

Oaxaca Travel Guide

The best things to see and do



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1. Why you should visit Oaxaca

Oaxaca is known for its stunning colonial architecture, rich indigenous culture, and heritage, and it is considered Mexico's culinary capital. It is one of the most popular non-beach vacation destinations for Mexicans and it has gained increasing popularity with US Americans, Canadians, and Europeans in the last years due to its vibrance and authenticity.



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In this Oaxaca Purple Guide, we will tell you what you need to know to visit Oaxaca in five days and we provide you with tours that bring you to the historic, cultural, and culinary highlights of Oaxaca.

To help you find out what best fits you, we have added lots of photos and links to google maps locations and additional reviews. Join us to explore the best things to see and do in Oaxaca in nine days.

This is not an in-depth Oaxaca guide – and you will need a lot more than five days to see all the highlights of Oaxaca. You can buy in-depth Oaxaca guides from the big travel guide companies. Our goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing Oaxaca trip and help you build the perfect itinerary for your trip. For that purpose, we have added lots of photos so that you see what you will experience and make an educated decision if these places are for you.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our **Backpack and Snorkel [website](#)**.

2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide we are doing our best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

2.2 Copyright

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3. General Information about Oaxaca

Oaxaca is pronounced equally in two ways: oa-hah-ka or wah-hah-ka. The stress is on HAH. If you use the OA pronunciation, both letters in OA are pronounced.

Oaxaca, also called Oaxaca de Juárez or Oaxaca City, is the capital and largest city of the Mexican state of Oaxaca.

The city and the nearby archeological site of Monte Albán were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987.

Today, heritage tourism of the local Zapotec and Mixtec cultures and structures, fascinating colonial buildings and Oaxaca's culinary scene are the most important drivers of the local economy and account for almost 80% of all jobs.

The Oaxaca Valley was inhabited by the Zapotecs since approx. 2,500BC and later partially succeeded by the Mixtec starting around 900AD. Important settlements during those times were Monte Albán and Mitla.

Starting in 1440, the Aztecs entered the valley and named it Huaxyacac, which means: among the huaje trees. Huaje trees are a small, fast-growing type of native tree.

In 1521, the area was conquered by the Spanish in hope of finding the Aztecs' gold that Moctezuma II had told them came from here.

In 1522, construction of the first cathedral was begun and the settlement was called Guajaca. The name Guajaca was chosen as a more Spanish sounding variation of Huaxyacac.

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- Another staple food of Oaxacan cuisine are **Tlayudas**. Tlayudas are large crispy tortillas covered with refried beans and quesillo and various toppings, and are sometimes called Oaxacan pizzas or Mexican pizzas. Good places to get them are [Tlayudas La Chinita](#) (after 8pm) and [Mercado 20 de Noviembre](#).



- Fried **chapulines** (grasshoppers) can be bought in every mercado and many restaurants offer them as a side dish.



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The hotel would get five stars if there would not have been one issue, which many travelers seem to complain about: The shower seems to only have water that is either too hot or too cold.

Officially, the hotel says that they heat water by solar and provide a bucket to collect the cold water that will come out of the lines for the first minute or so. Unfortunately, when you turn on the hot water, it soon turns too hot, regardless of your settings, and if it gets too cold if turn the hot water down. We were able to shower by using the water during the transition from too hot to too cold and vice versa. One time, there was no cold water for a few minutes and another time there was not hot water for a few minutes.

We consider this to be only a small inconvenience, considering that the hotel is competitively priced, in the heart of the city and everything else is close to perfect.



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4. Itinerary for a 5-day trip of Oaxaca

This 5-day itinerary covers many of the major highlights of Oaxaca. If you have more time then you can add more artisan villages near Oaxaca. In case you have less time, please read through this Purple Travel Guide, and take the things out that you are not interested in.

