

Sam and Katahs' painting trip along the west side of Orizaba September '05

*Written by Sam Kerson
Edited by Katah
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For almost four weeks we stayed at Patrick and Alysias house in Xalapa, Vera Cruz, Mexico; sleeping in the same bed every night, we were feeling sedentary, and found our selves staring out at Citlaltepctl, fifty miles to the south, while we drank our coffee in the morning. We decided to go on a road trip.

We rented a car from *Kangaroo* car rental, a compact Nissan with 58,000 miles on it for \$30 a day. It was delivered to our house on Sexta de Juarez, Sunday morning about nine.

Image 1

Our plan was to explore the Western side of the massif, Citlaltepctl, also called the Pico de Orizaba, this massif includes the Cofre de Perote on the north end. I have never approached the mountain from this side. During my first visit in '72, I came up from Vera Cruz, and recently we have been using Coscomatepec as a base.



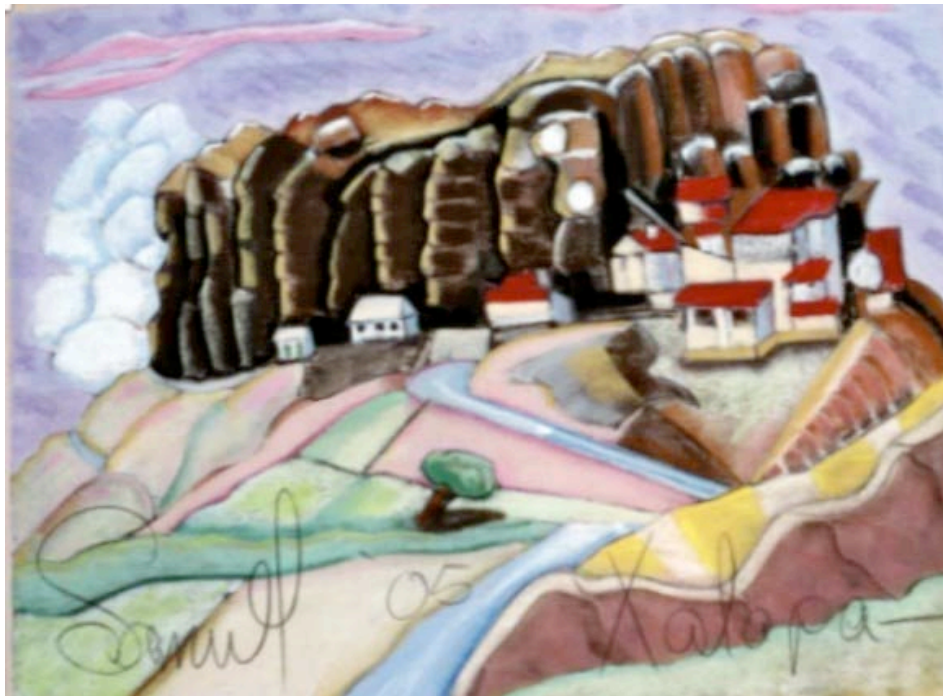
The first time I climbed to the top, with Mark and Isaac and Jacke, was from Ciudad Serdan which is on the west side but south west which is easy to get to from Mexico City.

The traffic was light leaving the city. It was easy to find El Conejo, the last town on this side of the Cofre, I had been asking everyone how to get there. The cobble stone road, up the mountain, was bad, the stones were too large for our car, but we have certainly seen worse roads. We put it in first, and up we went, slowly and carefully all the way. Climbing at ten k an hour, we wound through the pine forest, hairpins galore, rose above the tree line, and motored right to the micro-wave

station. Three hours from our house and we were on top of the Cofre de Perote at an elevation of 4,250 meters. The cofre is an enormous stone structure sticking out of the top of the peak, shaped sort of like a pirates treasure chest, if you look at it just right, hence the word cofre like coffer, it rises more than one hundred feet above the sandy alpine slopes.

