

True People

CHIAPAS, MEXICO | SEPTEMBER 2011

Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, shares a border with Guatemala.



Though this is a very poor region, ruins of once-majestic Mayan cities such as Palenque, Yaxchilan, Bonampak, Tonina and Chinkultic are here, and this proud heritage still exerts an influence. I was intrigued to learn of unique gastrophilanthropic customs that endure among Chiapas' large Mayan population, including tribes called the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Zoque, Chol, and Tojolabal.

Much of Chiapas' history involves the subjugation of these native peoples, and their occasional rebellions. For instance, the city where I spent most of my time, San Cristobal de Las Casas, is named for Father Bartolome de Las Casas, a Dominican priest in the late 1500's and early 1600's who tried to protect Mayans from the ravages of Spanish Colonialism. More recently, the state suffered through the 1994 Zapatista uprising, through which revolutionaries eventually succeeded in obtaining new rights from the Mexican government for citizens of Chiapas.

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When he learned I was headed to San Cristobal, a Mexican friend urged me to stay at a small hotel called Casa Na Bolom. A former Catholic monastery, Casa Na Bolom was purchased in 1951 by a Dutch archeologist Frans Blom, and his Swiss photographer wife, Gertrude (who everyone called Trudi). Frans was born in Copenhagen in 1893, earned a degree in archeology from Harvard, and was a professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, when he first began traveling to Mexico in 1919, as a consultant to U.S. oil companies. Trekking through the rain

forest of Chiapas, he met Gertrude Duby, who was there taking photographs while researching and writing a series of articles on women who had fought with General Emiliano Zapata's army during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Once married, the Bloms spent the next half-century studying a particular Mayan tribe called the Lacondon. Frans and Trudi were among the first outsiders to come into contact with these people who, until then, had lived isolated and unknown, hidden by the dense La Selva Lacandona rain forest. The Bloms turned their home into a haven for these indigenous peoples when they came into town to sell their handicrafts or produce. Frans, who had the chiseled features of a matinee idol (he resembled Kirk Douglas), died in 1963. Trudi lived another thirty years, presiding over dinners at her almost comically long dining table where guests, visiting anthropologists, and Lacondon all gathered together. She was always ready to “trade” a home-cooked meal for news of what was occurring in the jungle.



Today, Casa Na Bolom is a hybrid of research center, museum, hotel and restaurant. Its exterior is painted a gorgeous orange-yellow; inside, wide stone patios are surrounded by covered colonnades, flowering trees, and pots of bougainvillea. On display are facsimiles of Frans' field notebooks and diaries, in which he carefully documented all he saw on

his journeys into the rain forest. Hallways are decorated with photographs of Lacondon Indians taken by Trudi, from the 1950's through the 1980's.

Also called *Hack Winik*, or “True People,” the Lacandon believe God created men out of clay, and then taught them how to live in the rain forest. Plants and animals are sacred gifts.

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Each Lacandon man is his own priest, and he builds a “God House,” or a temple area inside his dwelling. Worship centers around a “God Pot,” or incense chalice in which they burn offerings of corn, as well as chunks of tree resin called copal. As smoke from the God Pot carries their prayers up to the heavens, the Lacandon consume *balché*.

This inebriating beverage is made by mixing water and honey with roots from the *balché* tree, and allowing it to ferment. Thought to have magical powers, the faithful in ancient Mayan ceremonies administered *balché* by way of an enema to maximize its potent effect. Perhaps due to this unusual manner of consumption, Spanish invaders saw the devil lurking in *balché*, and quickly outlawed it.

This prohibition, and others, caused the Lacandon to flee ever deeper into the jungle, where they remained isolated from the outside world until after World War II. At this time, their peace was disturbed by the extraction of rain forest reserves, the discovery of Mayan ruin sites, and new agrarian land reforms dictated by the Mexican government. Some experts feel, though, that the single biggest factor in transforming the Lacandon was the arrival of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, in 1948.

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Now called SIL International, it is an evangelical Christian organization that’s based in the United States and whose main purpose is to translate The Bible into tribal languages. While some admire the group’s work in cultural anthropology, SIL has also attracted criticism and controversy. Its activities are seen as a thin cover for a secret agenda of proselytizing for Christianity, and fostering a more pro-U.S. stance around the world. Rare is the hotel that provides a guest with an eye-opening lesson in geopolitics and theocracy, but the small museum at Casa Na Bolom was just such a place.

The cultural anthropology I engaged in during my stay in Chiapas was of a decidedly more agnostic cast. And so, the following morning, I took a trip to the south of San Cristobal de Las Casas, where I spent the day at *La Abarrada*, a kind of camp-college that’s funded by the Mexican government. Poor people from anywhere in Chiapas can apply to come here and learn different trades, while they live, eat, and receive childcare if needed, for free. *La Abarrada* is a Spanish word that translates roughly as a defense to keep water off, or a barrier that holds something else back. In other words, by teaching people how to make a living, they’ll not be swept away by poverty.



