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Guest Travel Writers

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I never win anything; church raffles, oversized carnival teddy bears, Ed McMahon's sweepstakes-zippo. But, that changed in October two years ago when I went to a screening of The Legend of Zorro sponsored by a famed travel magazine. After viewing the film, there was a fiesta in the theater mezzanine where one could enter a lottery to win a trip to Mexico. Even though my luck was nil, I still filled out an entry form and folded it up in an origami-ish manner, hoping that the prize picker would sense the "Choose me!" energy vibe emanating from the form.

It worked. I won a trip for two to San Luis Potosi sponsored by the tourism board where Zorro was filmed. Whoo hoo!

In early May, my husband and I landed in San Luis Potosi in central Mexico. (About an 8 hour drive south of Monterey and 8 hour drive north of Mexico City) We stepped off of our puddle jumper and met our driver Santiago; only to be driven another 5 hours to get to the city, "Valles." City? Um, okay, but this original New York City girl was seeing country with lots of farms and agriculture (A whole watermelon was selling for 30 cents!) There were fields with hundreds of tin triangular "tents" with live roosters perched on top. (I learned that roosters are bred for cockfighting and each had to have their own territory or they would kill each other before ever entering a ring.) Hmm, okay, so maybe this was not that unlike home.

After a breakfast of eggs with refried beans and queso blanco wrapped in tortillas, Santiago and Alfredo, our guides, drove up into the Sierra Madre mountains into Xilitla, making the journey to Las Pozas; a bizarre compound designed and built by millionaire Scotsman Edward James in the 1960's. Abandoning the aristocracy of his upbringing, he focused on the nurturing of orchids and constructing and building a magnificent castle based on surreal dreams he had (he was close with Dalí). He used no architects and just had workers build on "what he saw in his mind;" therefore, the castle had a dreamlike quality. There were staircases that lead to nowhere and signs of "positive" and "negative" feelers to draw in energies, along with sculptures of mushrooms and animals and items that one could see as a whale, yet another would see as a star. He had libraries and "cinema rooms" with no books or screens and told his visitors to "read and see with their senses" and to take in all the jungle around them as their book and film. The loveliest part of Las Pozas were the many waterfalls that surrounded the structure. Alfredo told us that at dusk that evening, we would see a spectacle rarely seen anywhere on Earth" called, "Los Sotonos de Golondrinas" in the mountains near Axtla, translating to "the basement of the birds," was a deep cavern measuring 30 stories tall and peering into it, one could only see a deep abyss of black space. Hiking 40 minutes to get to the "basement", and finally stopping at a steep cliff where we could see the cavern, as the sky began to darken, thousands of birds (black swallows and green parrots) began whizzing past our heads to get back into their "home". It was literally raining birds and we felt the wind on our heads as they zoomed past.

Exhausted after our 40 minute hike back to the car (with rumors of a puma on the loose) we looked forward to tomorrow's adventure, which turned out to be a tour of the archaeological sites of Tamtoc and the Huasteca Indians (dating back to 300BC!) and met the actual man, Guillermo, who dug it all up and noted that he soon may be in or on, National Geographic for his findings. He asked us to envision a massive city in our minds, showing with pride, pieces of his findings that proved his theories. We saw remnants of the Huastecas' homage to the Sun and Moon and Guillermo unveiled a circular stone disc that was a foot thick with a 10 foot diameter, explaining that this was the opening to their irrigation system. The surrounding grounds had women crouched into sitting positions, all entombed. Pulgoso, Guillermo's dog, invited us back for a lunch of tortillas and beans, which the archeologists' wife had just finished preparing.

Later that afternoon we were on our way to Tamasopo and the "Puente De Dios" (Bridge of God). Crossing train tracks used for cargo shipments, we walked through papaya, mango and coffee plants to again, hike a good distance, but this time, instead of ascending, we were descending. We ended at a lovely waterfall and grotto forming a bridge of natural rock where the stone had eroded from the force of the water. All of our stops seemed to be well kept secrets, since on all of our excursions there seemed to be no one around but for Alfredo, Santiago, my husband and I. We stripped down to our bathing suits and plopped into the warm waters, rippling with the rumble of the falls. We followed a rope tow into the grotto and saw fish swimming in the transparent azure waters, reflected from the sun. It smelled heavily of minerals and I looked around to see smooth stalagmites and stalactites.

I was truly amazed and liberated that there were no "sign off" papers to fill out, no admission charges, no cheese ball guy charging 100 pesos to have your picture taken in front of anything and no refreshment stands or souvenir places, anywhere.

We felt like royalty and Alfredo explained to us that the purpose of the trip was to make the winners feel truly welcome by this little known region of Mexico; its people and places. I explained to Alfredo in English, of which my husband translated into Spanish, that they certainly had accomplished that.