Here is the suggested itinerary:

Day	Activities
<u>1</u>	Arrive in Oaxaca; Mercado Benito Juárez ; Zócalo ; Catedral Metropolitana de Oaxaca ; Calle Macedonio Alcalá ; Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán ; Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca ; dinner at Levadura de Olla Restaurante
<u>2</u>	Monte Albán ; Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad ; dinner at Los Danzantes
<u>3</u>	Zona Arqueologica de Mitla ; Santa María del Tule (Letras Turísticas 'El Tule' ; Árbol del Tule ; Templo de Santa María de la Asunción ; Mercado Gastronómico de Santa María del Tule); dinner at Mercado 20 de Noviembre or Tlayudas La Chinita (after 8pm)
<u>4</u>	Guided tour: Hierva el Agua with Mezcal distillery
<u>5</u>	Guided tour: Oaxacan Cheese Experience in Reyes Etlá ; fabric production and dyeing in Teotitlán del Valle ; Alebrijes tour in San Martín Tilcajete ; shiny black pottery in San Bartolo Coyotepec
6	Depart Oaxaca

5. Five-day Itinerary for Oaxaca

5.1 Day 1: Self-guided walking tour of the historic district in Oaxaca

Today is your first day in Oaxaca and you will likely arrive in the morning or early afternoon. We want you to enjoy the city instead of rushing from one attraction to the next. Therefore, we only have a few highlights on today's list.

If you cannot see all the sites today, then you can visit them tomorrow.



- 1 = [Mercado Benito Juárez](#)
- 2 = [Zócalo \(Plaza de la Constitución\)](#)
- 3 = [Metropolitan Cathedral of Oaxaca](#)
- 4 = [Calle Macedonio Alcalá](#)
- 5 = [Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán](#) and [Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca](#)
- 6 = [Levadura de Olla Restaurante](#)

5.1.1 Mercado Benito Juárez

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Start at the lively Mercado Benito Juárez. It is right across a pedestrian street from [Hotel Trebol](#).

Opened in 1894, Mercado Benito Juárez is one of the oldest trading centers in Oaxaca. It was named after Benito Juárez, a Zapotec man from Oaxaca, who was the first indigenous president of Mexico and who served as President from 1858 until his death in 1872.

The market is open daily until 8pm, but most stalls start closing 30min earlier. Saturdays are the busiest.

At the mercado, you can buy fresh fruits and vegetables and other foods and anything you need to prepare meals. There are also some souvenir, textile, handicraft, and accessory stores.

Since this is your first visit to Oaxaca, this is a good place to eat your first inexpensive authentic Oaxacan lunch here.



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5.2 Day 2: Self-guided walking tour of Monte Albán the historic district in Oaxaca

Today is your first full day in Oaxaca. Start with the most important historic site in Oaxaca: Monte Albán. Afterwards, you have time to see the sites that you did not have time for yesterday and you can visit additional sites.

End the day with traditional Oaxacan food in probably the best restaurant in Oaxaca and finish your evening people-watching in the Zocalo.