Katah assembled her soprano sax, as she likes to use her instruments in these wild places. She first did a sax salute to the four directions and then went on to play a 45 minute improv to encounter the natural world. Standing on top of a stony pinnacle she was sky lighted by the cumulous clouds.

Image 2



We used the car like a fold out work bench. There was no one else up there. We opened all the doors and the trunk, right in the middle of the road. We got our drawing boards ready, laid out our colors and got to work. This was a couple days after Rytta hit Galveston, and there was a lot of turbulence in the air and various enormous cloud formations, high wispy ones and low thick ones. Some times the clouds were colliding with the peak we were on. The clouds covered Orizaba in the distance to the south. As we made our pictures of the Cofre, there were cumulous clouds floating behind it, reminding us how high we were.

At 4000 meters the sun is quite strong, it will definitely burn our pale skin, and we felt a noticeable shortage of oxygen. When a cloud passed overhead, the temperature dropped significantly. The sun felt scorching while the shade was quite cool. None the less we were focused, we wanted to make pictures, and got in a couple of good hours before the burning sensation, and the smell of burning flesh, no doubt imaginary, convinced us that we had to retreat. Slowly we made our way back down the mountain to the highway.

On this trip we are approaching the massif from the North West and driving south along the western slope. For a map we have a Guia Roji, which is better than nothing, but full of funny errors and disinformation.

We left the highway as soon as possible and followed the country roads that contoured the edge of the mountain. The first day we made it to Guadalupe Victoria, where the town folk were having a "dia plata" a market day and the center of the city was blocked by the colorful Bazaar. We walked among the vendors of chickens and shoes, clothes and fresh herbs, corn and bicycles, flowers and iron-wares, streets were closed for blocks and the vendors stands, all under brightly colored tarps, were selling all the needs of the town and the area. We went around the *tanguis* the market, and found a hotel. I was suffering a bit from the quick changes in altitude. We went out to check our e-mail, and then headed back to the Hotel Guadalupe to retire early.

The hotel was very modest but it had one of those big tile bathrooms you see once in a while here in Mexico. The toilet and the sink and the shower are in the same large, open room, this one is about 15 feet square, all pink tiles, with a little window in the roof that lets in purple light, that is filling the sky as the sun goes down. We steam the place up, just hot water, and indulge our sun burns and car weary bodies in the pleasure of running water. We are in bed by eight thirty, just after dark.

Looking for the Pico

Thinking that the Volcano might be exposed in the first few hours of the day, we were out before dawn on Monday morning. The country road had various obstacles, like long, man made, bumps that crossed the road at the beginning and end of every populated area. On the open stretches there were serious potholes, and sometimes unmarked construction. In one case the bridge was out and the workers had thoughtfully dumped a load of sand in the middle of the road so we would not fall into the fifteen foot pit. We had been making our way slowly south when the sun began to come up, first lighting the saddle behind us, between the Cofre and Orizaba. Our plan was to drive as high up on the mountain as the road would take us.

There was a very good road, asphalt with cement drainage, going up to Zoapan, which the signs told us was an Ejido (indigenous, communal lands). We drove slowly, looking at the antique agricultural practices the native farmers were still using. We saw a man following a plow in the style that the Spanish brought in 1512, wooden handles fashioned from tree-branches and a steel blade, dragged through the earth by a great ox, the ox came with the Spanish too. These farmers whose families might have been cultivating here since before the conquest were growing corn, fava beans, oats and potatoes, the corn and beans at the lower altitudes the oats and potatoes at the higher. The hill sides were covered with neat rows of plants as far as we could see in every direction. Bright yellows told us where the mustard plants protected the fallow fields, startling silver greens where the oats dominated, striated dark reds and greens like a barrier at the edge of the corn fields and beautiful red flowers where the beans were flowering...

