

After the White Chrysanthemum

Snapshots of Chiapas

BY KATHLEEN BELEW

TRAVEL IS ALWAYS A MUSE, for better or for worse. It is the source of the greatest joy and tragedy yet in my life, and also the greatest extremes of beauty and ugliness.

ARRIVAL

Chiapas is the least Americanized place I have traveled, and its entire effect is something of a beautiful shock. Gazing out of the taxi as I arrived in town felt like visual eavesdropping into lit windows — a group of men drinking around a tailgate in the neon light of a liquor store, two children huddled by a fire next to a dumpster, a beautiful woman standing by a window, waiting for someone, and a Tzotzil woman nursing her child. All the houses here touch, doorways opening side by side onto stone paved streets.

San Cristobal de Las Casas is a lovely colonial city wedged into the mountains of Chiapas. It is inaccessible except by a twisting, nauseating highway, driven at breakneck speeds by intrepid cabbies. It feels small despite its population of 99,000, and stretches for miles over the slopes of the surrounding mountains. At its center is the cathedral and municipal palace, the indigenous mercado and the ladino stores. On its outskirts are sprawling slums of indigenous expulsados, those who have been kicked out of various surrounding hamlets because of religious conversion.

The mist rolls in thick in the mornings like pea soup, tangible. The poor have perpetual coughs.

COLECTIVO

I've settled into a daily routine of classes, finally. I go back to the house for comida and return to the center for more classes in the late afternoon. This means riding the colectivo four times a day. Colectivos are white VW vans with green or red stripes. The route is written across the windshield, but it's definitely an approximation of where the van will actually go.

There are no seatbelts on the colectivo. They are often crowded, with people sitting and standing and the boy with the change hanging out the

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door, barely jumping on as the van takes off at breakneck speed. There are no stops on the route. People flag down the van they want and yell “bajan” where they want to stop.

Passengers rarely talk to each other, but are constantly touching. Today I sat next to an indigenous woman carrying an enormous sack of peanuts and an indigenous man with a sack of fresh-cut corn cobs probably as heavy as he was. The smell of the new corn wafted through the entire dusty ride.

One sweltering day, a colectivo pulled over, not stopping, near a tiny house on the roadside. A woman ran alongside and gave two popsicles to the boy working the door, one for him and one for the driver, who shouted his love for the popsicle woman as we barreled along.

THE EVIL EYE

We visited San Andrés, San Juan, Chamula and Zinacantan yesterday. Children follow us around San Andreas. They are not begging, but curious. When we stop to talk or listen to our guide, I feel feather-light touches on the back of my head -- the little girls are touching my hair.

In San Juan Chamula, the church is the center of the town. The religious structure here is entirely indigenous; there are no priests or deacons, only shamans and those who care for the church. The saints wear mirrors around their necks, “windows to the soul,” and the ceiling is completely black from all the incense, despite its repainting every year.

I watch the Tzotzil healing ritual being performed on a child of about six months who needs to be cured from the ojo, the Evil Eye. Simply put, the ojo is jealousy, sickness caused by the envy of a pretty baby. The shaman, or curo, throws incense on a group of candles and chants as she passes basil leaves over the child’s tiny body. She does the same with chicken eggs, to draw the evil out of the child and into the egg. For the critically ill, they use live chickens. She then she breaks the egg into a bowl of cold water and reads it like tea leaves, proclaiming the child had the ojo but is now released.

We eventually learn that the ojo can be avoided by touching the thing you are looking at with envy — to touch a baby saves it from the ojo. The children might have believed that they were saving me from the ojo when they touched my blonde hair.

THE FAULT LINE

On Saturday, the group piled into the bus to go to Cañon de Sumidero. We put on life vests of dubious quality and pile into a long motorboat with peeling sky-blue paint. We pass beneath one dilapidated water pipe spanning the shores, and then the gorgeous, immaculate suspension bridge built

to accommodate the new highway that will soon cut the commute from San Cristobal to the state capital in half. The river runs along a fault line, whose shivers and creaking groans delay the construction.

As we gain speed, the oppressively hot air becomes a delicious, humid wind. We are wild children as we speed down the river, creating huge slow ripples in the water — emerald-green, crayon-green, impossible green.

Later, we pull into a cavern in the cliff, where the water seeping through the limestone is pink and green, the colors of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They have built a shrine to her, with a ladder, a statue, paintings. Every year, the boatmen gather here for a special mass. They say they can see a headless Christ figure in the limestone.

