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A Treasure's Comeback Bid

After unrest, Oaxaca, city of temples and markets, tries to rebuild; discounts, few crowds

By **JOSEPH ROSENBLOOM**

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Oaxaca, Mexico

To sip a beer and savor the gentle night air at an outdoor cafe in the Zócalo ranks high on the must-do list of many tourists visiting this ancient city in southern Mexico. On a Monday evening earlier this year, however, workmen were sandblasting graffiti off the facade of the Governor's Palace on the south side of the square. The drone was a jarring reminder that all is not yet back to normal.

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The Monte Alban archaeological site in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Over some of the past year, Oaxaca, renowned for its colonial architecture and nearby Indian ruins, has been plagued by violence. Beginning last May, teachers' protests virtually shut down the city, with demonstrators occupying the Zócalo and clashing with police. As cafés, restaurants and stores closed, tourism ground to a halt.

Now, calm is slowly returning to Oaxaca, and the city is trying to rebuild its reputation as a safe destination for vacationers.

Hotels are discounting rates by as much as 30%, restaurants aren't overrun by crowds, and some local businesses are trying to overcome the drop in tourism by expanding into

bed-and-breakfasts and offering traditional cooking classes.

Despite its troubled history and remoteness -- roughly halfway between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico -- Oaxaca has long been a magnet for tourists. Its gracious colonial buildings and pastel-hued houses recall another era. The architecture, along with the city's many gilded churches, universities and museums, earned it a Unesco World Heritage listing in 1987.

TRIP PLANNER


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The designation extends to the ruins of Monte Albán, a 20-minute drive from the city in the Valley of Oaxaca. The Zapotec Indians lived there from around 500 B.C. to A.D. 800. From the temples, the priests had panoramic views of the

smoky-blue Sierra Madre Mountains and the green Valley of Oaxaca. The well-excavated remnants are one of Mexico's most intriguing archaeological sites.

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During a recent visit, I also checked out the bustling Sunday market at Tlacolula, 20 miles east of Oaxaca. Copper-skinned Zapotecs from outlying villages, many of the men wearing 10-gallon straw hats and the women in gaily colored pinafores, jam the town's cobblestone streets to buy everything from dried chili peppers to pirated CDs.

The area around Oaxaca has a rich history of weaving, and just south of the Zócalo, a series of covered markets sells textiles, as well as pottery, wood carvings and locally produced foods.

In a sense, this is an ideal time to visit Oaxaca. Just 255,000 tourists came during the second half of last year when most of the violence occurred, down from 615,000 in the same period a year earlier, according to the state Secretariat of Tourism. At least eight protesters were killed and the overhang from the turmoil is still deterring visitors from coming to the area, says Beatriz Rodriguez Casanovas, the head of the Oaxacan state's tourism agency.

Is it safe to travel there now? At least one U.S. State Department official says yes, based on current conditions. The underlying issues concerning teachers' salaries and the state government are still unresolved, but Oaxaca remains calm.



Getty Images

A wood carver displaying his work

Recently, demonstrators have been staging peaceful sit-ins in the Zócalo as a reminder of their cause. Locals say they don't have the stomach for more violent forms of protest -- or the financial resources to withstand another year of sluggish tourism.

One way to check the pulse of Oaxaca's recovery is to turn an ear toward the window of Mark Leyes's second-story office on Alcalá Macedonia, the city's pedestrian north-south artery. Mr. Leyes is the U.S. consular agent in Oaxaca. When I stop by his office one sunny afternoon, he points out his open window. "During normal circumstances, the streets should have hundreds of people milling around out there," he says. "Right now, I don't hear anybody."

In addition to fewer crowds, adventurous travelers will find plenty of room at hotels and reasonable rates -- as well as an easier time finding a table at some of the city's best restaurants.

Oaxaca's distinctive cuisine draws travelers from within Mexico and beyond. Moles -- spicy sauces typically made from chilies and savory chocolate -- are the centerpiece and come in more varieties than found in many Mexican restaurants in the U.S. Though a handful of restaurants remain shuttered, there are still plenty of options. Try La Biznaga for chicken or beef with pungent mole.



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Roasted leg of lamb with Oaxacan black mole with spinach

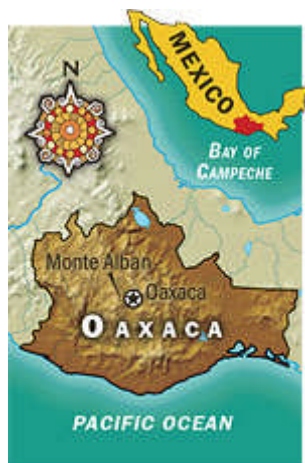
The Young Weavers Work Shop and Cooperative now offers cooking classes and has opened a bed-and-breakfast. When I visited, there were no other tourists watching Gaspar Chávez demonstrate the cooperative's traditional rug-making methods, painstakingly produced on foot-pedal looms. "For eight months, we didn't sell anything," Mr. Chávez says of the cooperative's problems following last year's unrest. "We decided that, if we offered other things to the tourists, they'd buy more

rugs."

For Hector Ramirez, his solution to the tourism decline is to try to diversify his woodcarving business in his yellow-stucco workshop in San Antonio Arrazola, a town on the western outskirts of Oaxaca. Rather than watch his inventory of alebrijes -- fanciful wooden figures depicting everything from cats to monsters -- gather dust, he has started marketing his product to galleries in San Francisco, Houston and other American cities. The galleries are demanding a steep markdown and getting it. When I tried to bargain with him, he shrugged his shoulders in resignation: "Something is better than nothing."

* * *

Trip Planner



Joe LeMonnier

• **Where to Stay:** Oaxaca's grandest hotel is the Camino Real, with rooms listed at between \$280 and \$425, but prices have dropped more than 50% at times this year (caminoreal.com/oaxaca_i/main.php²). The Hostal Casantica, two blocks from the Zócalo, is a congenial alternative, with rates starting at about \$75 (www.hotelcasantica.com³). The hospitable Casa de las Bugambilias B&B, well-located a half-dozen blocks from the Zócalo, ranges from \$85 to \$105 (www.lasbugambilias.com⁴).

• **Where to Eat:** To sample creative versions of Oaxaca's traditional foods, try La Biznaga (Tel: 951-516-1800). About \$15 a person. For excellent Oaxacan-style seafood served in an open-air courtyard from \$10 a person, there is Marco Polo (Tel: 951-513-4308). Or try a four-course lunch on a \$6 prix-fixe menu at Restaurant & Bar La Olla (Tel: 951-516-6668).

• **Where to Go:** The Zapotec Indian ruins of Monte Albán is a 20-minute drive from downtown Oaxaca and an awe-inspiring experience. The Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca and adjoining Church of Santo Domingo showcase Oaxaca's cultural and religious heritage. About an hour's drive from Oaxaca is the Sunday outdoor market at Tlacolula. It's a hive of buying and selling by colorfully attired Zapotecs from farms and villages in the area. There are also many other covered markets closer to the city selling textiles, pottery, wood carvings and local produce.

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