We stopped in the village to talk to the men in the street. Contrary to what we had expected, the peak was shrouded in clouds. The local men did not encourage us, they thought maybe we would see the peak tomorrow. We weren't sure what to do. We started down the road where we encountered a group of twenty harvest pickers, about to enter the corn rows, with big wicker baskets on their backs. The baskets were strapped on behind them so they could fling the ears of corn over their heads and the wicker baskets would catch them. The workmen said the corn was for Pozole, a very popular corn based chicken stock soup. Seeing that we were interested in the corn they picked a few ears and handed them to us. We opened them, big white kernels, fat ears, sweet tasting but very starchy. In the middle of the field, a high backed farm truck, waited to take the ripe corn up to Mexico City, the workers would dump their baskets into the truck till it was full.

Ciudad Serdan, the largest town on this side of the range, seemed like the next possibility and we drove down there. It was cool and overcast and sometimes raining. I recognized nothing. The last time I was here was when Peter and Francois and I climbed to the top of the Pico and Mark and Lothian accompanied us and set up the camp at Caves of the Dead. I think it was in the year 2000. Francois stayed here after the climb and reported that he liked the city. We went to the hotel Casa Viejo, where Bernardo cooked for us, he was a local fellow, a guide who had been in a car crash and now suffered from continuous pain as he hobbled back and forth from the kitchen. Before the accident, he had climbed the pico 27 times. On the walls of the restaurant Bernardo had hung some paintings from Rodrigo, a local painter. We thought they were interesting and so we went out to look for the painter having learned that his workshop was just a block away. We did meet his father but not the painter himself who had moved down to Puebla.

No one was willing to risk an opinion about the weather, Bernardo least of all.

Katah went to the internet and looked for possibilities. We used Roger Oliver's suggestion for a weather page, but it was a bit too sophisticated for us to understand. The clouds hung over the peak, that's what we could see from the roof top, as well as on the Sattelite GPS images we found on the internet. Finally we decided to drive to Tlachichuca and look for an Alpinista's Hostel...

It was six by the time we got back on the road, we were driving north, right along the edge of the mountain and the clouds lifted! We swerved to the right into a farming village and made our way to the back streets and then actually drove right out into a corn field. In ten minutes our drawing boards were ready and we were working on images of the great peak's profile. Fortunately we had really slipped in here and only a few people saw us, none the less they gathered around us and gave advice and enjoyed our mania. We enjoyed their warmth and hospitality too.

Katah was involved in one of these typical conversations, about where the man, of the couple she was talking with, had been, in the US. He had worked as a *bracero*, picking vegetables in California, and then following the harvest up to Oregon. Katah was saying how beautiful the flowers in the corn field between us and the mountain were, when the man turned to his wife and said, “ you know, it is true, up there they don’t have any flowers in their fields”.

Katah’s early years as an agronomist had focused on eradicating weeds and this remark, as she admired the swaying flowers in the field, sparked her thinking about the effect of the agricultural industry. How do these chemical regimes designed by Dupont and Monsanto effect human and environmental health? It was startling to realize that Industrial Chemical Agricultures, “chemical solution” was intended to obliterate this same natural beauty that we were enjoying here at the foot of Orizaba.



Image 3

When we first arrived the mountain appeared to be wearing a Chinese hat, or the roof of a pagoda, with points sticking out on all four corners. But now the cap had lifted and dissipated, the snowy peak was exposed, the sun was setting behind us and bathing everything in an amber light and low clouds were blowing in from the north, this narrow band of clouds hung above the fields and below the peak so we could see both over and under them. We worked till it got dark, making it especially difficult to see the terrain in the middle ground at the base of the mountain. When we could see no longer we packed up, said goodbye to our new found friends, who had gathered closer as the shadows darkened, and continued on our way to Tlachichuca.

The Alpinista’s Hostel was a well known one, run by Joaquin Cancholas Limón and his daughter Maribel. They were totally enthusiastic. As greeting, Maribel informed us, that Joaquin was ready to pack us up and leave for the peak right then, if that is what we wanted. We understood that the season had not quite started and they were feeling a bit between jobs. We took a room and went out to check our e-mail.

We were working with Michel and Kirsten in Montpellier, France, to write a proposal for a production of, "Persephony in the Underworld", there in Montpellier for the summer of 2006.