The most towering cliff is the one I stare at the longest. It is a sheer rock face that seems to stretch forever into the sky, ending only on the green water that here seems too green, toxic somehow. This is the spot where the people say the Chiapaneco Indians jumped to their deaths in order to avoid capture by the Spanish conquistadors. A popular historian recently disproved this, but the indigenous people still believe in it, still tell the story to their children.

“No one died here,” says the guide who speaks English, the one from Rhode Island. “But somebody did kill himself by jumping off that suspension bridge last year.”

Later, as we sit at lunch in nearby Chiapa de Corzo, wilted from the heat, I think about that new highway. The new suicide. Will that also become legend?

BORDERS

On Saturday, our group went to Comitán by bus — the closest I have been to the area of Chiapas declared “dangerous” by the U.S. State Department.

Although the town is a bit smaller than San Cristobal, it feels richer. Cattle country means social services, garbage collection, drainage, museums, better architecture. It means impressive churches that look European, views of sweeping plains, grazing lands instead of corn plots.

But the striking thing about Saturday had nothing to do with the destinations. It was the roads. On the two-hour drive to Comitán, I realized that I no longer register as strange or unusual a number of things that probably should be — the trash, for example. I have to turn my brain on to notice it. Poor women sitting by the highway have become a normal aspect of the scenery. Outside Teopisca, a small indigenous community that we passed through, it was stranger that there were not people by the roadside.

Along the way, we are stopped by migracion, the Mexican equivalent of the INS. My blood runs cold as a man with a machine gun on his back bangs on the door of the bus and climbs aboard. "Passaportes!" he says, gruffly.

Half the group doesn't have their passports. We are still in Mexico. We are still in Chiapas.

One of the professors manages to ask why he needs our passports, since there is no border here.

"Si, es una frontera" (Yes, it is a border). He explains that refugees and migrant workers from Guatemala come through here, that it is a checkpoint. He points at a girl in our group who is from Mexico, near Guadalajara. "Passaporte!"

Her passport is with her host family, safely hidden.

He asks every dark-haired person on the bus to prove that they are from the United States. I tremble and hate the process and the system. I think, clearly, how lucky I am that I can leave this place any time I want to. It is beautiful. But I see it freely.

THE WHITE CHRYSANTHEMUM

I find myself wanting to wrap up the trip, some kind of closure. And what I really have, when I think about it, is a collection of snapshot memories, not yet in an album, not yet connected in a meaningful way. Still beautiful.

About a month ago, when the fair was in town, the colectivos that pass that way all wrote "FERIA" on their windshields in white shoe-polish. I climbed into an almost full colectivo to go home for lunch. The back was full, so I sat in the front seat with the driver, who smiled at me and then acted very busy with the driving.

After a while, we got to the fairgrounds, about six blocks before my stop. He pointed at the fairgrounds. "Feria!" He said, smiling.

"Si!" I said, confused at this point.

He frowned.

"Esto es la feria" (That is the fair).

"Si."

Eventually he discovered that although I'm blonde and clearly a tourist, I didn't want to get off at the fair. When we got to my stop, and I got off the colectivo, he seemed very relieved that I wasn't lost beyond hope.

The next morning, I got the first colectivo to school that I saw, and it was the same driver. He greeted me in Spanish, very enthusiastically, and opened the front door for me even though there are only about two people sitting in the back.

"Do you speak Spanish?" he asks.

"A little."

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

"Oh," he says. "I don't."

He asks where I'm from, how long I've been here, and what my name is. This last bit prompts the usual debate over the "th" sound, very difficult to pronounce for Spanish speakers. Eventually we settle on Catalina. He introduces himself as Julio Cesar.

Ever since, he is Julius Caesar in my mind. Today, in the morning, I rode his colectivo to school. He stopped at the market on the way to pick up more passengers and load in more produce, which today included three crates of tomatoes, one of avocados, a bag of peanuts and two enormous bundles of purple and white chrysanthemums. As he was helping the indigenous girl who raised the flowers load them into the colectivo, one broke off, too short to sell, but a full white blossom.

Chiapas is completely lacking in the concept of "ordinary day." Nothing here is mundane. People continue to surprise me.

Today I went to school holding a white chrysanthemum, given to me by Julio Caesar without any expectation of a gesture in return.

RETURN

I'm tired and I think the U.S. is noisy and sad and I miss Chiapas.

I miss my host grandma. Everyone cried when I left, even Marta (the maid) who had been surly the last few weeks. I don't know how to explain to everyone all the ways that it changed me, and I don't want to. But things are divided into before and after and off I go into the wasteland of not knowing anything.

My photos and writings of Chiapas leave out too much.

I am just trying to get my bearings, still.

It may be awhile before I am capable of serious conversation about anything other than this.