

silent gods and sunburned stones

There may be countries more attractively mystifying than Mexico, but I doubt it. My own dawning awareness that there was something curiously baffling about Mexicans dates from my first visit in 1959. The Soviet Union was then sponsoring a great exhibition in Mexico City to impress the natives with Soviet technological prowess (that was the era of Sputnik). What struck me while strolling through the glittering show was the utter impassivity of the Mexican onlookers, who could have been wearing stone masks.

I noticed that there were black books conveniently placed on tables, and in them visitors were invited to inscribe their comments. I opened one of the books. All the pages were blank. Totally blank. In the words of Alexander von Humboldt, writing in 1803: "Mexicans enjoy making a mystery of even their most insignificant acts."

With a touch of proud despair, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz describes his country as a "labyrinth of solitude." The solitude is palpable as you drive through Mexico's vast stretches of sunburned earth, the highway bounded by cactus sentinels and lonely adobe huts. You feel it in the jungles of Chiapas, where a parrot's shriek can resound like a thunderclap. But you are also aware of it during the rush hour in Mexico's gleaming Metro, where the loudest sound is the purr of rubber wheels—and where the station walls are, incredibly, devoid of all graffiti.

In this labyrinth you need a guiding thread. And one important strand—it can be put no more strongly than that—leads through the half-lit tunnel of the past. Without some awareness of ancient Mexico, the bedeviling paradoxes of the present make no sense. To quote Paz again, "The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins."

To share in this quest, I propose an archeological tour of Mexico, the itinerary consisting of ten sites, one museum, and a subway station. The visitor I have in mind is anyone with three free weeks, a moderate budget, willing legs, a little patience, and an at least semieducated curiosity about a republic infinitely more remote than the jet

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The real Mexico
is more remote than
you'd think—but this
archeological tour
can help you find it.

BY KARL MEYER

timetable suggests.

The subway station is the Zócalo stop of the brand-new Mexico City Metro (which, I realize, is not, technically speaking, a true subway, but I would cheerfully swap it for the miserable system in New York, which, technically speaking, is). In the Zócalo stop the three distinct layers of Mexican civilization—the Indian, colonial, and modern—are tangibly visible. The vast square above was once the solar center of the Aztec Empire, and some of the remnants of the principal Aztec temple can still be seen near the colonial cathedral that supplanted it. In the station—itsself an emblem of Mexico's modernizing aspirations—you can study a well-executed scale model of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital that Cortez subdued in 1521. But the layers blend only imperfectly; they coexist but are not fused.

The sole museum on the itinerary is also the one imperative stop—the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park, the greatest of its kind in the world, a portal opening into a dazzling past. Completed in 1964 after a whirlwind twenty months of construction, the museum is interesting in its own right as well as for the 100,000 objects it possesses. It testifies

to an abiding Mexican trait: a flair for visual theatricality. After visiting it Sir Philip Hendy, then director of the National Gallery in London, reported: "In museography Mexico is now ahead of the United States perhaps by a generation, of the United Kingdom perhaps by a century."

The museum's theme is expressed by an inscription over its entrance, through which one sees a carved pillar of bronze supporting an immense canopy measuring 4,000 square feet. The inscription asserts spaciously: "Valor and confidence to face the future is found by people in the grandeur of their past. Mexicans, look at yourselves in the mirror of this splendor; stranger, know also the unity of human destiny. Civilizations pass, but man has always within him the glory of those who struggled to bring him into being."

Within, the unfolding pageant of pre-Columbian Mexico is faultlessly displayed in ingeniously arranged galleries that juxtapose dead and living Indian cultures. From the celebrated Aztec calendar stone and the great Maya chieftain's tomb at Palenque to case after case of flamboyant Zapotec figurines—it is all here. An admirable introductory hall helps the visitor make stylistic and chronological sense of the varied but interrelated civilizations that flourished in Mexico, beginning with the formative Olmecs, the mysterious mother culture that emerged abruptly on the Gulf Coast around 1200 B.C.