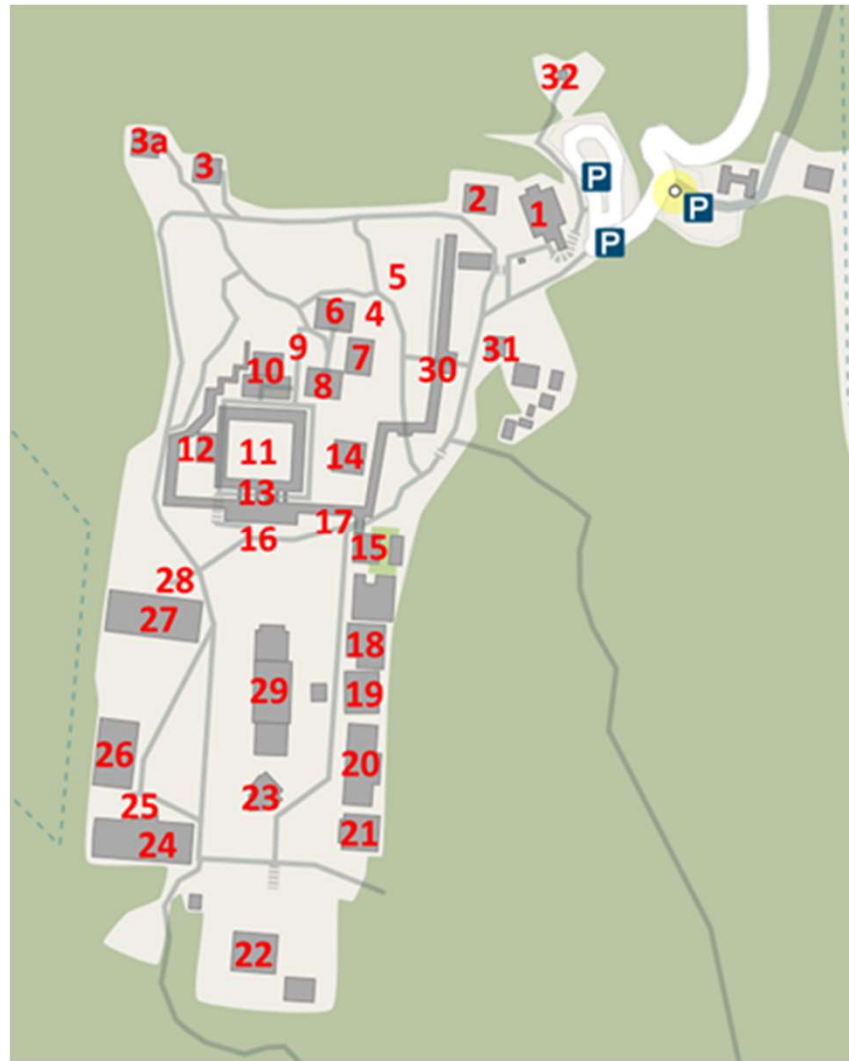
1 = [Monte Albán](#)

2 = [Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad](#)

3 = [Los Danzantes](#)

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- 1 = [Visitor Center](#)
- 2 = [Building X](#)
- 3 = [Tomb 104](#)
- 3a = [Residence Tomb 103](#)
- 4 = [VG Complex](#)
- 5 = [El Palacio del Ocote](#)
- 6 = [Building D](#)
- 7 = [Building VG](#)
- 8 = [Building E & Stela VGE-2](#)
- 9 = [Temple of Two Columns](#)
- 10 = [Building I](#)
- 11 = [Patio Hundido / Sunken
Patio](#)
- 12 = [Building B](#)
- 13 = [North Platform](#)
- 14 = [Building A](#)
- 8 = [Building E & Stela VGE-2](#)
- 15 = [Ballcourt](#)
- 16 = [Stela 9](#)
- 13 = [North Platform](#)
- 17 = [Stela 15](#)
- 18 = [Building II](#)
- 19 = [Building P](#)
- 20 = [Palace](#)
- 21 = [Mound Q](#)
- 22 = [South Platform](#)
- 23 = [Building J / Observatorio](#)
- 24 = [System M](#)



- 25 = [Galeria de los Danzantes](#)
- 26 = [Building L / Building of the
Dancers](#)
- 27 = [Building IV / Building K](#)
- 28 = [Stela 18](#)
- 29 = [Buildings G, H, and I](#)
- 30 = [Jewelled Platform](#)
- 31 = [Tomb 56](#)
- 32 = [Tomb 7](#)

6) Building D

Building D is the northernmost building of the VG Complex from the period IIIB-IV (500 AD – 800 AD).



You can climb up for a beautiful view of the VG Complex.



