

Oaxaca State



There's a particular, captivating magic in the mountains of Oaxaca (*wah-hah-kah*), a state dotted with long-isolated indigenous villages, lined by a coast legendary for surfers and backpacking beach bums, and host to one of Mexico's most charming and vibrant colonial capitals. Here travelers find Mexican life that has almost vanished in more accessible regions, evident in the patter of indigenous languages, intricate arts and crafts traditions, the mountain passes of the Sierra Madres, and stunning, newly discovered archaeological sites. Just as Oaxaca lulls you into the leisurely pace of the past, there's always something to jar you back into the present: the burst of savory spices from the region's inimitable cuisine, a gripping exhibit of Mexico's modern-art vanguard or the report of a firecracker announcing one of the state's ubiquitous festivals, which rank among the most colorful in the country.

Beautiful, colonial Oaxaca city – the state's center in every way – is a fascinating and hospitable cultural, geographical and political hub. Around the city extend Oaxaca's three Valles Centrales (Central Valleys), always the center of civilization in this part of Mexico and today still full of bustling indigenous markets, spectacular pre-Hispanic ruins and villages full of creative artisans. North of here are the forested highlands of the Sierra Norte, scene of successful community-tourism ventures enabling visitors to hike, bike, climb rocks and ride horses amid some of Mexico's most unusual landscapes. Across the mountains to the south is Oaxaca's coast, with its sandy Pacific beaches, waters full of dolphins, turtles and fish, and lagoons teeming with birds. Many of the beaches are empty, but there's a handful of towns and villages that will make any traveler happy – Puerto Escondido with its world-class surf; the planned but beautiful and relaxed resort of Bahías de Huatulco; and the sybarite's delights of Puerto Ángel, Zipolite, San Agustínillo and Mazunte.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Indulge in the culture, color and culinary delights of colonial **Oaxaca city** (p643)
- Hike through otherworldly cloud forests between the remote villages of the **Pueblos Mancomunados** (p674)
- Soak up the surf scene at mellow **Puerto Escondido** (p678)
- Chill out for longer than you planned at fabled travelers' hangout **Zipolite** (p692)
- Get a feel for Zapotec village life at the markets and fiestas of the **Valles Centrales** (p664)



■ BIGGEST CITY: OAXACA CITY
(POPULATION 270,000)

■ HIGHEST PEAK: CERRO NUBE FLAN
(3750M)

History

Pre-Hispanic cultures in Oaxaca's Valles Centrales (Central Valleys) reached heights rivaling those of central Mexico. The hilltop city of Monte Albán became the center of the Zapotec culture, conquering much of Oaxaca and peaking between AD 300 and 700. Monte Albán then declined suddenly, and from about 1200 the Zapotecs came under the growing dominance of the Mixtecs from Oaxaca's northwest uplands. Mixtecs and Zapotecs alike were conquered by the Aztecs 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. The indigenous population declined quickly and disastrously: the population of the Mixteca in the west is thought to have fallen from 700,000 when the Spanish arrived to about 25,000 by 1700. Unsuccessful indigenous rebellions continued into the 20th century.

Benito Juárez, the great reforming leader of 19th-century Mexico, was a Zapotec from the Oaxaca mountains. He served two terms as Oaxaca's state governor, then as president of Mexico from 1861 until his death in 1872 (see p650). Juárez appointed Porfirio Díaz, son of a Oaxaca horse trainer, as Oaxaca state governor in 1862. Díaz rose to control Mexico with an iron fist from 1877 to 1910, bringing the country into the industrial age but also fostering corruption, repression and, eventually, the Revolution in 1910.

After the Revolution about 300 *ejidos* (communal landholdings) were set up in Oaxaca, but land ownership and wealth distribution remain sources of conflict today. Tourism thrives in and around Oaxaca city and in a few places on the coast, but underdevelopment still prevails in the backcountry. The violent confrontations between the authoritarian state government and opposition organizations in Oaxaca in 2006 and 2007 highlighted the gulf between Oaxaca's rich, powerful minority and its poor, disempowered majority.

Climate

The Valles Centrales are warm and dry, with most rain falling between June and September. The average high in Oaxaca city ranges from 25°C in December and January (when lows average about 8°C) to about 30°C in March through May. The coast is generally warmer and can be oppressively humid, averag-

ing some 330 annual days of sunshine and temperatures between 27°C and 32°C.

Parks & Reserves

Combining both dry and damp mountain ranges with low-lying northern, eastern and southern fringes, Oaxaca has greater biological diversity than any other state in Mexico, but little of this is under official protection. Two smallish national parks – 142-sq-km Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua (p687) and 119-sq-km Huatulco (p700) – protect coastal areas. The Reserva de la Biosfera Tehuacán-Cuicatlán spreads over the semi-arid tropical ecosystems of northwestern Oaxaca and adjacent southeast Puebla state.

Dangers & Annoyances

Buses and other vehicles traveling isolated stretches of highway, including the coastal Hwy 200 and Hwy 175 from Oaxaca city to Pochutla, have occasionally been stopped and robbed. Though incidents have decreased in recent years, it's still advisable to use caution if traveling at night.

Getting There & Around

By air, Oaxaca is mostly served with connections through Mexico City, but direct service exists between Oakland and Oaxaca city by discount provider Volaris. Continental Airlines also flies direct from Houston to two points in the state, Oaxaca city and Bahías de Huatulco. Small planes hop from Oaxaca city to Puerto Escondido and Huatulco.

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

TOP THREE THINGS TO DO WITH TIME ON YOUR SIDE IN OAXACA (APART FROM CHILLING AT A BEACH)

- Hike from village to village through the forests of the **Sierra Norte** (p674)
- Ride a bike from Oaxaca to Puerto Escondido with **Bicicletas Pedro Martínez** (p651)
- Spend a few days at Teotitlán del Valle's **Casa Sagrada** (p668), riding horses, hiking, watching birds, learning Oaxacan cooking and taking a *temascal* (steam bath)