

Journal of a Pilgrim in a Land Where the Dead Dance with the Living

I feel drawn to share a story with you — a personal story about my quest for lost culture. For foods, crafts, and a way of life that spring directly from the soil underfoot. For the joy and abundance that flourish when there is no shame or guilt. For what it's like to live again where children are complete beings rather than incomplete adults, where the elderly are Elders, and where all the generations live, laugh, and work together. For a life with the goal to become Ancestors worth descending from.

I let myself be lured into the interplay of the artistic, the spiritual, and the sensual that permeate the Aztec, Huichol, and Mayan cultures. I became mesmerized by sights, tastes, and smells that until now were only possible in my imagination. I stepped through the veil between life and death, then awakened to a reality that had no boundaries in time or space.

Now I invite you to listen to this, being the narration I transcribed as it happened.

The City of Eternal Spring

Anticipation mounts as we fly low over Mexico City toward the international airport. However, ten minutes go by, then twenty, and we still haven't landed. All I see below is endless lights dotting the low rolling hills in all directions. I've never seen a city so spread out like this one, with so few multi-story buildings; but rather, small close-together structures hugging the ground in a pattern that looks more like a maze than a grid.

From the airport, the first leg of our adventure is by bus to Cuernavaca, which lies about two hours south of Mexico City. I was looking forward to a ride in a classic chicken bus, with its market goods and crates of squawking hens tied to the roof, goats and children packed inside, along with a wide variety of people and parcels. Instead, I step into a luxury liner on wheels — a BMW, no less — which gives welcome respite after a cramped flight.

Offered food and drink upon boarding, I settle into ample velvet-upholstered seats, and I can watch a movie if I like. Or I can go to the back half of the bus, which has tables where I can sit and visit with friends while having a drink, sharing a meal, or playing a game.



The closer we get to Cuernavaca, the more flowers appear. And I don't mean just in flowerbeds in front of people's houses, but flowers everywhere, in all colors. There are vines climbing the fences, climbing buildings, climbing the rock outcrops, festooned with blooms of every hue. In a rural area, I expected the roadside stands to be stocked with fruits and vegetables. But not here. There are bunches of radiant roses stacked like so many pumpkins, only they radiate all the colors of the rainbow, and practically seduce you to pull off the road to select a bunch or two to take home with you.



A typical “produce stand” in the City of Flowers

As if that isn't enough, in the fields behind the stands where I expected to see corn, beans, and other food crops, there are — you guessed it — row upon row upon row of roses.

As we enter the city, more flowers appear: blooming bushes, vines, and even trees. These are no ordinary flowering trees — they are full of orchid blooms. I just assumed that orchids were delicate little plants tucked away in some sheltered woodland grotto, not at all a stout tree standing blatantly before me.



One of the countless rock walls, cliffs, and buildings perpetually draped in blooms

As if it isn't enough of a treat to have such a grand bus ride to Cuernavaca — for under twenty dollars, no less — but now to be greeted by a whole city of bloom. I am told, the city is not only a-blossom now, but this is the way it looks all twelve months of the year. Cuernavaca is called the City of Eternal Spring. With a year-round temperature that averages 78°F, and the eternal beauty of the landscape, I can see why this was once the vacation spot for the Aztec emperor and other royalty from Mexico City. To this day, people from around the world are drawn to Cuernavaca for the same reason. And the city supports a vibrant art and performance colony.

Castles and Crafters

The bus drops us off downtown, where the Castle of Cortez looms high before us. Cortez, conqueror of the Aztec empire and first de facto colonial ruler of Mexico, lived like a king on his plunder and the labors of his indigenous vassals. The castle, open to the public, is filled with artifacts from the era that tell the story more succinctly than words ever could.



A fortress for protection from the Natives who were ironically forced to build it

Adjacent to the castle is the downtown market, with hundreds of artisans displaying their fine art, jewelry, clothing, pottery, rugs, textiles, and carvings of all sorts, even sacred objects from the many traditions that comprise the Mexican metaphysical mindscape.

In the adjacent park and along the sidewalks are more crafters and food stands, along with musicians and other performers. Villagers in native dress come into the city to offer their various handicrafts, which range from whistles that sound like bird song and unique pieces of jewelry, to multicolored hand-woven sashes and leather goods.

A Sense of Family

What impresses me most, as I take in this scene, is the sense of family that permeates everything. From the roadside flower and beverage stands to the market booths and sidewalk vendors, there are grandmothers in the background tending babies, children both playing and helping to tend the booth, and adults of various ages tending to customers, preparing food or crafting. Sometimes an elder sits out front to greet people, or just observes. Child labor laws and retirement age have little meaning here.