Our hosts fed us and we looked at the various books and photos about the peak , especially a massive tome by Winston Crausaz, a volcanologist who had drawn all the illustrations and studied every cone vent and crack, in Puebla and in Vera Cruz that might be related to Citlaltepētl..

We went to bed early and rose before dawn.

The weather was still confusing so every half hour we ran up on the roof to stare in the direction of El Pico and study the cloud cover. Remember the clouds were coming from the hurricane to the east, over the Pico, and the night before we had seen clouds gliding down from the north. Finally after checking the weather maps and reading the weather reports neither of which were very helpful, we decided to go, because the sky to the west of the peak, we were looking out there to see Popocatepetl in the distance, maybe 60 miles, this sky to the west was fairly cloud free and we figured that was a good sign.

Joaquin had finished all his chores; milked his cow, fed his sheep, put his caged birds out, and got his four by four ready to go. The truck was out in the street , he was sweeping it out and putting things in it and polishing the windows, It was a ninety two, ford pick up with a V8 engine. The morning had slipped away, it was eleven when we got underway.

We head for the Piedra Grande Hut

Just the three of us, Joaquin, Katah and I. Still over cast, we stopped in the Ejido, Zoapan, just to get some drinks. Joaquin got out and switched us over to four wheel drive and we started the climb. Tlachichuca, is at 2600 meters (8,500 feet) and Zoapan at 3400 meters (11,154 feet)...The hut at Piedra Grande is at 4260 meters (14,000 ft). This is well above tree line, and right at the point where the volcanic cone juts up from the massif. No wild life along the route, but we did see cows and horses scattered in the beautiful high pine forests browsing on a tough silvery grass, spaced among the trees in big tufts. Lichen marks the north side of the reddish pine trees and occasionally we sighted the snow capped peak through the clouds. The road was deeply rutted and the truck lurched and threw us around. A difficult ride but we had seats and we were in the cab. In the past, sometimes we have caught a ride up to the tree line, with the wood gatherers, on these occasions we stood in the back of the truck, this ride in the cab with Joaquin was much easier.

Joaquin talked the entire time. He complained about the Indian practices, various ones, such as cutting the trees, burning the grass in the spring, or using the national park to feed their animals. We were not very sympathetic as we see these as traditional practices, but he continues to shout out, between four wheel maneuvers, his anxiety and chagrin over what is happening to the forest.

The road was a deeply rutted red gash through the widely spaced trees, and since we were hiring the truck, it didn't seem we could very well point the finger at a few grazing Holsteins.

There were a couple of scary moments after we got out of the forest when the truck was doing basic rock climbing, Joaquin felt confident, we looked the other way. Then we went along a sandy ridge for a mile or so. We could see the hut, the stone *albergue* and the peak with its northern glacier, and we arrived at the Piedra Grande hut.

Inside we found a party of Canadians resting on the big broad bunks, they had walked up from Tlachichuca, the climb had taken them two days, camping over night along the way and arriving an hour or so before us. They were exhausted from the effort and the lack of air. Soon a truck would arrive with their supplies and equipment. Their plan was to stay at the hut for up to a week. During the coming day they would mark the first part of the route with flags. This flagging project would help them acclimatize a little and later the flags would guide them, when they started for the top, in the middle of the night. Typically the climbing party rises around 2 am and heads across the rock strewn, sandy slope towards the glacier. It takes about 8 hours to climb up the Jamapa glacier to the Summit and 4 to descend. They want to put the flags in during the day so they can see the crevasse. There is a dangerous crevasse on the glacier which mostly everyone knows about but which is still dangerous and occasionally takes climber's lives.

Joaquin brought a gallon of paint with him and went right to work painting the inside of the hut.

Katah and I took a look around, we climbed up a little toward the glacier, we saw the memorial sign for the Walker boy, who had died here Feb. 21, 1998, he was 23 years old. We read and considered the many other memorial placards and crosses, remembering the alpinistas who had fallen on this peak.

