

Tenejapa Homecoming

by Jim Kane of Culture Xplorers



Upon returning to Tenejapa, Jim gave the mayordomos and their wives a copy of this photo.

There was intense competition for the senses as we sat inside the church in Tenejapa in the State of Chiapas, Mexico. The chant-like murmur of the faithful conversing with their individual saints laid a bass backdrop for the high-pitched tinkling of heavy medallions swinging from the bowed necks of the kneeling authorities. The glow from hundreds of candles ablaze on the floor rose up to meet the shafts of sunlight slicing down through the smoky air. The smoke itself was a mixture of copal incense and cigarettes. Finally, there was the "posh", the local firewater, offered, accepted, and drunk during prayers.

This was the scene of my home-coming to Tenejapa, where ten months before I had sat with some of the butlers or "mayordomos" of the city's patron saint, San Ildefonso, and talked and drank. I was here with a small group of friends to deliver photos taken during that visit, fulfilling a promise made months ago.

The time I spent with the mayordomos that January day was not only an honor rarely granted to foreigners and one of my fondest memories of Mexico, it was also full of ritual, tradition, and exchange. It was a reminder of the best of community travel, where guests and hosts connect, talk, and share, each coming away with a broader perspective.

Being the only foreigners in town this day, we were rather conspicuous. It didn't take long before one of the praying authorities came to say hello. I explained our purpose, and photos were unwrapped and passed around. A crowd gathered and prayer stopped, replaced by giggles from the women and grunted recognition from the men. Sebastian, who had introduced himself to us, was a dead-ringer for one of the men in my photos and explained that he was Alfonso's younger brother.

"Is your brother here? I'd like to see him again and deliver these in person." He explained that Alfonso lived in a neighboring community and that Sebastian and the others were only together in Tenejapa on Thursdays and Sundays in preparation for this January's festival of San Ildefonso. They would assume charge of the saint and his festival the following year.

He invited us to the place being prepared for the saint's altar, and in single file we left the church and followed Sebastian and his fellow mayordomos through the dusty streets.

The site of the mayordomos of San Ildefonso walking through town together always draws glances. With our group in tow, the glances were more pronounced than normal. Our travelers' attire of khakis and baseball caps contrasted markedly with the authorities' black wool tunics and wide-brimmed straw hats covered with bright, dangling ribbons. Brilliant silver medallions swung from their necks, some with crucifixes attached, ending just above thick brown leather belts.

As we entered the wooden shed reserved for the patron saint, the mayordomos' wives took seats on the hay-covered floor along one side of the wall, the men on benches along another. A bare wooden table stood in the center of the room. Over the course of the following few months, this table would become the 2004 altar for Saint Ildefonso. The table would be covered in cloth, flowers, and other offerings, with the statue of the saint as its centerpiece and sticks of copal incense enveloping it in halos of fragrant smoke.

The talk grew boisterous, with various subgroups discussing a half-dozen subjects at once in Spanish, English, and Tzeltal, the indigenous language still spoken in Tenejapa.

Above the clamor of voices and the jingling of metal, toasts were made and answered as posh was offered around the circle. We reciprocated, proffering the bottle we had bought

upon entering Tenejapa (an old plastic soda bottle filled with the clear, strong, homemade spirit). I tried to follow the same serving order I had seen our hosts use: from highest ranking authority to lowest, then the guests, then the wives.

Thin shafts of bright sunlight entered through the gaps in the wooden slats of the shed, adding warmth and color to an already animated scene. The shots of posh began to take effect and the call and response toasting of the authorities and their wives, combined with the spackled sunlight and drone of multiple conversations, created a surreal landscape of colors and sound.

I found Sebastian and we discussed a small donation we wanted to offer toward Ildefonso's celebration as well as my desire to bring more friends in the future—to share time with the authorities, to learn about their traditions, and to support their festival. Perhaps, if we were lucky, we would come during the annual celebration. Sebastian agreed and informed everyone in the room.

Sebastian paused for a moment as another shot of posh was handed to me: "I'm very grateful to be next to this American who is helping us maintain our traditions here in Tenejapa. Thank you!" ✧



Jim Kane is the President and co-founder of Culture Xplorers. Having lived in 6 countries and traveled through 40 more, Jim now creates immersive trips to Latin America with a focus on people. Through festivals, home-stay opportunities, living traditions and positive impact projects, Culture Xplorers promotes genuine interaction between travelers and locals. Visit Jim & Culture Xplorers at www.cultureexplorers.com

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