Juan Mendez, age 30, who is a professor of textiles and weaving techniques, showed me about the campus. There is room for 200 students, who range in age from 16 up to 60. I was amazed at what a

cheerful and well-kept spot this was. Simple one-story cinderblock buildings, painted in vibrant shades of green and yellow, are spread out over many acres of meticulously-landscaped flatland. Tall ficus hedges are clipped precisely, then embellished with topiary designs of birds, cows, cats, and monkeys.

Long-dormant artisanal techniques are being revived here, as well as forgotten knowledge from this area’s nearly 5,000 years of agriculture. These ancient methods are combined with modern ideas such as the use of solar energy, building environmentally-friendly stoves, and composting. Another of *La Abarrada*’s goals is to encourage the participation of women in trades and activities once considered only for men, such as iron-working, carpentry, and electrical engineering. There were studios and out-buildings dedicated to the study of baking, leather work, sewing, and weaving, too.

This last is Juan’s speciality, and with obvious pride he showed off the various looms, explaining how different Mayan tribes around this valley in Chiapas each have their own special techniques.

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Most of the women work on “backstrap” looms, held in their laps, but braced by being lashed about their waists. Handicrafts like these, I realize, are no mere hobbies. On the contrary, they are a matter of life or death. Only if the weaving is good enough to sell, will its creator be able to eat.

Unfortunately, my visit coincided with the weekend of Mexican Independence Day, so most of the students were gone. However, Juan introduced me to two young women who had stayed on campus for the holiday. Both had the shy, giggling demeanor of village girls who were not much exposed to talking with strangers, much less a white man from America.



Chanuk Kimbor Chambor, age 27, was at the school for a three-month course to study typing. She wore a bright pink T-shirt that was clearly a reject from some part of the English-speaking world. Under the words “LOVE TEAM” was a misspelled gibberish that read, “Call-to-arms-for-chunkily-pebused her right to do good still mist definant.”

Chambor is from the village of Lacanjá Chansayab, where she grew up speaking Mayan, but she was also fluent in Spanish. Hearing the name of this town, I remembered what I’d learned from Casa Na Bolom’s museum, and I found myself wondering if her parents or grandparents had been converted to Christianity by missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Chambor had a rosary in one hand, and a cell phone in the other. She nervously fingered both, seemingly with equal reverence.

Her friend, Blanca Amelia Perez Sanches, age 20, was at the school for a three-month course in pastry making. Blanca speaks Tzeltal, and is from an even smaller village, Altamirano, which she told me was occupied by Zapatistas during the uprising of 1994 against the Mexican army. I wanted to learn more about the Zapatistas, but Juan hurried me off to meet one of the chefs in *La Abarrada’s* kitchen.



This woman’s name was Estella Martinez-Lara, and she works in a light and airy kitchen decorated with hand-painted Mexican tiles. Nearby was a garden, and much of the vegetables and herbs used in her cooking are grown right here on the campus. Neatly planted rows bulged with acelga (a type of lettuce), carrots, red tomatoes, corn growing tall, big bunches of cilantro, and many varieties of chile peppers. Neither Juan or Estella made any particular fuss over this, not like an American chef who’d doubtless blather on about “think global, eat local.” Chiapas is too impoverished to indulge in such righteous rhetoric. Estella grows her own vegetables because she can’t afford not to.

I tell her how disappointed I am that the school is closed today, or I’d have loved to help her cook lunch for the students.

“*Proxima vez,*” she says with a smile. Next time.

What will we cook? I ask. “*Que vamos a cocinar?*”

“*Mole verde,*” Juan pipes up, his face beaming with a broad smile.

Mole Verde, or just “Verde” for short, is one of the lightest and freshest-tasting of Mexico’s sauces. A puree of green herbs like epazote, marjoram, cilantro and parsley, Mole Verde is only added at the last minute to cooked meat, seafood, or vegetables. Juans now tells me a story I’ve heard before, which credits mole’s original recipe to the Convent of Santa Rosa in Puebla, a town two hour’s drive south of Mexico City.

As the legend goes, sometime early in the colonial period, an archbishop showed up unannounced to dine at Santa Rosa. The convent nuns were distraught because they had no food prepared that was special enough to serve such a dignitary. After seeking God’s help through prayer, the sisters were led to invent a mixture of everything they’d been able to scrounge together:

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stale bread, nuts, chocolate, chile peppers and spices. Poured over cooked turkey, the archbishop was overjoyed. Mole was invented! There are more gruesome theories. Among these is a possibility that strongly-flavored mole was necessary to make the taste of human flesh palatable. Mexico is infamous for its history of human sacrifice, of course, as I would be reminded the following day when I headed off to see the Mayan ruins at Tonina.