Katah climbed a hundred feet higher, found a small flat place and changed into one of her horizontal, red and white striped, Chiapas, mountain costumes and got her sax ready. She played to the four directions and to the earth and to the sky. She started a grand circle of improvisations searching for the rhythm of the mountain, feeling along for a sympathetic riff she could follow, probing, speaking, singing out, she played her horn and circled and swayed.

Painting the Pico

Meanwhile I dropped back to the hut, Joaquin had brought tables and chairs and I set up a drawing station outside the hut and began to look over the glacier and the peak. This is a big drawing project everything is huge. The peak towers over us four thousand feet, there are fields of scree and broken rocks rising hundreds of feet above us. We see the edge of the glacier, a broken wall of ice, and then the rim of a bowl lies behind this wall and then half a mile back the volcanic cone starts

to climb pitched against the sky at a distinctive, steep incline. The clouds part and we see the peak for a minute.

Remember we are at about 14,000 feet, the sun burns our skin, there is a more or less constant wind, gusting, but also blowing steadily, and when the sun is covered it is cold. Some times pictures are easy and some times they are not. I perhaps should have acknowledged the mountain gods, as Katah did. I might have poured a little mescal on the ground, lighted a bit of incense, and in this way shown my respect for the earth and the sky.

Here, all the young people, call each other, "buey", Ox. I am like that, not riding the great Ox, but being the great ox. I shake my shaggy head and try to sort out the five or six colors of stones and lichens. In a small area we see a dozen different formations. To the right we see lava from an eruption, and landslides, boulder strewn fields approach the dry river beds, the face is scarred by deep ravines, All of this geology is prevented from sliding down by solid stone buttresses that jut out, holding the ice wall in place and forming the bowl. There is actually an *ecluse*, which at one time carried glacier water to one of the municipalities below. With my thumb I measure the dry river beds and the ice wall and the stone formations around the bowl and then the clouds blow off and the brilliantly white peak appears and staggers the eye. The Jamapa Glacier rises above us pointing into the vast blue sky.

I have a tight grip on the board, I lean against the wind, my colors and chamois and erasers are right at hand and I struggle to draw, the image to divide my paper into meaningful shapes. Concentrated, attentive, I put all my Ox energy into it.

We have been reading Gerstle Macks' biography of Cezanne and I see everything as cones and globes and cylinders. The cylindrical gouge, half a mile wide and a thousand feet high that confronts us, the inside of the globe forming the bowl behind the head wall of the glacier, the mammoth 3000 foot cone that rises to the heavens.

Katah comes to speak to me, she has changed to her painting clothes and put her instrument away. The wind is up, the clouds have returned, I have moved into the hut and set up with my colors in front of the window.

*Note: Images 1,2,5 and 7 are by Sam Kerson
Images 3 and 4 by Katah
Image 6 by Sam and Katah
All originals are pastel paintings on paper, 50 X 65 cm
They were created in Mexico, in September and October 2005*

Image 4

As Katah gets her materials ready the clouds blow off again and she goes out with her drawing board and approaches the mountain. She sets up, standing against a big boulder. She measures a little with her charcoal, she decides what will be at the top of her picture what will be the middle what will be the bottom and how far to the sides her picture will reach. She has walked through the vista, climbed the path, played on the stone pinnacles and now she re-combines all this information with the view before her and she gets it, she simplifies everything, she connects with the mountain and the image flows right through her and onto her board.



The whole complicated three dimensional heap of cylinders and cones, a mountain of geological forms submits to her composition in one simple gesture. Her time spent walking through the landscape and sensing it with her improves, her prep time, has effected her vision and the image she makes shows that she is in sympathy with the spirit of the mountain.

Back to Tlachichuca

It is five o'clock by the time we get loaded up again, back in the truck. The ride down is uneventful, we stop a few times and take photos of the afternoon peak. We are descending the western side and the sun light from the horizon hits the peak just before dark. Sunlight, streaming under the clouds, the light penetrates the dense air as the sun reaches the horizon. This dense moist air works like a prism accentuating the red spectrum. The whites and the blues become radiant and every recess glows and the majesty of the peak is fully evident.

