

Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo

by

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“When I was a boy, Ixtapa was a large coconut plantation,” Juan said as our ancient bus bumped along a road passing rows upon rows of coconut palms. We had left the modern buildings and conveniences of Ixtapa thirty minutes before and except for our bus moaning and groaning as it traversed the countryside, we were alone among the palm trees.

“I grew up and became a fisherman,” Juan continued, “and when the government created the town of Ixtapa (names means the white place) to bring tourists to the state of Guerrero, I took people out in my boat to snorkel or scuba dive. I learned English from the visitors to Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo.”

These two small towns (part of Guerrero’s Sun Triangle) are north of Acapulco on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Zihuatanejo was originally a fishing village and its people still harvest fish from the sea. I saw their market when I visited the town but Zihuatanejo now caters to tourists so has a vibrant night life and the outdoor markets sell everything from hand-painted clay bowls to lustrous silver. The deep harbour is home to the fishing fleet as well as many tour boats and cruise ships. Tours usually involve a trip to Ixtapa Island where one can indulge in water sports such as snorkeling, kayaking, wave running, and swimming.

The bus’s gears protested as we turned onto an even bumpier side road. A passenger commented he wouldn’t be surprised if the bus died and left us stranded in

the middle of nowhere. “And, I don’t even like coconuts,” he added, waving at the palm trees surrounding us. There was nervous laughter among those who heard him.

“We’ll be seeing the pyramid soon,” Juan said as the bus hit a trough in the road. I nearly flew from my seat and hoped I’d live to see this relic from the past. I had always been fascinated by Mexican pre-history but this was the first time I would actually see one of their ancient pyramids.

“The people of this area were influenced by the Olmec culture and we did have a stone head here but someone stole it. No one knows who.” Juan shrugged his shoulders as if it say, ‘that is life’. The colossal heads of the Olmec were renown and I was a little disappointed we’d not see one in-situ.

“What we will be seeing are the remains of a culture that lived in this area around 500 BCE. No one knows where they came from or why they vanished although most credit the Aztecs for wiping them out. The Aztecs controlled this area until the Spanish arrived.”

The bus jolted to a stop. I peered out the window but could not see the familiar stone blocks that characterizes Mayan temples.

“We have to walk through the forest from here,” Juan said.

“Reminds me of hiking in the mountains,” I said as we hit the steep trail following the line of people snaking up the path.

“It’s a lot shorter,” my husband, Glen, replied pointing to the top of the hill. After wiping the sweat on his brow, he added, “and a lot hotter.”

The average winter temperatures in Guerrero range between 20° and 30° C and today it was thirty-two with high humidity. This made walking difficult and several in our group suffered as we scrambled up the crude trail.

A giant cactus greeted us at the top. Juan said it was over 400 years old. Older still was the pictograph he showed us on an eroded piece of stone. A rough corrugated tin roof protected it from the elements.

“This stone tells us that a king was buried in this pyramid,” Juan said, gently following the lines of what was obviously a human head. “We know he was a king by this headdress.”

I strained to see the etchings of the king’s crown. Juan then pointed to a series of zigzagging lines. “These are the steps down into the pyramid. We don’t know how far they descend. Years ago, when I first led this tour, a man from the United States said he was a caver and would return to explore the tomb. When he did, I went down with him. We wore masks to breathe because the air was foul with bat guano.

“We found the steps but when we started down them, we heard a voice telling us to go back.”

“A ghost?” A lady from Kansas asked.

Juan shrugged his shoulders. “Who knows? We didn’t listen to the voice thinking it was a trick. Minutes later our flashlights went out. It was very dark so we had to go back to the surface to replace the batteries.

“So down the steps we went again. Again the voice warned us. Again our flashlights went out. It was very eerie. Since we could not see without flashlights, we gave up. No one else has tried to explore the pyramid since then.”

“You keep telling us about this pyramid but where is it?” A Texan drawled.

“You are standing on it, sir.”

We all looked at our feet. We stood on a hill with trees and cactus surrounding us as well as several large boulders. It could have been any hill, anywhere.

“See these boulders?” Juan led us towards them. “These rocks don’t belong here. That’s how archeologists knew this was a pyramid. These rocks come from far away and were brought here to build the pyramid. Come, let me show you the tomb.”

We followed Juan along the path until we came to a pile of colossal stones.

“We can see other pyramids from here, if you care to climb these rocks.”

I did and he pointed toward the two hills opposite me, covered in dry brown brush.

“More tombs,” he said.

At the feet of these pyramid-hills were miles and miles of coconut palm trees and in the distance I saw the shimmer of the ocean.

“They brought these boulders from the sea. No one knows how they did it.”