8) Structure E-Sur and Stela VGE-2

Building E was enlarged towards the south during period IIB-IV and a stairway was constructed from the North Platform surface to the top of Building E where a southerly facing temple was built. A large stone slab, or stela, was erected on a platform in the stairway and carved with representations of individuals of Monte Albans governing class. Four of the five individuals are female, and each person is shown with his calendric and personal name. The principal figures, an elderly woman and a younger man depicted as a jaguar, are engaged in a ritual possibly related to the transfer of power between generations.

The other three women may be relatives.

Late period IIB-IV: 800 AD

You can climb up for beautiful views of the VG Complex and the rest of Monte Alban.



You will come back later to the base at the southern end of this building for a better view of the stela.

16) Stela 9

Originally discovered by Leopoldo Batres at the beginning of the 20th century, this stela is also referred to as an obelisk due to the point at its upper extremity. The four side panels display remarkable glyphs.

This piece is similar to Mayan stelae and is one of the most important in Monte Alban. Given its location, this stela is almost certainly associated with events that took place on the North Platform.

On its southern side we can observe a richly adorned male character whose name is possibly represented in the lower part with the glyph '8 Flower'.

On the eastern side, there appear two persons with large plumes adorned with chalchihuites ('precious stones') who probably are priests since they carry bags of copal. A glyph representing 'word' is in front of their faces.

On the western side there is a richly dressed priest with a word glyph and a cluster of other glyphs that refer to important dates that relate to him.

The north side contains the most important inscription showing two people with their respective names over their heads. One figure is talking and the other is listening.

Underneath them is a narrative exposition of numerical and symbolic glyphs possibly representing an important period of government.



Behind the Stela is the [13\) North Platform](#) that you previously walked on.



Trace your way back almost to [15\) Ballcourt](#). Shortly before you get there, you see your next destination to the left.

17) Stela 15

This unique horizontal stela shows one of the few narrative texts that has been found in its original location, probably because it was built during the late occupation of Monte Alban IIIB-IV (600 AD – 800 AD).

The carvings on the monolith include a scene, two short texts, and several isolated glyphs, in which calendrical names and members of the ruling nobility may be identified.

The texts begin with a year glyph and year bearer. Apparently the central text refers to the ritual depicted in the scene where a Monte Alban ruler named '5 Reed' intervenes. The figure, with a nose ornament and reclining on a long piece of furniture, dedicates an offering, while a shaman called '7 Escobilla' (Soap Plant), transformed into a bird, is presented with a prisoner. Another individual with a nose ornament called '6 Earthquake' is seated to the left. It seems to establish the genealogy of Lord '5 Reed'.

It is possible that the monument commemorates his ascent to power, legitimates his line of descent, and celebrates a military victory through the ballgame and the sacrifice of a prisoner.



18) Building II

During Period II (100 BC – 350 AD), this was a high platform topped by a temple with rectangular columns. A stairway led to the platform to the south, and the entrance to a tunnel connecting to the altar in the Main Plaza.

The facade of the building was extended during Period IIIB-IV (500 AD – 800 AD) and the stairway and the 'double scapular' cornices were remodeled.



5.2.2 Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

The basilica was built from 1682 to 1690 in baroque style and in the shape of a Latin cross. To better resist earthquakes, low spires and towers were intentionally built.

The current facade was built from 1717 and 1718. As with many other buildings in Oaxaca, green cantera stone was used

The baroque pipe organ dates back to 1686 – it was restored in 2000.