Supper is waiting when we get back. Once we have eaten, we go to e-mail to see how our projects across the Atlantic are developing.

We are also following the conflicting reports from Puerto Rico about the assassination of Filiberto Ojido Rios, a 72 year old revolutionary and the self proclaimed, leader of the group of Puerto Rican Nationalists who robbed Wells Fargo in Connecticut back in '83..He has been a fugitive for ten years and on Sept 23, while Puerto Rico is celebrating the Grito de Lares, and Puerto Ricans' independence from Spain, the FBI goes to Filiberto's mountain home in Los Hormiguitos. 25 agents surrounds his house and they shoot him down. Early reports say there was a fusillade of a hundred bullets but that Filiberto was wounded by a sniper.

Image 5



Filiberto bled to death over the next twenty hours while the FBI permitted no one to approach his shack, declaring it, off limits to emergency volunteers who arrived when the neighbors called to report what was going on. The FBI cordoned the house off and waited for a bomb team to come from Virginia. When they finally entered, Filiberto was dead and there were no bombs. There are two reports coming from Puerto Rico, the FBI says, "he shot first", the Governor says, he is outraged!

We are waiting to hear the account of Beatriz, Filiberto's wife who has survived the ordeal.

..... We fall asleep wondering why a democratic country resorts to such barbarism.

Heading back to Xalapa

Wednesday morning, our last day out. Joaquin tells us there is a ruina at Cuatemoc. We have heard plenty of talk about the sacred valley and Quetzalcoatl's final ascent of Citlaltepētl and his disappearance and his prophecy of the coming of the Europeans. Our acquaintances tell us that the kings of the Aztecs were cremated here. All interesting and we set off looking for the ruina. The direct

road is closed, we try to get there through Guadalupe Victoria, the Pico is visible when we leave Tlachichuca. In our imaginations we can already see our pictures of the overgrown pyramid standing before the great peak. The road above Guadalupe Victoria, is all dust, a field road, and goes over hills and through dry river beds for an hour.

Considering how far back we are, the town Cuatemoc is quite sizable. We park and talk with some teenage boys in their school uniforms. They say the ruina is an hour and a half by foot. The clouds from the east begin to cover the Pico. From here we can see the cloud banks to the east of the peak and the clear sky to the west. The boys say there is a good road that leads over the ridge that stands between us and Orizaba. We try it, till it seems to narrow and we get discouraged. It is late, we are hungry. The boys have hitched a ride in a wood choppers truck, and they catch up with us. They tell us where we can eat, at the house of a couple of old women. They get ahead of us, descending on their bikes, and they knock on the door and make the lunch arrangement for us. The clouds are getting denser.

We hang out in the house, eat lunch, talk with our hosts, mostly about their sons and daughters, who are working in the U.S. When we re-emerge the clouds are lowering. We try the road again, slowly pushing further into the forested furrows, till the path becomes uncertain, it seems to be going in the wrong direction and it seems to be going down, and we give up.

Descending from Cuatemoc we find the farm road blocked by a truck loaded with corn, that has fallen into a drainage ditch. We meet a mother, in a jeep Cherokee, who is trying to get to Guadalupe Victoria to pick up her kids after school. We follow her through the maze of beans and corn. We are not in a Jeep Cherokee, but we stick with her, her eight year old hangs out the window and waves us on, we put up a great cloud of dust, traveling that route in convoy, before to long we are back on the hard top!

Back on the Highway...