So surprising is the unexpected rise of high civilization in Mexico that a hundred theories exist to prove that the ignorant Indians got help from the wise Old World. Whatever one may think of these theories, the Indian achievement is incredible in its own right. Without metal tools, pre-Columbian craftsmen became master carvers of stone; without the ox, the horse, or the wheel, ancient Mexicans built temples on top of prodigious pyramids. (The principle of the wheel was known—wheeled toys from Veracruz can be seen in the museum—but, strangely, it was never applied to construction or pottery making.)

You can get a taste of the harsh environment by visiting Cuicuilco, a circular temple now in a small park on Avenida Insurgentes Sur, near the polychrome National University on the outskirts of the capital. The gloomy landscape is blanketed in *Pedregal*, soot-



black lava of intractable toughness, yet figures were hewn from this obdurate stone, and the bleak terrain was ornamented with a temple that seems modeled on a volcanic cone. The lava reclaimed Cuicuilco, which was buried in an eruption from Xitli Volcano around A.D. 300.

Far more remarkable, early Mexicans not only raised temples but created cities, not simply ceremonial centers but true urban centers. The earliest American city was Teotihuacán, famous for its vast pyramids but more important for the evidence it yields of the first urban explosion in the New World. Only an hour's drive from Mexico City, Teotihuacán is the one site most *norteamericanos* are certain to see. Usually, however, they fail to see the dead city's most absorbing attraction: the partly restored palace residences of Tetitla and Atetelco, both outside the archeological zone, lying amid still-cultivated maize fields (the official guidebook pinpoints the exact locations).

In these residences, with their cen-

Spanish invaders called Chichén Itzá's greatest temple El Castillo. Here it looms beyond columns of the partially restored Temple of the Warriors.

tral patios, cunning drainage systems, and handsome frescoes, you get a sense of the urban amenities in a city that at its peak—around A.D. 600—had a population (unbelievably) of close to 200,000 and that covered more terrain than the Rome of the Caesars. (These calculations are not moon drift but are based on a meticulous mapping project of Teotihuacán directed by Professor Rene Millon of the University of Rochester.) Equally remarkable, this first American city was a planned metropolis, expanding on an orderly grid pattern over a period of centuries before its still-unexplained destruction in a holocaust around A.D. 750.

My advice is to go to Teotihuacán on a weekday, when the big tourist buses are not disgorging their trampling hordes. In the early morning hours you have the place to yourself, and in your imagination you can people the

empty plazas with feathered warriors and reproving priests. Then you may reflect on an enduring Mexican trait: the love of fiestas, the antidote to solitude. Octavio Paz remarks: "Thanks to the fiestas the Mexican opens out, participates, communes with his fellows. . . . Their frequency, their brilliance and excitement, the enthusiasm with which we take part, all suggest that without them we would explode."

Teotihuacán was not the only high civilization of its time, but rather one of a family of nations. We now know that these nations, or tribal complexes, had extensive trade and diplomatic relations with one another. Evidence of this can be seen at the later site of Xochicalco, an array of ruins on an eyrie high above the Morelos countryside, some twenty-five miles from Cuernavaca. A bold relief on the principal pyramid shows a mingling of Toltec gods and Maya priests; an inscribed tablet found in 1960 has numerals based on the Maya-Zapotec system, normally found far to the south. The belief is that Xochicalco may have

been the venue for a summit meeting of ancient astronomers, possibly dealing with the all-important question of calendar reform. (The time-haunted

Maya calculated the length of the solar year with a precision unmatched in the West until the last century.)

