

As we ascend through the Sierra Madre morning mist, a cruel joke is unfolding. Our tiny plane is being piloted by two guys who appear to have just left a good party. Both are dressed in black—one with a silver tie, the other in leather. Dance music fills the cockpit. Then, of course, comes turbulence. My friends' faces blanch while remnants of last night tango in our stomachs. *Chapulines*, I think. We actually ate fried grasshoppers.

Somewhere into Air Disco's third song, a respite arrives: The thumping music softens, the clouds slip away, and the deep-blue Pacific glimmers at our destination, Huatulco. This Mexican government-sponsored tourist development, pronounced "hwa-TOOL-co," originally was touted as "the next Cancún" upon its creation in 1985. For better or worse, the former fishing village missed its intended calling; it's still a hidden gem on the shoreline of the state of Oaxaca (wah-HAH-ca).

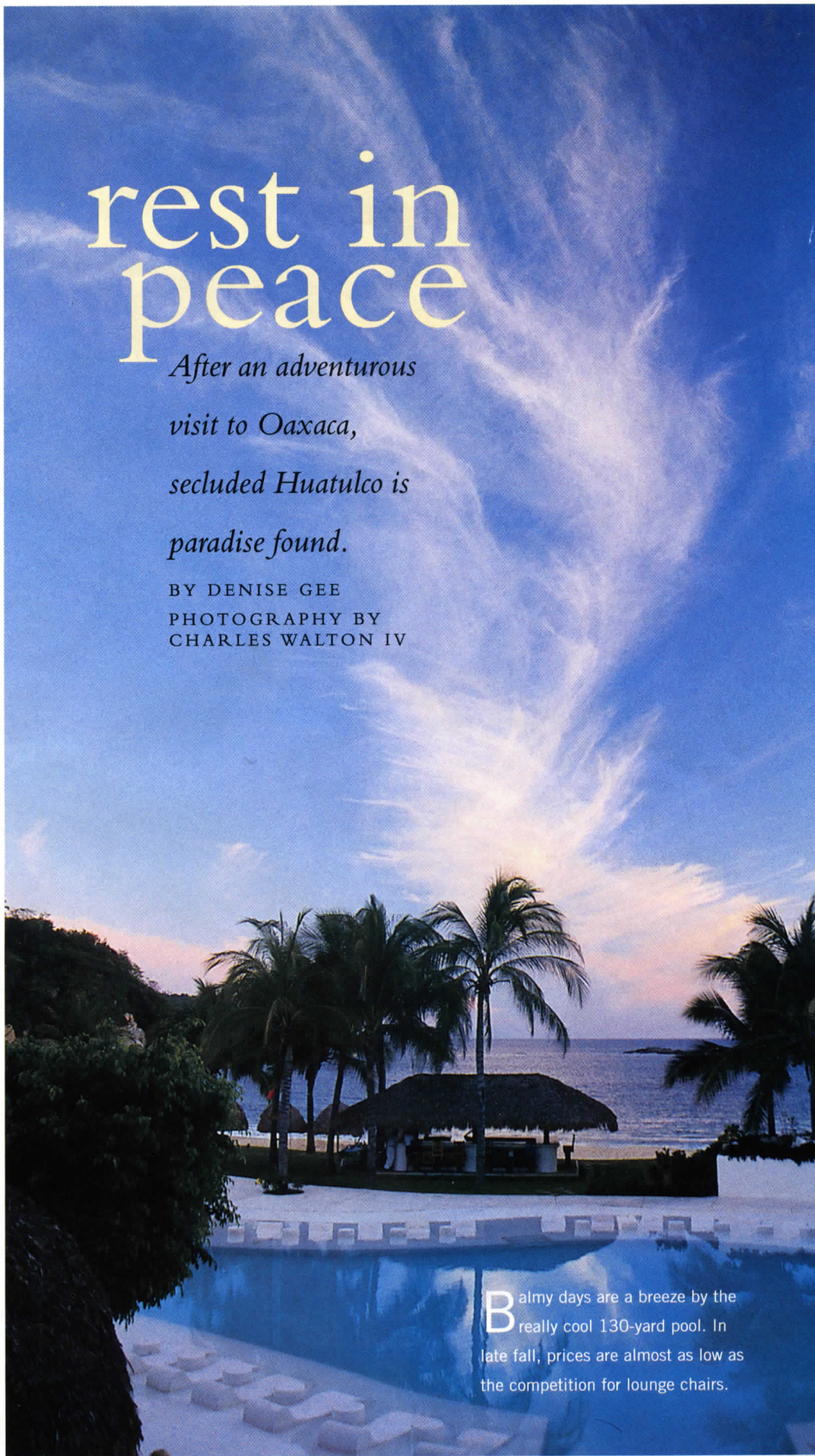
Tucked into rocky, remote Tangolunda Bay (one of nine in Huatulco), the area is ultra-beautiful and ultra-quiet. That's perfect for a foursome who've just experienced every amazing moment of Oaxaca's annual Día de los Muertos, or "Day of the Dead" celebration (see "Holy Mole," page 30). It's been a memorable week of eating, walking, shopping, exploring, and, most fulfilling of all, visiting one cemetery after another to experience the region's homage to its ancestors. Now our goal, shall we say with all due respect, is to rest in peace.

Amid Huatulco's handful of standout resorts, by far the most graceful and beach accessible is our home for a few days, the Camino Real Zaashila. Its white Mediterranean architecture is accented by rag-rubbed walls in salmon and periwinkle. Vivid pink bougainvillea hugs

rest in peace

After an adventurous visit to Oaxaca, secluded Huatulco is paradise found.