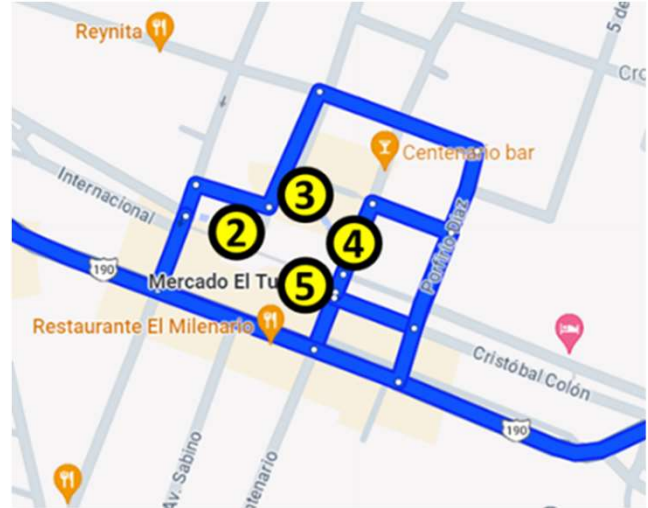
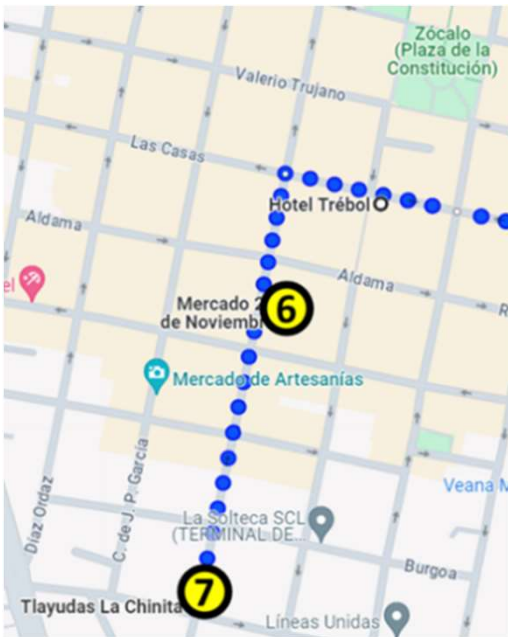


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5.3 Day 3: Discovering Mitla and El Tule

Today we will explore Oaxaca's second most important archeological zone, the town of El Tule and we will finish the day with dinner in Oaxaca City.



- 1 = [Zona Arqueologica de Mitla](#)
- 2 = ['El Tule' letters](#)
- 3 = [Tree of Tule \(Arbol del Tule\)](#)
- 4 = [Templo de Santa María de la Asunción](#)
- 5 = [Mercado Gastronómico de Santa María del Tule](#)
- 6 = [Mercado 20 de Noviembre](#)
- 7 = [Tlayudas La Chinita](#)

5.3.1 Self-guided walking tour of Zona Arqueologica de Mitla ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Monte Alban was the most important Zapotec site politically, and Mitla was the most important religious site for the Mixtec.

Originally established as a sacred burial site by the Zapotec, Mitla's architecture and designs show a very strong influence of the Mixtec, who had become the dominating force in the area during the peak of Mitla's settlement.

The name Mitla comes from the Nahuatl (Aztec) name Mictlán, meaning the 'place of the dead' or 'underworld'.

Mitla is unique among Mesoamerican sites, because of its elaborate and intricate mosaics and geometric designs that can be seen everywhere covering walls, tombs, and panels and cannot be found elsewhere in Mexico.

The mosaics are made using small, precisely cut, and polished stone pieces that were pieced together without mortar.

Mitla was inhabited at least since the Classic Period (100 - 650 AD), but possibly as early as 900 BC. Originally built as a fortified village, the oldest buildings date between 450 and 700 AD and have similar architectural features to those found at Monte Alban from the same time.