After scrambling back down, I re-joined the group. Most did not care to risk their necks to see more palm trees.

“Now we must go further down. But first, see this,” and Juan pointed to a tree with particularly nasty looking thorns. “Don’t touch these trees. Inside each thorn is a fire ant. Their sting makes you feel like you’re on fire. Can be deadly to some.”

I shivered. I react to black ant bites so I gave the tree a wide berth. I wasn’t the only one.

The path to the tomb was steep and the cave entrance a narrow slice between two boulders. I peeked in and saw a colony of bats clinging to the ceiling. Juan said we

could explore the cave, crawl through the tunnel, and see the staircase, so my husband ventured in. The thought of what creepy crawlies might lurk in that passageway made me stay outside.

Glen returned a few minutes later.

“I’d have gotten stuck,” he said. “The floor is covered in guano and you’d have to crawl through that to get to the tunnel. It was so narrow that no one in this group could have slid through it. Besides, who’d want to sit in the bus covered in bat guano.”

As we scaled the hill to return to the bus. Juan stopped us again.

“Look! A tarantula!”

My heart leapt to my mouth. I have an inherent fear of spiders. Yet, here was one of the largest spiders in the world and I had to photograph it.

Earlier in the week, I had faced my fear of heights on a zipline tour so perhaps staring at a spider wouldn’t be so bad. As it turned out, the ‘zipping’ part of the adventure tour was fun but climbing the tigtropes, unstable slatted bridges, and wobbly boards proved to be too much. I hyperventilated on each challenging climb to reach the zipline stations despite knowing two ropes secured my harness to sturdy cables. Now, I was within inches of the spider I had feared most of my life.

I quickly took my photo and moved on, thrilled I had done something I’d never thought possible.

Our next stop was an archeological dig. The week before a tourist had twisted their ankle near the excavation so the scientists banned us from seeing their dig. Juan would not let this setback ruin our experience. He headed straight across a farmer’s

field to another hill upon which stood a ramshackle house. On the way, we passed a calf munching weeds, a stand of dried corn, and a pile of sesame stalks.

On the side of the hill, Juan gathered us beside a boulder with dish-like carvings hollowed into its surface. He waved his hand in the direction of the farmer's field we'd just crossed. "This was once a ball court."

I gasped. The infamous ball courts of the Aztecs?

Juan nodded. "Yes, this is where the game of the gods was played. See these cups in the rock. They were filled with oil and lit. They also held blood. See the hill over there? There is another rock with cups there.

"The name Zihuatlanjo means place of the women. It is an Aztec name for the people who lived here. It was a matrilineal society, run by women and they believed in blood sacrifice."

"Probably to keep the men in line," someone said. We laughed.

"This rock was used in the sacrifice performed after the game of the gods. Here some of the winners would give up their lives for their gods."

"Winners?" I asked.

Juan nodded. "These men wanted to die. The shedding of human blood meant rebirth in this society. Those selected would be honoured to die."

"I'd always make sure I was on the losing team," my husband muttered. All who heard him nodded.

Lunch was by the ocean. Fish freshly caught and torillas warm from the oven. Before we ate, wandering vendors besieged us selling colourful bowls, wood carvings, and shell or coconut jewellery. It was our first experience with these street sellers as our

hotel's beach was cut off from the main town of Ixtapa by a rocky ridge. This prevented beach vendors plying their wares to sunbathing 'gringos'. A firm 'no' and a shake of the head usually sent them off to find another customer.

Back on the bus, we bumped our way through rural Mexico to visit a roof tile-making venture. The Mexican-Indian man had given up his siesta to show us how they created the tiles used all over Mexico. It was like watching a dancer perform the same series of steps over and over--beautiful movements done perfectly every time. He explained how they dug the clay from a nearby pit, then worked it with water until it was soft. He then slapped it into a rectangular mold, scraped off the excess, and slid the slab of clay onto a rounded piece of metal. He then lay the curved tile on the ground in the sun to dry. Later, he would stack the tiles into a pyramid and light a hot fire beneath them to fire them. He could do 500 tiles in one day.

Back at our hotel, the Las Brisas resort, we sat on the beach and drank cervezas (Mexican beer) and enjoyed the sunset. Paradise has a name and it is Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo but the area is more than a sun destination. It offers a taste of rural Mexico, a chance to see pre-history as archeologists peel back the layers of time, and an opportunity to move outside one's comfort zone and experience life!

If you go

Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo website -- www.ixtapa-zihuatanejo.com/

Las Brisas Ixtapa -- www.brisas.com.mx

Sunnyside Tours (website in Spanish but Director knows English) --

www.sunnyside.com.mx/

To view my photographs, go to www.vashti.com/ixtapa