

Oaxaca



Oaxaca... The concussive, guttural name alone conjures images of swirling, visceral mountain vistas, proud and resilient indigenous enclaves, laissez-faire beach towns, remarkable cuisines, mole and mezcal – a spirit and essence far removed from the glitter and glam of the coasts to the north. At the heart of this ancient southern state, pronounced *wah-hah-kah*, is Oaxaca city. This delightful capital dates back to pre-Columbian times, and to this day the mishmash of indigenous groups and settlers that call this land home retain many of the traditions of their forebears. In the hills that encircle the city, you'll find numerous pre-Columbian ruins, including the region's largest archaeological site at Monte Albán.

Heading down from the capital, travelers arrive at the lyrical and rhythmic Oaxacan coast. Even the biggest draw here, Puerto Escondido, retains a peaced-out cool. Further south is a free-loving series of beach towns, including Puerto Ángel, Zipolite and Mazunte. While surfing is one of the region's biggest draws, there's plenty to do for everyone. And a visit to the numerous lagoons that dot the coast is not to be missed.

But the spirit of Oaxaca extends well beyond the coast. A visit to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, one of the last strongholds of the Zapotec people, reveals the ancient heartbeat that keeps this area as vital today as it was more than a thousand years ago.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting high – on life – as you let the winds of the gods blow past you beachside in the chillier-than-chiva town of **Zipolite** (p249), before spending an afternoon with the turtles at nearby **Mazunte** (p253)
- Rambling through the labyrinthine markets of **Oaxaca city** (p228) to pick up all the fixings – grasshoppers, chocolate and chilipeppers – for an afternoon picnic at the ancient Zapotec capital of **Monte Albán** (p232)
- Going big at Mexico's very own Pipeline at **Puerto Escondido** (p235), or simply sitting on shore and marveling at the moves and bravado of the toned gods and goddesses charging these leviathan waves
- Skipping across the waves to the desolate bays around **Bahías de Huatulco** (p255), where pristine beaches, and prolific plant and animal life prevail
- Taking a week away from the travails of modern life to study yoga in **Puerto Ángel** (p248), Spanish in **Oaxaca city** (p219), or the currents of modern Zapotec life in **Tehuantepec** (p263) – you are sure to leave the wiser



■ AVERAGE JANUARY DAILY HIGH:
OAXACA CITY: 25°C | 77°F,
PUERTO ESCONDIDO: 32°C | 90°F;

■ AVERAGE JULY DAILY HIGH:
OAXACA CITY: 28°C | 82°F,
PUERTO ESCONDIDO: 35°C | 95°F

History

The Valles Centrales (Central Valleys) have always been the hub of Oaxacan life, and the pre-Hispanic cultures here reached heights rivaling those of central Mexico. The hilltop city of Monte Albán became the center of the Zapotec culture, which extended its control over much of Oaxaca by conquest, peaking between AD 300 and 700. Monte Albán declined suddenly, for reasons still unknown, and by about 750 it was deserted, as were many other Zapotec sites in the Valles Centrales. From about 1200, the surviving Zapotecs came under the growing power of the Mixtecs, renowned potters and metalsmiths from Oaxaca's northwest uplands. Mixtec and Zapotec cultures became entangled in the Valles Centrales before the Aztecs conquered them in the 15th and early 16th centuries.

The Spaniards had to send at least four expeditions before they felt safe enough to found the city of Oaxaca in 1529. Cortés magnificently donated large parts of the Valles Centrales to himself and was officially named *Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca*. In colonial times, the indigenous population dropped disastrously as a result of introduced diseases and mistreatment by the Spanish. The population of the Mixteca (the mountainous western region) is thought to have fallen from 700,000 at the time of the Spanish arrival to about 25,000 in 1700. Rebellions continued into the 20th century, but the indigenous peoples rarely formed a serious threat.

Benito Juárez, the great reforming leader of mid-19th-century Mexico, was a Zapotec. He served two terms as Oaxaca state governor before being elected Mexico's president in 1861.

Through the close of the 19th century, tobacco planters set up virtual slave plantations in northern Oaxaca, and indigenous communal lands were commandeered by foreign and mestizo (of mixed European and American Indian ancestry) coffee planters. After the Mexican Revolution, plantations were dissolved and about 300 *ejidos* (peasant land-holding cooperatives) were set up, effectively returning lands to the people who worked them. However, land ownership and poverty – this is one of Mexico's poorest states – remain a source of conflict even today. Oaxaca made international headlines in 2006 when a teachers' strike (p216) boiled over, leading to a seven-month state of siege in the downtown area of Oaxaca city. With the teachers' strike

long gone, Oaxaca city is trying to regain lost ground, but tourism figures remain at about 60% of their pre-siege numbers.

The Land

The Sierra Madre del Sur (average height 2000m) runs parallel to the Pacific coast. It meets the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca (average height 2500m), which runs down from Mexico's central volcanic belt, roughly in the center of the state. Between them lie the three Valles Centrales, which converge at the city of Oaxaca. In Oaxaca city December and January are the coldest months, with average lows between 8°C and 9°C and highs around 25°C; March through May are the hottest months, with average highs around 30°C. The valleys are warm and dry, with most rain falling between June and September. The coast and low-lying areas are hotter and a bit wetter.

Situated in a region where temperate and tropical climatic zones and several mountain ranges meet, Oaxaca has spectacularly varied landscapes and a biodiversity greater than any other Mexican state. The inland highlands still have cloud forests and big stands of oak and pine, while lower-lying areas and Pacific-facing slopes support deciduous tropical forest.

Internet Resources

Oaxaca's Tourist Guide (www.oaxaca-travel.com) is an excellent photo-filled website with everything from information on beaches and hotels to regional recipes and biographies of famous Oaxacans. **Oaxaca's Forum** (<http://bbs.oaxaca.com>) is a bulletin board where you can look for rented accommodation or shared transportation or ask any old question.

Dangers & Annoyances

Buses and other vehicles traveling along isolated stretches of highway, including the coastal Hwy 200 and Hwy 175 from Oaxaca city to Pochutla, are occasionally stopped and robbed. Though incidents have decreased in recent years, it's still advisable not to travel at night. Robberies aside, this is a good rule of thumb in all of Mexico, particularly on the winding mountain roads connecting the coast to Oaxaca city.

Getting There & Around

Oaxaca city has good bus links with Mexico City and Puebla to the north, and a few daily services to/from Veracruz, Villahermosa,