

Southern Mexico reveals history and



ABOVE: The brilliant yellow cathedral dominates the centre square in San Cristobal de las Casas.

LEFT: A boat trip through the Sumidero Canyon was the highlight of the authors' recent visit to Chiapas. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS



Pedestrian-only streets make San Cristobal a pleasant, walkable place.

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

We gazed up at vertical cliff faces almost a kilometre high as our boat zig-zagged through narrow passages between canyon walls. We stopped to see caves and strange rock formations, or to get closer looks at birds or spider monkeys playing in the trees.

Most impressive was the Christmas Tree Waterfall. Wispy streams of water from a small cataract halfway up a cliff keep moss-covered rock formations perpetually wet, resembling boughs on a Christmas tree.

The boat trip through the Sumidero Canyon was the highlight of our recent visit to Chiapas, Mexi-

co's southernmost state and certainly one of its most scenic. It's a land of rainforest, mountains, wild rivers and waterfalls, with its high proportion of indigenous residents giving it a distinct culture.

Our main base was San Cristobal de las Casas, high in the mountains. Founded in 1528, the Spanish colonial town has narrow cobblestone streets lined with vibrant multi-hued buildings and ornate ancient churches, and is an official "Magical Town" as designated by Mexican tourism authorities, because of its historical and cultural significance.

It is a pleasant, walkable place, with pedestrian-only streets in the centre lined with sidewalk restaurants and colourful markets. Dominating the centre square is the brilliant yellow cathedral dating to the 16th century, with numerous other ornate colonial churches nearby. If you really want a workout, head to the Guadalupe Church and the Temple of San Cristobal, each on hilltops at opposite ends of town and accessed by a

long series of steps. The views are worth it.

A big bonus is that your money goes a long way. In Mexico the battered loonie is still doing well, and we found that Chiapas offered especially good value. For example, our organized day trip to Sumidero Canyon (easily booked the day before) cost just \$23, including hotel pickup, the two-hour boat tour, national park admission, a drive to three lookout points on the canyon rim for views that were just as impressive as from the water, plus a stop at the colonial town of Chiapa de Corzo. Local tour companies also offer a number of other trips such as visiting traditional villages, lakes, and waterfalls.

What can be better value than free? San Cristobal has become famous for its twice daily free walking tours. We expected a quick overview, but instead got an excellent in-depth walk around town that lasted well over three hours and left us exhausted.

Our guide, Tony, speaking Spanish and English, not only covered

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natural beauty



The authors' recent trip to Chiapas included sampling pox, a moonshine-like drink made from distilled corn.

the main historical highlights, but also took us to many hidden-away spots that we would never discover on our own. There were even stops to sample locally grown coffee (for which Chiapas is justifiably famous), cacao and chocolate, and most intriguing — pox, pronounced “posh”.

Pox was a moonshine-like drink made from distilled corn, and used in age-old traditional Mayan ceremonies. More recently, it has become a mainstream drink, even going upscale with refined distilling and infused flavours. Mixing it with coffee is said to make you wide awake yet calm at the same time.

