds, who were visiting with other members of Elderhostel.

Some other Oaxacan favorites included food and libations. "We love tortillas and enchiladas, and, we like to eat spicy foods," Joan said. Oaxaca obliged. Many of their meals, said Jack, involved chicken prepared in a multitude of tasty ways, and accompanied by crisp and tangy sauces.

The mole (say MO-lay) sauces, spicy concoctions mixed with unsweetened chocolate and a variety of chilies and spices, are particularly appealing when served with chicken and poultry dishes. Fruits are vibrant and succulent. Mango, kiwi, strawberries, papaya and pineapple appear on breakfast buffets, as appetizers and with desserts. Lush thick, fruit-filled drinks, with or without alcohol, satisfy thirsty palates.

Do the Olds recommend the Mexican beer?

SI!

They preferred the dark varieties, but were pleased with many of the lighter colored brands.

If you go

Oaxaca, tucked above a high valley in the shadow of the Sierra Madre del Sur, is the capital of the state with the same name. The average annual temperature hovers between 71 and 72°F.

For information on Oaxaca city and neighboring attractions check the Web at:

www.oaxaca.gob.mx/sedutur or email: info@oaxaca.gob.mx/sedutur.

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"The whole feeling of Oaxaca is nice," said Joan, who liked the ease of checking out the city on foot. The pair meandered through art museums (Jack is an artist), studied Spanish and participated in sightseeing excursions. From their hotel, the couple would venture out for a leisurely short stroll to the zocalo, or town square, to eat at sidewalk cafe, listen to the street musicians, shop, and people watch.

The zocalo represents the heart of activity in many Mexican cities. In Oaxaca's square, shade trees stretch heavenward, a gazebo lures couples and kids. Street vendors peddle handmade wares, balloons and food. Saturday shopping at the zocalo is a highlight for novice travelers as well as local families. When the Olds visited Mexico, a 20-piece orchestra set up their instruments in a corner of the square to entertain the afternoon crowd. Pedestrian traffic only is allowed on the main street that encircles the square.

In the small village of Mitla (say: MEE-tlah), a trek approxi-

mately 26 miles southeast of Oaxaca, adventure seekers will discover a harmonious blend of modern influences, an intriguing outdoor market and ancient ruins.

"Mitla is a special place where we will find a 1,000-year-old palace — and — signs for Coke and Pepsi," said Saul Lopez, a tour guide who was speaking earlier this year to a group of American travelers.

At the archaeological site in Mitla, visitors are free to meander around the grounds, admire the limestone columns, climb a set of geometrically precise steps and explore an underground tomb. The massive layout is mind-boggling. Stone was transported from a distance 80 miles from the structure. Construction spanned 600 years.

"We are looking at original paintings that are about 1,000 years old," explained Lopez, as he pointed above an archway to patches of faded hand-painted designs. Within years, or maybe months, he said, some of the color will be lost because the walls are not protected.

Control of the complex changed hands throughout the decades. During one stage, said Lopez, the political classes from neighboring villages journeyed to Mitla to worship the gods. The Zapotecs, Mayas, Aztecs and Spaniards influenced what was once a thriving community.

Santa Maria el Tule

Kids who live in Santa Maria el Tule, home to a cypress tree estimated to be more than 2,000 years old, are offered a unique incentive to excel in school. They can apply for the position of volunteer tourist guide.

"The children, ages seven to ten years, are chosen by the teachers," said Lopez, as he led a group to the neatly manicured grounds of the widest tree in the world. The coveted title is very competitive. If a child's grades decline, the youngster is no longer eligible to participate,

and someone else is appointed as a replacement. The tours, which basically consist of an easy walk around the perimeter of the tree, are available in Spanish, Italian, German and English.

With a little imagination on the part of the audience, coupled with brief descriptive phrases by a guide, "silhouettes" of a turkey, a fish's mouth, an elephant and other figures are visible on the mammoth tree. The town, situated a few miles east of the outskirts of Oaxaca, also supplies limited shopping opportunities.

More activities

Rent a car or sign up for a bus tour to explore the neighboring villages. Weavers, woodcarvers and potters (the Dona Rosa black pottery produced in San Bartolo Coyotepec is world renowned), supply an endless selection beautiful hand-produced crafts.

Language is no barrier with shoppers. However, if your Spanish is limited carry a dictionary and remember to be patient. Mexican crafters are usually knowledgeable about converting pesos to American dollars and

vice versa. Prices are reasonable and many of the independent artisans are willing to barter.

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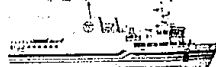
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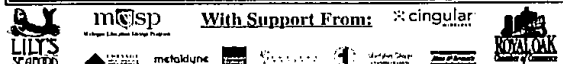
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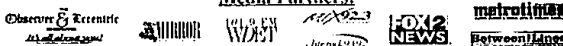
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