We have to go about ten miles on the highway!!! Wednesday afternoon!! The traffic is crazy, dangerous, wild and scary. There are huge things that should not be on the road, one which I could not identify was one and a half lanes wide and fifty feet long and maybe 18 inches thick, it travels slowly with support vehicles flashing and blasting their horns and sirens. Long lines of honking traffic quey up behind it. It comes almost to a stop as it eases off the road to let the traffic pass. Before long we overtook two concrete bridge spans, they must have been one hundred feet long, they had a second little steering unit at the end. A set of wheels framed a steering wheel and a little man in goggles was sitting under the enormous beam steering. There were busses, big new Volvo busses, aggressively trying to keep their schedules. There were bubble gum and bailing wire contraptions, with shattered windshields and directionals hanging out on wires, that we gaped at in disbelief. There were chicken busses, belching black clouds of thick diesel fumes.

Traffic is bumper to bumper, two lanes, and moving much too fast. We hustle along, studying the chaotic signage, watching for Tenex-tepec...Tenex-tepec to Los Altos. As we slow down, for our exit, we watch the great trucks rush up behind us, our little car shutters as their engines shriek when the truckers jam their transmissions into lower gears. The exit has a three foot strip of dirt, where the asphalt is missing, and the far side of it is about four inches high, it is coming up fast, our Nissan is a standard too, we pull it down into second and swerve into the dirt, we skid, bang and bounce back up onto the hard top, the airhorns blast behind us and we see the whole crazy scene rolling over the *autopista* toward Xalapa, behind us in the rearview. We are instantly back in the countryside.

The Back Roads

A pristine, pastoral, bucolic, countryside that reminds us of the fields painted in Europe in the 18th, 19th century. It is late afternoon, we putter along stretching our necks this way and that. We try to identify the crops, and when we can't tell what they are, Katah gets out of the car and wanders into the field, studying leaves, checking pods, and pulling out some plants to look at the roots. We look at our map, trying to see where we are going. So we come to Los Altos, only to realize that we are once again, right up on the shoulder of the Cofre de Perote, when one of the locals suggests, we might like the hike up to the peak. We drive through the narrower and narrower streets till we get to the top of the town. The municipality is there too and we park in the grassy plaza, where sheep are grazing and walk up the last little hill top. Our Pico is still covered but we enjoy the vista of a large agricultural bowl that spreads out at our feet, at this hour, the sheep herds have their flocks on the move, school boys are playing soccer and a horseman makes his way across the landscape. We see a large haul of potatoes coming down the mountain and the farmers and workmen are hanging out, on the edge of the hills like we are, enjoying the end of the day. Brueghel's "Land of Coccagne" comes to mind, farm tools leaning here and there, golden siennas, indian reds, carmine.

Image 6



Men are grouped along the walls, warming themselves in the sun, and we talk to them, asking about the peak? Might we get a glimpse of it? We are ready to draw. They are unanimous in their opinions; there will be a good view in the morning. They assure us that this is the best view, right here from Los Altos!

We go to the bakery which is filling the late afternoon air with a delicious scent of baked goods. The boy suggests the *guisanos*, twisted crescents filled with cheese. We order one each and find them better than their name, which means, worms!

It is about five when we try to find our way out of town, the truck driver we talk to says, the road from here is, *media feo*, pretty ugly, and we had better go back to El Triunfo. After twenty minutes we arrive in El Triunfo? The road is all dirt, there are trucks, sturdy little farm trucks full of produce or full of workmen. A confusing picture, the road looks like it goes nowhere but we see a steady stream of trucks coming out of the distance. We stop and ask, the lanky fellow with a big smile says, *mas alla*, and points to the oncoming trucks, *adelante!* These directions are so common as to be meaningless, really we learned more from his smile.

It is a very pleasant surprise, at the other end of the town; the dusty, stoney, dirt streets end and abruptly we are on an excellent mountain road, banked and marked, smoothly asphalted. This new road leads us through a beautiful mountain pass that divides the alti-plano from the steep eastern slopes of the massif. Our Nissan begins to wind down the other side of the water shed, this is the beginning of the descent in to Vera Cruz. From here it is straight down to the Gulf of Mexico. We can feel the, warm, water laden, breezes wafting toward us and we see them turning to clouds right before our eyes. The forest fattens up, turns green and we see vines and flowers and enormous leaves. We are in a cloud forest or a jungle and we are descending fast.. Twisting and turning, the fine little road weaves in and out of the mountain topography, bridges, streams, cataracts, everything is descending. Birds fly out of our path as we whizz past.