Another agreeable trip is to Tula, the

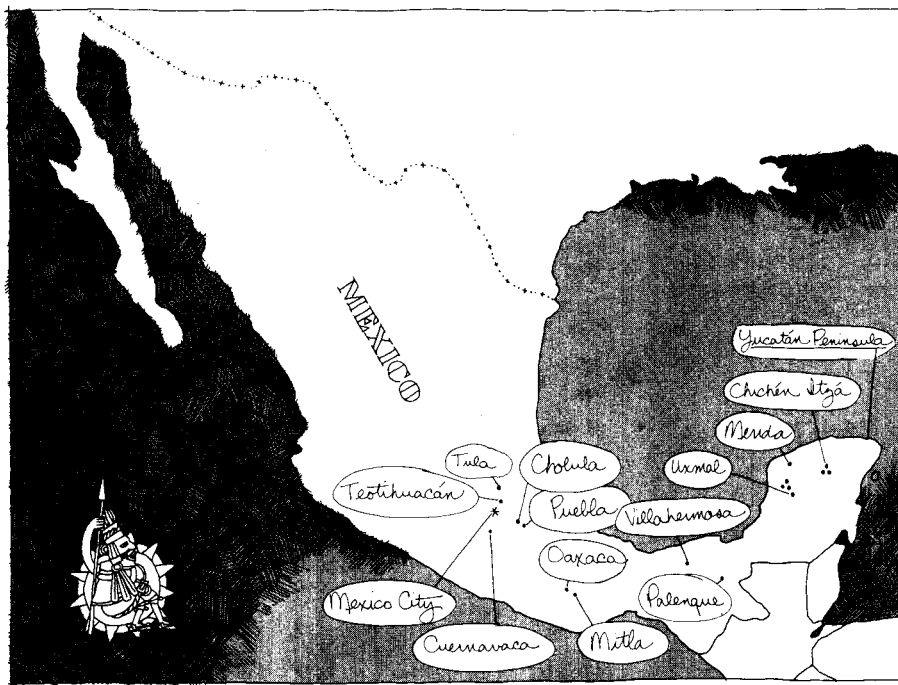
ancient Toltec capital, about fifty-five miles north of Mexico City, reachable on a good highway. With the collapse of Teotihuacán, the dying empire was invaded by warrior tribes, and, much like the barbarians who sacked Rome, the newcomers absorbed some of the outlook of the vanquished. Supreme among the invaders were the Toltecs, who burst into the Valley of Mexico around the tenth century A.D., creating a martial empire to which the Aztecs were the successors.

Rising in the green farmland of Hidalgo State, Tula has a principal pyramid crowned with a file of giant Atlantean figures of Toltec warriors, *machismo* incarnate. Yet the same tough warriors revered as a god a Toltec high priest who took the name of Quetzalcoatl, a refined teacher of the civilized arts. The even fiercer Aztecs also worshiped Quetzalcoatl, or the Feathered Serpent, while drenching altars with human hearts offered to their war god. The pre-Columbian cosmos was a mingling of light and dark, blood and flowers. The mixture persists in modern Mexico.

The early friars were properly horrified by pagan human sacrifices and zealously implanted the True Faith, with fire and sword when necessary. At Cholula, a two-hour drive from Mexico City, you can see the energetic succession of religions from the church atop the largest Indian pyramid. There are enough bricks in the Cholula pyramid to cover an expanse twice as large as the Place de la Concorde to a level double the height of the Louvre. From its peak you see a hundred churches and chapels, each built on the site of a pagan shrine. "It was a sanitary precaution, a process of magical disinfection," remarked Aldous Huxley, who made an awed, if not pious, survey of Cholula's multitude of churches.

But the old gods linger still, especially to the south, in Oaxaca and the Maya realm. A three-day trip is necessary for going to Oaxaca to see the spectacular ruins of Monte Albán and the smaller, only a trifle less interesting, site of Mitla (I estimate that all the sites mentioned up to now would take a week to see). What makes Oaxaca notable is the continued and vital presence of the Zapotecs, the outgoing and gregarious tribe whose ancestors built Monte Albán and Mitla.