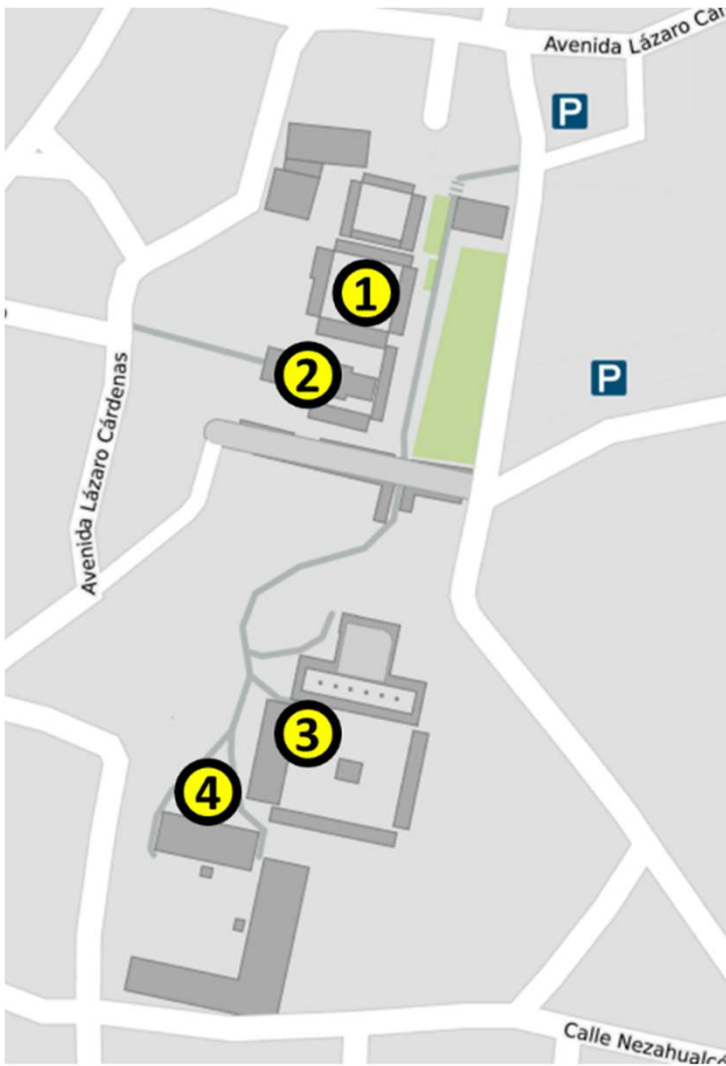
Starting at around 850 AD, Mitla eventually became the main religious center of the Zapotec. At around 1000 AD, the Mixtec took control of the area, but a sizeable Zapotec population remained. Mitla reached its height between 750 and 1521, when the Spaniards arrived.

In 1553, the Oaxacan Archbishop ordered the destruction of the Mitlan site in the hope of destroying its still important political and religious significance. Spanish forces destroyed the majority of the buildings and later, some Spanish clergy moved into some of the remaining buildings to fully displace the Zapotec who still lived there. Stone blocks from the site were used as building materials for other construction in the area, including the Templo Católico de San Pablo Villa de Mitla, which was built over some of the ruins.

Unlike Monte Alban, the Mitla site was built on the valley floor and therefore lacks the wide vistas and defensive capabilities of Monte Alban. As a religious center, the architecture is built more for the comfort of the residents rather than for magnificence.

The Mitla archeological site consists of five groups of buildings: [Grupo del Norte](#), [Grupo de las Columnas](#), [Grupo Del Adobe](#), [Grupo del Arroyo](#), and [Grupo Del Sur](#).

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- 1 = [Grupo del Norte](#)
- 2 = [Templo Católico de San Pablo Villa de Mitla](#)
- 3 = [Grupo de las Columnas](#)
- 4 = [Grupo Del Adobe](#)
- 5 = [Grupo del Arroyo](#)
- 6 = [Grupo Del Sur](#)

3) Grupo de las Columnas (Columns Group) ([map](#))

Grupo de las Columnas has been fully excavated and restored. Access is only by paid admission at the gate on the pedestrian-only shopping street Reforma ([map](#)).

The main building of this group is called the Palace or, sometimes, the Grand Hall of Columns. This is the structure around the patio in the northern part of the group.

The Palace sits on top of the platform to the north and measures 120 by 21 ft (36.6 m x 6.4 m). The six columns on the inside are made from volcanic stone and were used to support a roof.

