I HAVE A BIAS AGAINST group travel, one I’ve nurtured since an early encounter with a middling rom-com in which the protagonist goes on a bus tour of Italy. I saw the rows of cheering couples, the matching baseball caps, the plastic sunflower bobbing above the crowd like a periscope and decided, Nope, not for me, not ever. So it was a surprise when, last fall, I found myself in the courtyard of a Oaxaca hotel, meeting the strangers with whom I’d be spending the next week.

I’d been swayed by the promise of Modern Adventure, a tour operator that sets its trips apart by adding a tastemaker—in our case, the San Francisco chef Traci Des Jardins, who made her name at the late, great Jardinière. It’s a model that banks on chefs and influencers as the new celebrities, giving travelers an inside look not just at a place, but at the taste and style of those VIPs. Whether you want to explore Japan with the Heath Ceramics creators or Greece with a trainer from Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, the hosts are as much of a draw as the locations themselves.
Which is how I landed among a cohort of passionate eaters, all of us getting our first real taste of Oaxaca in the city’s labyrinthine Mercado 20 de Noviembre. We trailed like ducklings after our guide, the impressively mustachioed Florencio Rodriguez, as he wove past gaping bags of chiles and fat sausages strung up like garlands on the way to Fonda Sofí, an unassuming corner with chipped orange plastic tables and a picture menu overhead. I slid onto the bench between a polished lawyer and Modern Adventure founder Luis Vargas, whose earnest warmth and easy grin endeared me to him instantly.

We were greeted by a parade of dishes: quesadillas with piney epazote; broth beef-and-potato mole amarillo de res; tamales wrapped in plantain leaves, cooked with a smoky-sweet mole negro that lingered on my palate. Any awkwardness dissipated as we dug in, passing plates and sharing bites and insisting, Take that last piece of chicken. Here, you’ve gotta try this salsa. Grab another tortilla, I’ve had plenty. Every dish was the best thing I’d ever tasted. In a photo someone snapped, I am blissed out, gazing up into the restaurant’s kitchen like a woman in love.

The next day, as the bus snaked through cactus-studded hills, Florencio unspooled the history of Oaxaca, how the Zapotec empire rose and fell, and how civilizations were conquered in pursuit of an insect the size of a lentil. Crush a cochineal bug and you’ll release a smudge of scarlet liquid: carmine dye, once more valuable than gold. The spoils of that industry are still visible in Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, where an imposing 1541 cathedral looms over a tiny pueblo, its flying buttresses comically displaced amid the low-slung houses.

“Every dish was the best thing I’d ever tasted.”
Down a long gravel road, in a cobalt courtyard, incense wafted on the air and Ella Fitzgerald crooned from a boom box as ceramist Manuel Reyes burnished a clay heart. His sculptures are displayed in big-city museums, but in the artist’s home they’re treated unceremoniously. Wide-eyed masks hung on every wall, animal-shaped vessels lined outdoor shelves.

In between were artifacts Manuel picked up while digging minerals and clay for his work: bowls overflowing with shards of Mixtec pottery; ancient metates, or slabs for grinding corn; and piles of manos, the stones used to work the grain, polished smooth from long-ago use. Traci—who is half-Mexican and obsessive about the country’s culinary traditions—ran her hands over the stones reverently. When Manuel offered to sell her a pre-Hispanic metate for a song, she was dumbstruck. The hills are full of such treasures, he explained. You only have to look.

Manuel and his wife, Marisela, invited us to wander their house to see more of his work. In their daughter’s room, a sculptural mirror hung above a dresser strewn with the stuff of teenage girlhood; one door over, a mixed-media grid was juxtaposed with piles of their young son’s toy cars. We sat down for Marisela’s chiles de agua rellenos, a labor-intensive dish of fried peppers stuffed with a garlicky mix of chicken, apples, plantains, and raisins. It was sweet-hot and richly flavored, with cinnamon lending a bass note of warmth to the brightness of the chiles. I’d had Oaxacan food before, but few restaurants served meals like this—“celebration food,” Florencio called it, worth the effort only for births and weddings. And, apparently, for us. We fell quiet as we ate, too delighted to speak.

Our whole trip wasn’t about food, but it made all our other experiences come alive. At the home of the Ruiz family, Zapotec rug makers in Teotitlán del Valle, we learned how they make dyes from regional materials, then Señora Ruiz showed us how to press masa and cook the tortillas on a comal. In San Martín Tilcajete, we circled around alebrije figurine makers Zeny and Reyna Fuentes, peering at Reyna’s agave-spine brush as she dabbed an intricate sun and moon on the outstretched wings of a hand-carved copal-wood owl. Afterward, Zeny summoned us into the backyard, where we sipped hot mezcal and sucked on salted orange slices as he peeled back a sheet of metal covering a pit. There, beneath layers of avocado leaves, a goat had been slow-roasting for hours. The meat was earthy and deep, with hints of anise from the leaves. “I don’t mince words—this is absolutely the best goat I’ve ever had,” Traci said. I mopped up every drop of juice with warm tortillas.
Anyone can book a seat at Origen, chef Rodolfo Castellanos’s lauded Oaxaca restaurant, but to explore Rancho 314, the nearby farm where he sources ingredients, you’ll need an in—luckily, Traci is the chef’s friend and onetime boss. Rodolfo led us to the greenhouse to harvest glossy onions and hoja santa leaves the size of my face, then to the pig enclosure, where a sow emerged from her duckweed-blanketed pool to prize a chayote from my hand and crunch it down in big slobbering bites.

In the grassy courtyard, a prep station was laid out beneath a guanacaste tree, where a petite woman in an embroidered apron stood waiting—Rodolfo’s mother, Evelia. She ran a restaurant for 30 years, he explained, and though his cooking is the subject of all the acclaim, hers is the example to which he aspires. Soon we were at work, my gloves blackened from destemming piles of leathery roasted chiles. Evelia supervised a not-yet-mole, stirring garlic and herbs in a clay pot over the coals, adding tomatoes, onions, sesame seeds, and hunks of fried bread to thicken the mixture. After a trip to the community molino, or mill, to grind the sauces, then a final stint over the coals, our meal was ready. Another hush descended as we ate. “Are you crying?” Luis asked. “Only a little bit,” the tattooed Chicagoan across from me deadpanned. “I need a moment.”
Even in my febrile haze, that gesture felt more revealing of the place and its people than any stop I might have planned of my own accord.

That night, at a trendy cocktail bar, Traci was insistent. “This trip is bonkers. You know that, right?” Despite all her years of travel in Mexico, she said, this trip held new surprises. In my own skepticism, I’d come armed with a list of places to visit in my free time, only to find that eating a legendary chef’s mole in a restaurant felt rote after the intimacy of standing at a pot as Evelia guided my stirring, or peering over Marisela’s shoulder as she dropped battered chiles de agua into spitting-hot oil.

When I felt dizzy and faint in the middle of our visit to the weavers’ home, Señora Ruiz pulled me aside and ushered me into her daughter’s room, where she had dimmed the lights and made up the bed for me to lie down. Even in my febrile haze, that gesture felt more revealing of the place and its people than any stop I might have planned of my own accord. I thought tours were for people afraid to see a place in all its complexities, but this one led me to a version of Oaxaca I hadn’t even known to look for. “The real Mexico is not in restaurants or in stores,” Traci had told me. “It’s in homes. It’s in markets. It’s hidden away.”

Modern Adventure in Mexico

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