Monte Albán is a large complex of ruins—pyramids, a ball court, an ob-



TEN MEXICAN SITES

Name	Interest	Setting	Comment
Chichen Itza (cheeCHEN eetSAH)	• • •	• • •	A vast complex seventy-five miles east of Merida; a visit of two or three days essential.
Cholula (chohLOOlah)	•	•	Immense pyramid seventy-five miles east of Mexico City; interesting town, Puebla, nearby.
Cuicuilco (kweeKWEELcoh)	•	•	Near National University in Mexico City; early circular temple; en route to Cuernavaca.
Mitla (MEEtlah)	• •	• •	Twenty-four miles southeast of Oaxaca; famous for stone lace on walls; "oldest tree in world" en route.
Monte Alban (MONTay alBAN)	• • •	• • •	Six miles southwest of Oaxaca; memorable sunset view of great, classic Zapotec site.
Palenque (palENkay)	• • •	• • •	Eighty miles southeast of Villahermosa; overnight stay imperative at Maya city embedded in emerald jungle.
Teotihuacan (tayoteewahCAHN)	• • •	• •	Thirty miles northeast of Mexico City; full day needed to see pyramids, houses of oldest American city.
Tula (TOOlah)	• •	• •	Fifty-five miles north of Mexico City; ancient Toltec capital with giant sculptured warriors; important monastery of Actopán nearby.
Uxmal (OOSHmahl)	• • •	• •	Fifty-eight miles south of Merida; incomparable Maya ruins; nearby sites are Labná, Kabah, Sayil.
Xochicalco (zoecheeCAHLcoh)	• •	• •	Twenty-four miles from Cuernavaca; lofty array of temples on hillside; near showpiece hotel Vista Hermosa.

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servatory, and burial vaults—planted on a hilltop southwest of the lime-green city of Oaxaca. As you clamber around the site, youngsters with enormous charm hawk *idolitos*, tiny figurines of suspect provenance, probably made last week. Classic Monte Albán rose at about the same time as Teotihuacán and perished as mysteriously, around A.D. 900, when the site was abandoned by the Zapotecs. Later, it was occupied by a new tribe, the Mixtecs, the supreme goldsmiths of ancient Mexico. Evidence of Mixtec skill came to light in 1932 when a trove of 300 superb pieces came to light, the richest such find in the New World.

When Monte Albán was abandoned, the Zapotecs founded a new capital at Mitla, a site a few hour's drive from Oaxaca. Here the style is a surprise. There is a tidy compactness at Mitla, rather than the incredible spaciousness of the old capital, as if in retreating the Zapotecs were looking inward even in their architecture. Most unforgettable are the walls, brocaded with 100,000 small stones into intricate tiny motifs—indeed, one could compile a book solely on the marvelous Mexican obsession with walls, taking the form, at Mitla, of a tesserae fugue.

In the Maya area—the final stop—you need at least ten days (two weeks would be better) to see the three supreme sites, Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Palenque. In the Maya area, as nowhere else in Mexico, you confront the paramount riddle of pre-Columbian times—the collapse of the great classic civilizations, which flowered at Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, and scores of Maya centers. The fall was the greater in the Maya region because no other pre-Columbian people scaled such heights—the Maya was the only New World culture to develop what can be called a true form of writing (they also hit upon the concept of zero and the decimal system while Europe still groped in the Dark Ages).

I know of no ruin more dramatic than the temples and pyramids of Palenque, which from a distance look like carved ivory mounted on green velvet. Here you find every token of civilization—superb stucco bas-reliefs, buildings of Grecian grace, tablets inscribed with man's most intriguing script—and yet Palenque has been populated chiefly by monkeys since around A.D. 900. (Palenque is reach-

able from Villahermosa, capital of Tabasco, by car or plane; I would recommend the latter, and a stay of two or three days.)

After the classic Maya civilization fell, there was a regrouping in which survivors continued to inhabit some of the old centers and cultivate the old arts. But it was an epilogue, and at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal—two centers in Yucatán that persisted until the

Chac, the rain god of the Classic Maya, was a benevolent deity whose face adorned many buildings. Below, the curling noses of three Chac masks jut from a corner of the Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá.

arrival of the Spaniards—you can see the deterioration that set in when the Classic Maya became post-Classic Maya. This is notably so at Chichén Itzá, where Toltec invaders from the north grafted their own esthetic notions on an old Maya center, engraving grisly skulls everywhere. And at Uxmal the classic Maya architecture of the Palace of the Governors presides like a shaming ghost over later, inferior works. There are luxury hotels at both sites and perhaps too many tourists. One sometimes feels that North Americans could benefit from just a bit of the Mexican obsession with solitude. But that is another problem—and another story. □



"visit me with safety"

The old gods of the Lacandones are still alive, but retreating.