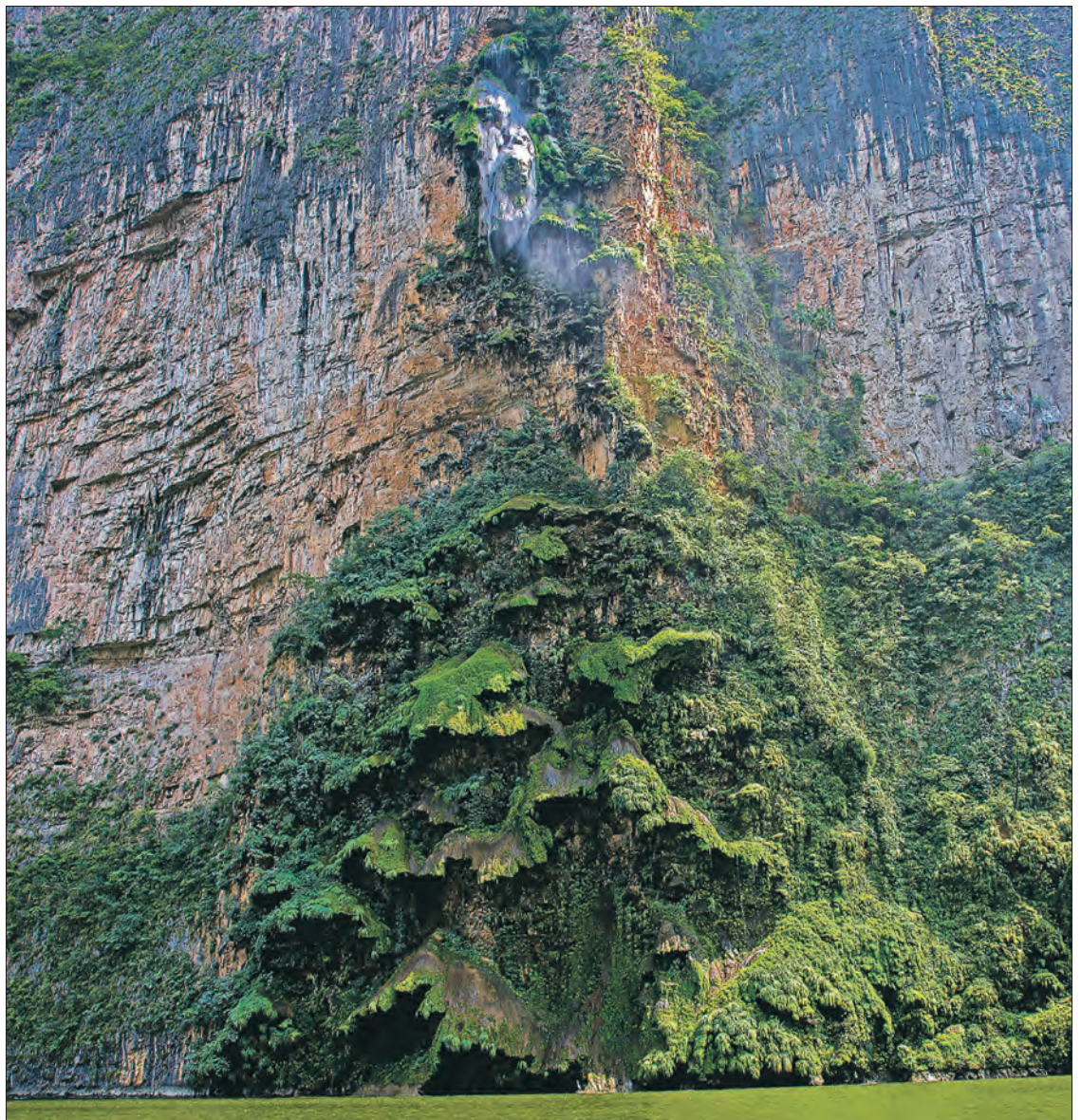
Most unusual were shops dealing with posters and paraphernalia of the Zapatista era, which seems to have almost a cult following. Chiapas, and particularly San Cristobal, burst onto the world news in 1994 with the short-lived Zapatista uprising, which began on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force. The main grievance was that the mostly indigenous farmers of the area feared loss of their communal landholdings, which would no longer be protected under the terms of NAFTA. The fighting didn't last long, yet today there are still some remote parts of the state where the federal government has only tenuous control.

San Cristobal seems tucked away near the bottom of Mexico but it is only an hour away from the airport in nearby Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital. We found that domestic flights within Mexico can be inexpensive, especially if you're flexible with dates. So it was easy to add on a trip to Chiapas while we were visiting Cancun.

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Colour is paramount in San Cristobal.



The Christmas Tree Waterfall was the most impressive sight during a boat trip through the Sumidero Canyon.



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