BY DENISE GEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHARLES WALTON IV



B almy days are a breeze by the really cool 130-yard pool. In late fall, prices are almost as low as the competition for lounge chairs.



each cluster of buildings, which tier downward from the reception area to the pool and restaurants. Walkways are framed by lush hibiscus and ferns, prickly cactus and tall palms. But just how beautiful the 130-room resort is strikes us as we reach the work-of-art pool and palapa-lined golden beach.

We soon realize another bonus: no crowds. Only a handful of guests putter about. Solitude is nice, yes, but also scary: Do the missing in action know something we don't? "This is a quiet time for us," explains the pool manager. "People start arriving in December, and flow in more through winter and spring. As you see, it's still a bit hot." True, a very humid 88 degrees. But a pool takes care of that nicely. During the next few days we stay in our swimsuits and convalesce, appreciating that even though people are in decline, service isn't.

Sunrise inspires a sumptuous alfresco breakfast at the resort's Chez Binni, offering smoked salmon-and-cream cheese omelets and Belgian waffles with fresh mango. And while some of our fellow guests head out deep-sea fishing, snorkeling, horseback riding, or golfing, most, like us, opt to do nothing at all. We choose to read by the pool, watching exotic birds splash at its edges. Later in the afternoon, we saunter over to the Beach Club for spicy shrimp soup.

By early evening we're ready to explore, so we head by taxi to the nearby village of La Crucecita, a new business square re-creating an old one. But having just visited the truly historic city of Oaxaca, we find the tourist fodder predictable—silver jewelry, rugs, cigars—and a bit more expensive. Unpredictable are the faces at the Americanized, biker-style Iguana Bar, or homey Oasis Restaurant near the square. There we sample salsas and discuss Huatulco's new direction: to promote ecotourism

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Markets offer marigolds and other cheerful flowers for adorning restaurants, cars, and grave sites.



HOLY MOLE

Though ancient Oaxaca is welcoming year-round, the best time to visit the colonial city is during its joyous celebration of Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, November 1–2 (All Saints and All Souls Days). Clean and picturesque cobblestone streets and marketplaces come alive with parades, marimba music, costumed children, craftspeople, and townsfolk celebrating their ancestors by way of Catholic and Aztec rituals. Streets surrounding the town square, or *zócalo*, are highly decorated with sand sculptures and personalized altars with loved ones' photographs and favorite foods.

Nestled in the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains, Oaxaca reflects a wealth of history in its Spanish architecture, numerous cathedrals, ancient ruins, earthy food, and proud people—a tapestry of Spanish and Zapotec and Mixtec Indian cultures. Uniquely Oaxacan crafts abound in black clay, silky textiles, patterned basketry, brightly decorated copal-wood animal sculptures, and charming skeleton figurines.

On the food front, Oaxaca is known for its mezcal (similar to tequila), chocolate, and especially moles: These thick, dark, chile pepper-based sauces, with up to 40 ingredients, aesthetically represent the soul of a family. Our favorites were at chef Iliana de la Vega's acclaimed El Naranjo at 203 Trujano St., just off the *zócalo* (mexonline.com/naranjo.htm; 011-52-9-514-1878; cooking classes highly recommended).

This time of year, days in the mountains are mild (averaging 70°) and evenings are cool (a light jacket is necessary). You can go it alone—hotels are always happy to help—or consult a travel agent for tour options. Mexicana Airlines maintains an excellent Web site on Oaxaca (mexicana.com), including itinerary suggestions/links and an overview of Oaxaca's food. Another good site is oaxaca-travel.com. Rooms book fast; make reservations now.



Life-size skeleton figurines, above, appear as happy as the children about Día de los Muertos. Altars and cemeteries are arranged with care.



interest in its iguanas and sea turtles. Such plans are still in limbo, though; for now, Huatulco is geared more for the slug set than adventurers.

“How can you all debate the merits of total relaxation?” asks our friend Dave, overworked and beach-free in Missouri. “I love not having anything to do but squeeze lime into my *cerveza*.”

With the highlights here eating and sleeping, we’re proud to excel at both. Encouraged for health reasons to eat mainly at hotels, we do so. Chez Binni’s international fare (entrées about \$16) doesn’t disappoint, but our true favorite is Quinta Real’s bar and restaurant, Las Cupulas. Soft lighting, music, and intoxicating Pacific views await before exceptional seafood and beef dishes arrive.

Entrée prices are relatively steep (about \$30) but worth it.

On our last evening in Mexico, a trio performs at Camino Real’s Bitza Bar while tanned guests sip after-dinner drinks and sink into their chairs. We choose to sink elsewhere. The soothing music of waves just outside our rooms is the ultimate nightcap. 🌊

OFF TO HUATULCO

- **Huatulco** is accessible via 25-minute flights on Mexicana Airlines (800/354-2562 or mexicana.com) and its partners; use a travel agent. Though it’s only 183 miles from Oaxaca, don’t drive the estimated six hours to the coast; mountain roads are unsafe. **Favorite hotels:** Camino Real Zaashila (this season’s rates start at \$130/night), 011-529-581-0460 or www.caminoreal.com; posh Quinta Real (starting at \$189/night), 011-529-58-10428 or quintareal.com; family-friendly Club Med (packages vary), 800/258-2633 or clubmed.com.

- **Oaxaca** is accessible via Mexico City (about an hour’s flight) on AeroMexico (800/237-6639 or www.aeromexico.com) and Mexicana Airlines (800/354-2562 or mexicana.com); check with a travel agent. **Favorite hotels:** Camino Real (this season’s rates start at \$172/night), 011-529-516-0611 or look up www.caminoreal.com; Hostal de la Noria (starting at \$95/night), 011/52-9-514-7844 or www.lanoria.com; Fiesta Inn (starting at \$95/night), 888/942-9612 or fiestainn.com.