BY RICHARD A. COWAN



Far up the Río Usumacinta, well past the modern city of Villahermosa and the ancient ruins of Palenque in the Mexican state of Chiapas, lies Metzabok, a tiny settlement of Lacandone Mayas. There is a place where the old gods of the Mayas still live, their privacy virtually undisturbed by foreign visitors.

Early in the twentieth century Alfred M. Tozzer, an archeologist from Harvard University, journeyed to the Lacandone area in search of living survivals from the classic Mayan civilization, whose remnants he was excavating. He found few parallels to his work in the structure of Lacandone society or in the buildings they inhabited. These people were probably always *massewal*, or common folk, living in tiny communities of brush huts and organizing their lives solely through family ties to various animal totems. But Tozzer learned that to an amazing degree the Lacandones still followed the same religious rituals and customs once practiced by the priests who climbed the pyramids of the magnificent Mayan cities that were mysteriously deserted more than 1,000 years ago.

True, Kukulcan—the famous feath-

Pepe, the old man who preserves his tribe's ancient rituals, prepares sacrifices of incense, food, and drink to the gods of the Lacandone Mayans.

ered serpent—had become just a mythical snake that must symbolically die at every eclipse of the sun. And the Lacandones had reduced the ornateness of the many-tiered Mayan heaven to a land little more complex than their own settlements. Yet, like the classic Mayas of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Tikal, they still spoke of how the peoples of the world were created of baked clay and of how the gods gave them corn seeds made from the stars of the Milky Way and of how the world would end in darkness when the jaguars of Cisin, the god of the underworld, would get loose and eat the sun and the moon.

Hachacyum, the creator; his wife, Akna; Metzabok, the god of rain; and all the other old gods still lived among the Lacandones, albeit with new or simplified attributes. And it turned out that they were still worshiped with a ceremony that extended backward through Mayan tradition at least to the heyday of the great Mayan cities.

When Tozzer visited the Lacandones, he discovered that each god was honored with food and incense

placed in his own special *incensario*, or god pot. God pots are small clay bowls, modeled on one side of the outer surface into a grotesque face. They are identical to artifacts found at the Cave of the Winds, close to the ruins of Chichén Itzá. According to most archeologists, they form part of a timeless Mayan religious pattern.

Even now the Lacandones of Metzabok worship with god pots very similar to those excavated at the ancient ruins. Each pot is the servant of a distinct god. The Lacandones hope that once the spirit of the pot has accepted an offering the spirit will bear the offering away to the god who is its master. Inside every bowl is the small stone idol of the true god of the god pot. Although the Lacandones remake their god pots every year in a sacred renewal ceremony, these stone medallions supposedly have been passed down from earliest times. They symbolically link the Lacandones of today both to past generations and to their present gods.

In every Lacandone settlement there is one old man who remembers all of his tribe's religious lore. At Metzabok it is Pepe who places incense to burn in the bowls of the god pots and who pours food and drink on the protruding lips of the pots. The heat produced by the burning incense vaporizes the provisions. Their fumes, as well as the smoke of the incense, travel upward to the skies. Thus the spirit of the god pot carries food to its master. The suppliant hopes that the god will be pleased and will visit the settlement, bringing good health and long life. Throughout the ages Maya Indians have shared their bounty with their gods, knowing that only if they make the gods happy can they ensure their own success.

Pepe chants as he feeds the gods. He describes what ritual is being performed and asks for well-being, for freedom from pain. He ends with a recitation of the names of the Lacandones for whom the offering is being made. Feeding the pots is a festival, not a solemn affair. The old man drinks native beer as he chants and feeds the gods. Sometimes his speech becomes slurred, but he retains a constant, slow rhythm. The other men join in his singing, for all Lacandone men eat and drink with their gods. They never stand apart from them:

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