

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

With the news coverage of gang wars and killings in the border towns of Mexico, it was with some reservations that we booked a tour in Mexico to the city of Oaxaca. Even if there were no warnings from the United States Department of Homeland Security, I was still uneasy. My wife wanted to do some birding because of good reports from the region, and we would be finishing a sailing trip to Costa Rica and coming back through this part of the country that was new to us.

We were pleasantly surprised by the clean and beautiful city of 800,000 people at 5,000 feet altitude. It was located in the valley of the southern reaches of the Rocky Mountain range with nearby peaks going up to 10,000 feet and a wonderful climate for hiking and outdoor activities.

The colonial town now on the historical registry was charming and friendly. Most of the shop's attendance spoke enough English to make buying and eating a pleasurable experience. The cafés with tables opening into the central square call the "circulo," gave ready access for people watching and viewing the carnival-like atmosphere, but did provide the vendors with table to table sales pitches that grew tiring after the 40th visit from a salesman.

An old colonial house converted to a hotel called the Sierra Del Azul was roomy and comfortable and just a couple of blocks from the center of the city where beautiful old churches dating back to 1557 beckoned us to visit and meditate.

First day in the charming city we visited an archaeological site called Monte Alba so named for the covering of trees with white blooms blanketing the mountaintop. There were temples, astronomical buildings, courtyards, game fields and plazas dating back 4,000 years, with the expanse covering 2-miles-wide-by-4-miles-long and encompassing two mountaintops.

An area larger than Machu Picchu stretched out before our unbelieving eyes as we stood on the highest point, the site of the Temple, with gigantic steps going up toward the heavens. Stone carvings told stories still uninterpreted by archaeologists. There were country scenes and body figures reminiscent of the Maya ruins with their petroglyphs.

Some burial sites had skull findings depicting modern medicine surgical procedures such as trephening (cutting holes in the skull) and bone growth after the procedure proving that the patient survived for years. The site is still being excavated systematically with archaeological digs encompassing the adjacent mountaintop.

Local crafts made with regional stones and resins from native trees, were too alluring and therefore purchased for what seemed like ridiculously low prices (the American dollar is valued at about 12 pesos).

Going into the mountains up to 9,500 feet altitude was a chilly experience especially since the best opportunities for seeing the native beautifully colored birds was best early in the morning. Just as soon as we exited the touring bus we saw the rare dwarf Jay only found in a limited area of a few mountain peaks in central Mexico. Within the next hour we had identified half-dozen warblers, many migrant ones that we would see again in Tennessee as they would come North during the summertime.

It was exciting to be able to identify many of the warblers by their songs that we had listened to in Tennessee. The elusive bumblebee Hummingbird evaded us in spite of driving its familiar haunts near mountaintops and straining with trained eyes scanning the flowers of the tropical rain forest.

Coming back down to the surrounding town gave opportunity to see the local craft of weaving native wool, pottery making of the shiny black variety, a secret process kept exclusive to one family for nearly 30 years. We also experienced the local foods and mescal which is a liquor made from the agave plant.

The people were very welcoming and friendly, and I would recommend this vacation destination to families and thrill seekers of all ages.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.