

Gringodog Travels, 2008
Oaxaca and Points North
with Bill and Jane Wilkinson and dogs Milo and Pancho Villa
Copyright 2009, by Jane Wilkinson. All rights reserved.

Part I – Arriving in Las Etlas

In early 2008, we spent more than a month in San Pablo Etla, a semi-rural area about six miles from the city of Oaxaca, and we enjoyed every minute of it. Friends from New Mexico and Seattle visited us there, which made for great fun. According to Bill's calculations, we spent 25 days on excursions, either into Oaxaca centro, or to areas around Oaxaca that included the Zapotec artisan pueblos to archeological sites (Mitla, Monte Alban and some lesser known sites), the mountains of the Sierra del Norte, and to colonial churches/ex-convents. We rented a lovely house on an acre of land from two NYC women who stocked it with a nice collection of indigenous art and handicrafts

Oaxaca is one of Mexico's poorest states (per capita income is about half of the more northern states) and poverty is considerably more visible here than elsewhere. The most significant industries in Oaxaca are tourism, remittances from the U.S., and Mescal production. The political uprising of a year ago paralyzed the tourism industry, put thousands of people out of work and many businesses closed their doors. The tourists are back, but not to the previous level, and the political situation is uncertain. As in Chiapas and other southern areas, there are as many Euringo (i.e., Euro-Gringos) tourists as North Americans. For example, at the Mitla archeological site, we chatted it up with an entire busload of very cheerful Danes and a group of about six young men from the Netherlands.

Our semi-rural neighborhood was fascinating. Although better off Mexicans and ex-pats are gentrifying it, many of our neighbors lived in adobe brick and dirt-floor huts. Neighbors kept goats, donkeys, sheep, horses, chickens, turkeys and, of course, numerous dogs on their little patch of land. They also grew things, but since winter is the dry season, we saw only a few irrigated gardens.

Our neighbors were friendly and used to the ex-pats scattered around the area. I stopped to chat with several of them – my Spanish has improved a lot over the last few years – and Milo turned into a genuine street dog. He was able to deflect the loud and aggressive barking of dogs defending their imaginary turf comprising the street fronting their dwelling. The dogs looked scary, but at heart they are all wimps, so I didn't find them bothersome. Pancho felt otherwise. He would not walk with us unless he was leashed and under our protection. The two Chows above us were particularly menacing. Actually, there were Chow-like dogs all over the neighborhood. Someone, sometime, brought a Chow or two into the neighborhood, and now every other dog has a strong dose of Chow in it..

Because our fenced acre had no really close neighbors (except for a small Evangelical Baptist church right above us), we let the dogs bark as they pleased – that is, they regularly joined the chorus of barking dogs and other animal sounds that echoed over the hillside. They managed a lot of exercise running up and down the property barking at real or imagined passersby (human, vehicular, and animal – mostly burros). We left them behind on several of our outings and found they were pretty tired out by the time we returned. Finally, we discovered that they'd been escaping through a small hole in the organ cactus and barbwire fence that surrounded about a quarter of the property. (The rest was surrounded by a gaily painted adobe wall, which at one point, Milo figured out how to climb and perch on top of for a view of all the goings on in the vicinity). At night, particularly on weekends and holidays, loud music and the ever-present cohetes (rockets) kept things lively.

One weekend we heard a band and rockets growing louder and louder, until we realize that a parade was taking place on the dirt road right in front of our house. It was time for the annual town festival, and the parade included some floats, a complement of pretty girls and people following behind on foot and in cars. On Sunday morning—at 7:00 a.m., another band and the firing of cohetes awakened us. This was a smaller parade featuring a religious figure.

I became fascinated by the cohetes. They are all over Mexico, but they seem to be more popular in the southern areas. They can be very annoying when they are close by because they are very loud and go off with out warning. Milo is petrified of them and generally ends up on one of our laps. Pancho is more sanguine. Supposedly they are lit only on religious occasions or other special occasions, such as one's birthday or a national holiday. I suspect,

however, that they are set off for simple amusement also. It occurred to me that I have never seen cohetes for sale in stores or the mercados. As it turns out, they are homemade with gunpowder stuffed into cardboard tubes, which in turn are stuffed into about a 24-inch piece of bamboo-like grass, which is used as kind of a fuse. They are often made and set off by coheteros--people who can be identified by their missing digits. Sometimes they are made into a complicated wheel and spoke arrangement so that they fire off in rapid succession.

An interesting exhibition that recently opened was located near us, in San Augustin ETLA. A former textile mill had been beautifully renovated to house a weaving exhibition, and below that was a smaller mill that had been retooled as a papermaking school. The Oaxacan artist, Francisco Toledo, had financed these endeavors. The area seems to have numerous springs, and therefore was green with lovely gardens, unlike most of the winter-dry Valley of Oaxaca. The landscaping was as impressive as the buildings.



Textile Museum Grounds – San Augustin ETLA

In Search of Mountain Art

We made several excursions into the mountains of Oaxaca. I instigated the first one after being spurred on by a Seattle newspaper article about an artist who returned to his indigenous mountain village (Teococuilco) following three years in Paris on a scholarship. He found his village half deserted. Most of the male population had gone to “el Norte” or “al otro lado,” meaning the U.S. He decided to “repopulate” the town with statues, 2301 in all, of those departed, and was in the process of doing so after receiving a \$100,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. We drove three hours over dirt roads to this high mountain village, which clung precariously to the slopes. Alas, our reward was nary a single sculpture. Our first inquiries met with puzzled looks, but a few people knew about them, and one woman pointed out the artist’s family home. Apparently, all the sculptures were on tour to places with a bigger audience. One denizen of this community dryly commented, “Statues? Why would a town like this need statues? Good point, we thought.

On another excursion, we went into the Sierra Madre del Norte, where a serious effort is underway to develop ecotourism. Modest hostels (each called “Tourist Yu’us”) have been built and are administered by each village. An equally modest system of hiking and mountain biking paths also have been developed. We picked up a young male Belgian hitchhiker and his female traveling companion, who was Czech. Later we befriended a French backpacker in a little restaurant in a mountain village. He seemed a little lonely and delighted to have someone to talk to, especially since his Spanish was lousy. A worksite in the town square was lined up with old oil or paint buckets waiting to have the letters “*basura*” (garbage) stenciled out. Seeing trash pails hung alongside the roads, in the villages and even in the forests, was a welcome departure from the norm in Mexico. To drive home the point, signs were posted all over threatening to do horrible things to litterers. The forests were mostly pine, but we were surprised to see Madronas (a tree we associate with Puget Sound), and even more surprisingly, stands of Douglas Fir--supposedly the species’ southernmost reach.