This complex of buildings flourished from 200 to 900 a.d., and was notorious (and feared) for its elaborate rituals of decapitation. Such butchery took place at a central pyramid, built of stone, where a central staircase of 260 steps led up to 8 platforms, and 30 temples, the grandest of which was called the Temple of the Smoking Mirror. Nearly all Tonina's iconography is devoted to images of captives and captors, the latter invariably depicted as bound, with their arms tied behind their backs.



A supernatural association was believed to exist between the moon, stars, and human slaughter. Blood spilt at Tonina kept the earth spinning properly, and to this end, hundreds (maybe thousands) of prisoners of war were decapitated here each year.

Scant consolation for this sorry fate was the assurance their severed heads would eventually become stars. "They battled darkness here, and nurtured and watered the stars with human blood, thus assuring the smooth operation of the celestial machinery," is how signage rather poetically phrases it in Tonina's archeological museum.

Perched at nearly 7,200 feet above sea level, Chamula is home to a Mayan tribe called the Tzotzil. Chamula is less than ten miles from San Cristobal de las Casas, but several centuries removed in its near-complete disengagement with modern times.

Sunshine was just starting to fall on the town's main plaza when I arrived, but people were still walking around in outfits that

kept them warm in the morning's chill. Tzotzil men wear furry ponchos, belted at the waist with red woven sashes, jeans and cowboy hats. Women have fabric piled up on their head, in what seems a combination of sun screen, hat, and "it might get cold later" second layer.



I found my way to the cathedral of San Juan which, at first glance, appeared much like any other Catholic church in a rural Mexican village. Once inside, however, remarkable differences became obvious. Pine boughs – and only the soft, green "whiskers," not thick wooden branches – were spread over the floor, as a kind of aromatic carpeting. The walls were decorated with fan-shaped palm fronds; long, dangling strands of bromeliads; and masses of white dahlias, carnations, gladioli and tuberose. Around the sanctuary's perimeter were many statues of saints, all housed in glass vitrines. Large mirrors hung from ribbons around the saints' necks, dangling before their chests like medallions. These mirrors are thought to ward off evil, but also, as the faithful pray, they can see themselves (and by extension, their prayers) inside the saints' heart.

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Countless numbers of lit candles were lined up, row upon row of flickering soldiers marching across every flat surface, including much of the floor. Like almost all Mexican buildings, however, there was no furnace or heating system inside this sacred space. Quite the only thing generating warmth were these flames, signifying all the hopes and prayers that caused them to be lit.

A band of perhaps eight musicians, all men, sat along one side of the church, near its center. Guitars took up the slow, nearly

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dirge-like melody established by a lone, somber accordion. There was no singing, only these instruments. Incantatory and lulling, the music put one into a sort of trance, where time seemed to stand still.

Rather than a God House, this was a God Hotel. Everyone finds their own particular place to set up a spot for worship. Parents and their little children unwrap paper folders in which were nestled several dozen (and sometimes many dozens) of candles. The father would then dip each candle into the flame of a votive, softening its base before plunking the candle directly on to the tile floor in an area he'd swept clear of pine needles. Working quickly, he could line up row upon row.

Children, especially the boys, were fascinated by this sacred ceremony, and watched, wide-eyed, as their father quickly laid out his pattern. Then, it was their turn to light all these candles, and what young man is not thrilled to have a chance to play with fire? Mom and Dad would perch up on their knees, eyes closed, and begin to chant their praises and prayers to God, in the Tzotzil language.

Near the entrance to the church, single men (or men unaccompanied by their wives) stood around smoking cigarettes, and offering each other refreshments, such as tortilla chips and bottles of Coca-cola. These men were also taking long pulls

from bottles of *balché*. Before sipping, they'd wave the bottles above and through banks of lit candles, as if to bless the liquid. Liquor was being consumed, but the men weren't getting drunk; or if they were, they were being low-key about it. It seemed a Mayan equivalent of the eucharist, with tacos and Coke substituted for bread and wine.

Standing nearby, I'd hoped to be inconspicuous, but clearly I was not.

One of the men, an old farmer with a face that was deeply tanned and wrinkled from years spent working in the sun, came over to my side and handed me an open bottle of Coca-Cola. I understood he was not a wealthy man and that, for him, even a bottle of soda was not a casual, or everyday thing. On the contrary, it was a real gift, and one to be savored.

I bowed to him to express my gratitude.

And there we remained together, this Tzotzil man having welcomed me into his fraternity, and his way of worship. I sipped my Coca-Cola, which was warm and sweet. All around me, people were burning copal in their God Pots, and the air was heavy with smoke rising up to the heavens. What hopes and dreams could I send along with them?