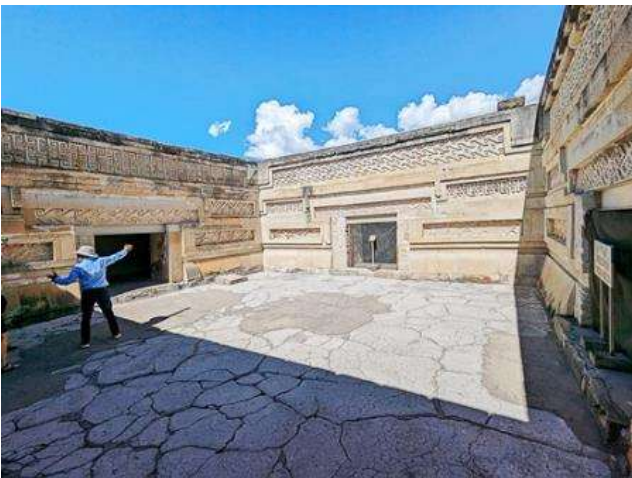
You can get there by entering through the patio and climbing up the pyramid to get into the Palace.



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From the Palace, a small hallway leads to a courtyard, which is intricately decorated with mosaic fretwork and geometric designs. Some of the rooms can be entered – they contain even more mosaic fretwork and geometric designs. They were likely used to house Zapotec rulers and high priests.



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5.3.3 El Tuel Tree / Árbol del Tule

([map](#))

The main reason people visit El Tule is the El Tule Tree: Árbol del Tule

This tree is one of several old Montezuma cypress trees that grow in town and that are remnants from the marshlands around the lake that used to cover this area.

The El Tule Tree is located in the center of town right next to the Zocalo and the Santa María de la Asunción church.

The El Tule Tree is one of the oldest and largest in the world and it is sacred to the indigenous people of this area.

Its age is likely at least 2,000 years, and its existence was mentioned by the Aztecs and later by the Spanish.

The recorded measurements are:

- Height: 40 m (131 ft)
- Volume: 700 – 800 m³ (915 – 1050 cubic yards)
- Estimated weight: 630 tons (1.4 mio lbs)
- Circumference: 40 m (131 ft) = widest girth of any tree on the planet

According to legend, a king named Conday stuck his walking stick into the ground, rested on it and eventually died. After his death, the stick started to grow and developed into the El Tule Tree.

Portions of the trunk, and some branches look like animals and they are sources for local legends. If you visit with a local guide, they will point out the elephant, deer, pineapple, fish, lion, etc. to you.

5.3.6 Mercado 20 de Noviembre

([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Directly south of [Mercado Benito Juarez](#) lies Mercado 20 de Noviembre. Mercado 20 de Noviembre focuses on vendors that sell fresh produce and it has lots of good small restaurants. Mercado Benito Juarez has those, too, but there are more non-food vendors that sell, e.g. souvenirs, flowers, kitchen hardware.

Because of the tasty food, we recommend visiting Mercado 20 de Noviembre for dinner and, if you feel like it, for lunch.

You can get good authentic Tlayudas at several food stands in the mercado. Alternatively, you can get them a few block south of here at [Tlayudas La Chinita](#) after 8pm.



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The destinations are:



- 1) Oaxaca by Locals office (depart at 9am)
- 2) [Panaderia Artesal Yazmin](#) (stop for approx. 15 - 30 min)
- 3) [Herve El Agua](#) (stop for approx. 3h)
- 4) [El Rey de Matatlan](#) (stop for 1h – 1.5h)