The road seems to good and we don't notice when we take the wrong turn, it is really steep and there are a lot of pot holes and boys playing in the street. Also we get distracted when we sight the three sisters. This is the first time we see them in the form we have anticipated. Big squash leaves reach out to us like friendly palms waving and we see the bright red bean flowers, four or five feet in the air and the fat ears of corn and the golden tassels crowning the stalks. The three sisters, the traditional technique of growing the basic foods; corn, beans and squash together in symbiosis each helping the other.

When our attention turns again to the road it is so bad we stop and talk to a well dressed man who is walking along next to us. He says, there is construction below and we have to go back, turn right twice and take the parallel way down. We notice, he does not use the word, road. We ask again, three men standing on the first corner, they confirm that the road we are on is closed just below and they also urge us to take the next right and we will soon see the road again.

It is a bit late when we realize we are on a goat path, a dirt trail, the foot path between two towns. It is very steep and it has been dug up recently to route the

drainage from the town above along an underground tube. The town authorities did work on it, to fill in the ruts and the big holes and in fact it was passable. We descended very slowly, waiting for the donkeys and the pedestrians coming up the path to look at us quizzically as they climb past us, on foot. Releasing the brake a little at a time and letting the little car descend from one stable position to the next.

When we got back on the road we saw our first advisor again, he had descended faster on foot than we had in the car, we stopped to talk and again he assured us that we had missed a turn and that there is a very good road all the way up the mountain to el Triunfo. This good road going up must explain the name of that otherwise desolate and dusty little town, el Triunfo.

The next town Ayadualulco features a pole for the Voleadores of Papantla, a real tree cut in the traditional way and set up in the church yard. We might have lost our way there too, but a store keeper idling on the porch watching traffic, whistled to us when we made the wrong turn and pointed us the right way.

Racing the shadows down the mountain we soon come to Ixhuacan de los Reyes which is a complete surprise as we are suddenly in a town that reminds us of French towns we saw in the Pyrenees. Towns made completely of stone, all the buildings and all the streets and the bridges and the plazas were all stone. Home of stone masons, we thought, but soon saw that this town was a dairy capital, wealthy from milk production. Holsteins, hundreds of them, this must have been the perfect environment for them, just the right altitude. We arrived in the very last half hour of the evening light and we saw people milking in the field. One would distract the calf with bottled milk while another, with a stool and a bucket, would sit down beside the black and white Holstein and hand milk her. We saw this a few times in this couple of miles of road but also we saw big operations, in one place we saw ten or twelve farm workers who had just finished milking, walking away from the barn. As a final confirmation of the level of production we saw a big stainless steel milk truck heading down the mountain to Vera Cruz.

All along this stretch of road we enjoyed the Trumpet flowers, bushes with long yellow flowers in the shape of a trumpet. Trumpet flowers and big signs that said, Estimable Conductor, esteemed driver, this road is very dangerous, dangerous curves, frequent fog, very steep descents, complicated by rain and traffic, please be careful. It was getting dark and there was no traffic, we enjoyed our nifty compact car and the banked road and the good asphalt, the brook accompanied us on one side and steep hills and forest on the other. We, like mountain water, raced down the course laughing and chattering.

One more town, Teocelo, this one a small city and we lost our way, there is no signage. We talked to a motorcyclist who said, follow me and led us around so we did not have to go through the center and we were back on the highway headed to Coaxtepec and then into Xalapa. The traffic in Xalapa was noisy and aggressive and our place, because of the one way street, was only accessible at the end of a maze of lights and intersections, but we managed them and parked right near our house and we were home.

In the morning the kangaroos came and recovered their car without any questions.

Katah and I set up our pictures and started working on the designs we had collected along the way.

*Come and see the original pictures at our studio party
in Montreal on Sunday, November 27...!!!*



Image 7

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