

Central Mexico's "fair and beautiful city"

The order and pomp of Spanish baroque construction blends with indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec elements in Mexico's central valleys.

Clare Hargreaves explores Oaxaca's ancient and colonial treasures



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Oaxaca's twin-towered Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán is "a gold-leaf-burnished baroque extravaganza"

Sprawled across a mountain-flanked valley in south-west Mexico, the beautifully preserved city of Oaxaca (pronounced 'wahaca') reflects the dramatic collision of indigenous and colonial cultures in the 16th century. The Spanish founded their city, then called Antequera (renamed Oaxaca after Mexican independence in 1821), in a grid plan on a site occupied by native Zapotecs. Sensibly, the colonisers constructed low-rise, thick-walled buildings to withstand the frequent earthquakes that shake the region. The following century, visitor Thomas Gage was bowled over by the "fair and beautiful city... of so temperate an air". Today Oaxaca is a heady mix of street markets and fiestas, museums packed with pre-Hispanic treasures and over-the-top baroque architecture.

Settle into a cafe under the *portales* (arcades) of the traffic-free **1** Plaza de la Constitución (Constitution Square) at the heart of the city to watch the action. Absorb music performed from its bandstand, observe protest marches and watch vendors selling *elotes* (corn on the cob) and handicrafts. Then head up Valdivieso, which turns into Macedonio

Alcalá, a cobbled, pedestrianised street – the best stretch for browsing silver and textiles.

A few blocks to the north, the twin-towered **2** Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán is a gold-leaf-burnished baroque extravaganza, once part of a Dominican monastery. Beyond the magnificent façade overlooking the plaza, its ornate interior is dominated by a massive gilded altarpiece.

Next door, the restored former monastery houses the **3** Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca (Oaxaca Cultures Museum), covering the history of Oaxaca from pre-Hispanic times; the highlight is a display of magnificent Mixtec treasures from nearby Monte Albán, including superb gold masks and breastplates.

Head west across Plazuela Carmen then up Manuel García to **4** Museo Casa de Juárez (Juárez House Museum), named after Mexico's most famous son, the Zapotec lawyer and politician Benito Juárez. Orphaned at the age of three, at 12 he walked 40 miles from his uncle's rural home to Oaxaca, where he lodged in this simple adobe house. Juárez later became president, and in 1872 the city was rechristened Oaxaca de Juárez. The museum,

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furnished in the style of a 19th-century middle-class Oaxacan home, contains a few of his possessions.

Return south down Manuel García and turn right on José María Morelos to the **5** Museo de Arte Prehispánico Rufino Tamayo (Rufino Tamayo Pre-Hispanic Museum), displaying more than 1,000 pieces gathered by the eponymous 20th-century Oaxacan artist.

Along Morelos, cross Plaza de la Danza to reach the vast 17th-century **6** Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (Basilica of Our Lady of Solitude), another masterpiece of Mexican baroque. Largely built between 1682 and 1690, the church contains an exquisite statue of the Virgin de la Soledad, Oaxaca's patron saint since

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1909. Admire her diamond-encrusted crown (a replica of the stolen original).

Head east along Independencia, then south on 20 de Noviembre, passing the food market to browse village handicrafts, flowers, fresh produce and *chapulines* (fried grasshoppers), at the **7** Mercado de Artesanías (Craft Market).

From nearby Mina Street, take a minibus to the ruins of the city of

8 Monte Albán, atop a hill five miles south-west of Oaxaca. With hundreds of terraces, canals and pyramids carved out of the mountain, this was a key centre of the Zapotec civilisation for over 1,000 years; at its zenith its population topped 17,000. From around the 7th century the city declined and was eventually abandoned, later used as a burial site by the Mixtecs. Head for the Main Plaza at its heart where, after enjoying staggering views over the valley below, you can make out ceremonial and residential structures. One bears carved stone *Danzantes* ('dancers') representing naked men, some genitally mutilated – probably prisoners, perhaps warriors, from rival villages. 🌐

OAXACA IN EIGHT SITES

- 1 Plaza de la Constitución**
Buzzing heart of the colonial city
- 2 Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán**
Baroque edifice dominated by a huge gilded altarpiece
- 3 Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca**
Historic marvels including gold Mixtec treasures discovered at Monte Albán
- 4 Museo Casa de Juárez**
Home of 19th-century Mexican president
- 5 Museo de Arte Prehispánico Rufino Tamayo**
Hundreds of pieces of art by Mexico's pre-Hispanic peoples
- 6 Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad**
Beautiful baroque church housing an iconic Madonna statue
- 7 Mercado de Artesanías**
Craft market, a great place to taste *chapulines* (fried grasshoppers)
- 8 Monte Albán**
Dramatically sited hilltop ruins of ancient Zapotec city-turned-Mixtec necropolis



ILLUSTRATION BY TONWEN JONES