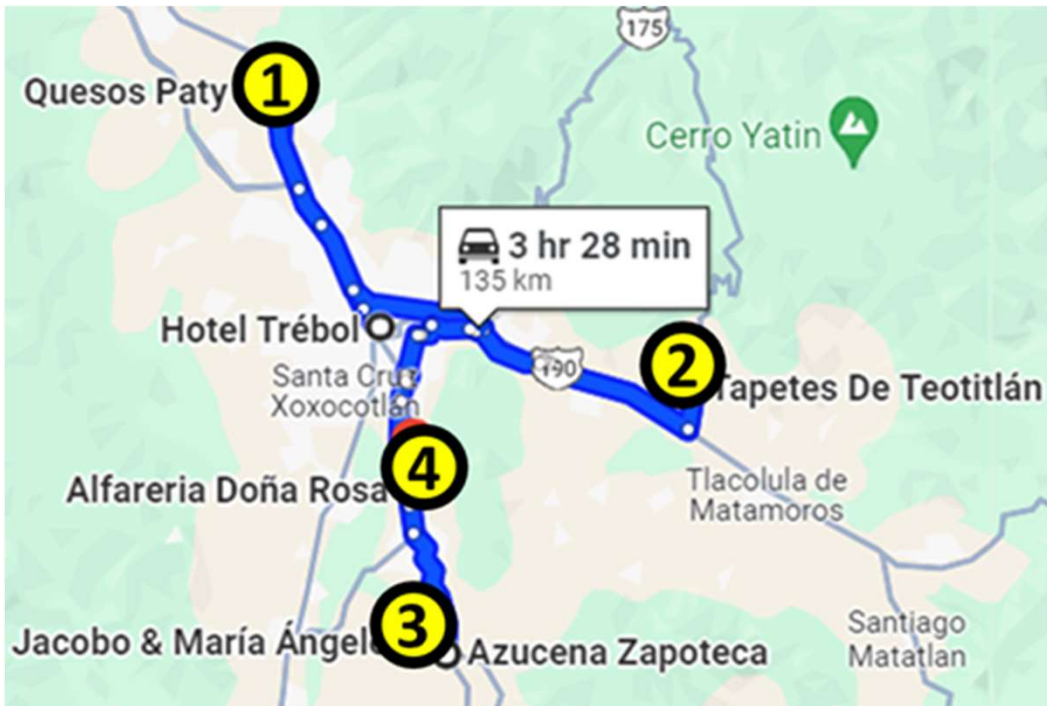
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- 1 = [Quesos Paty - Quesillo Demonstration](#)
- 2 = [Tapetes Teotitlan – coloring and weaving](#)
- 3 = [Jacobo y María Angeles - Alebrijes](#)
- 4 = [Alfareria Doña Rosa – shiny black pottery](#)

5.5.1 Quesos Paty - Quesillo Demonstration

([map](#), [reviews](#))

Quesillo is also known as Oaxaca cheese or queso Oaxaca. It is a white, semi hard, low-fat cheese which tastes somewhat similar to unaged Monterey Jack (but it is saltier because salt is used as a preservative for quesillo), but its texture is closer to mozzarella or string cheese.

The town of Etla, north of Oaxaca, is the epicenter of quesillo production in Mexico.

Even though there are many quesillo producers in Etla, only very few allow tourists to see their process.

Quesillo production is a laborious process and, as far as we know, it is only produced in labor intensive small-scale batches in family-owned facilities.

Quesillo is a popular ingredient not just for Oaxacan dishes, but also for typical Mexican foods like quesadillas and empanadas.

At Quesos Paty, you will witness the whole quesillo production process and you will be able to taste the quesillo that is being produced right before your eyes. It cannot get any fresher than that.

You will also learn why quesillo tastes a little salty.

The owner does not speak English, but Carlos was easily able to translate everything.

For me, the quesillo demonstration was one of the highlights of our Oaxaca trip.

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15. Fish: the characteristics are: abundance, prosperity, and emotional depth.
16. Snail: the characteristics are: with patience, perseverance, and carrying your own home.
17. Hummingbird: the characteristics are: joy, sweetness, and bringing happiness to others.
18. Opossum: the characteristics are: adaptability, resourcefulness, and playing dead to avoid danger.
19. Mockingbird: the characteristics are: mimicry, communication, and adaptability.
20. Bat: the characteristics are: transformation, night vision, community, and renewal.



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6. Closing Remarks

ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.



MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!



PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see our [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.