Four generations working together

The families I see are not just isolated nuclear families, but extended families, four and sometimes five generations deep. There is a breadth of relationship: a sense of clan that I feel with their interactions. Along with brothers and sisters, there are cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents, all working, playing, and living together in harmony.

This sense of family is what I miss in my life; it's what my culture doesn't have to give me. I come here as a pilgrim because I don't just want to read about extended family and clan and how it works — I need to see it in action in everyday life, so I can get a feel for it. Then I can take that living example home with me and put it to practice in my life.

I notice the sense of presence and respect family members have for each other here. There is an easy flow amongst all of them, from elders to babies. When there is tension, I witness it usually being smoothly worked out by those closest by. With children, an adult other than a biological parent might help, or even another child. Stress and conflict appear to be short-lived, and it's usually quickly back to life as usual.

Even the Dogs

Another potent example that I'll take home with me is about how we become what we surround ourselves with, and it comes from the free-roaming dogs. Nearly all the dogs I know back home spend their outdoor time on a leash or chain, or at best, fenced up in a yard. If they are allowed to run free, they're running all over the place, fueled by pent-up energy.



A Mexican free-range street dog: centered, relaxed, and observant

The dogs here are different. Most of them are free to wander the neighborhoods. They look just as relaxed and easy-going as the people. Rather than running blindly across a road as I've seen so often back home, the dogs here will step up to the curb and look both ways before crossing.

Classical Cuisine

For lunch, we go to a restaurant that serves buffet-style regional foods, with main dishes simmering in large traditional earthen-ware bowls surrounded by side dishes of all sorts, from grilled nopalito cactus leaves to squash blossom, corn, beans, rice, chicken, and pork selections.



The main dishes are cooked over an open fire in classic handmade pottery

The extensive salad bar includes greens and fruits I have never before seen. Drinks include a variety of regional teas and fruit waters. A Mexican baked custard called *flan* and a cinnamon pastry called *churros* enliven the dessert selection.

I am here to experience the culture in all its flavors, so I sample nearly every dish. It's easy to do, as everything is included in one set price, which is what you'd pay for a latte at Starbucks.

As we leave the buffet of epicurean delights, our guides give us quite the teaser: There is another distinctive dining experience to come, this one comprised entirely of precolonial foods!

The Sleeping Giants

The next morning, we head east about twenty kilometers, this time in something more resembling the typical metro buses to which I am accustomed. What I'm not accustomed to is the cost: less than a dollar.

Our destination is Tepoztlán, noted as the spiritual epicenter of central Mexico since ancient times. As we crest a rise, I look down on the village nestled in a protective semi-circle of mountains. The surrounding countryside of low rolling hills makes the mountains seem all the more spectacular.

There is more to these mountains than meets the eye. Legend tells of giant people who escaped the sinking Atlantis, moved in from the coast to escape the rising waters, then laid down in a semi-circle to sleep. To this day, they have remained to protect the sacred space that is now known as Tepoztlán.



A sleeping giant

At the base of a sleeping giant lies the tiny village of Amatlán, about five kilometers from Tepoztlán. Amatlán is the birthplace of Quetzalcoatl, the Winged Serpent Warrior who came to bring a vision of unity to the ancient Mexican people. Quetzalcoatl is the founder and first ruler of the Aztec empire.

Sweet Entry to the Netherworld

We step from the bus onto the cobblestone street that runs through the center of the village of Tepoztlán, and right away we are attracted to a large open archway that seems designed to funnel us in.



The Island Portal

I didn't expect such a large chamber inside, yet what catches my eye is the tall placard beside me. I read down the list:

- Sinfonía del Mar – Symphony of the Sea
- Oración del Viento – Prayer of the Wind
- Nieve de Xilone – Queen of Tender Corn
- Primavera – Labor of Spring
- Arrullo de Luna – Moon's Lullaby
- Beso de Angel – Angel's Kiss

- Canto de Sirenas – Song of the Mermaids
- Encanto de la Montaña – Enchantment of the Mountain
- Mil Flores – Thousand Flowers
- Oración de Amor – Love Prayer
- Beso de Tepozteco – Kiss of the Atlantian Giant
- Beso de Cenicienta – Cinderella's Kiss
- Reina de la Noche – Queen of the Night
- Serenata de Amor – Serenade of Love
- Templo del Silencio – Temple of Silence

I grow confused, because under each name is a listing of what looks like ingredients. There's calla lily, gardenia, rose petals, marigold, cactus blossoms, cactus leaf, avocado, and various Mexican chocolates. One title has twelve dried fruits listed under it, and another says it is made from nata, which is the skin that forms on heated milk. What exotic temple of celestial delights did I wander into?

I turn my gaze to the island in the middle of the chamber, which is ringed with colorful carved wooden murals that look like depictions of scenes from indigenous legends.



The consummation of the Virgin and the Volcano

As I draw closer, I see that the entire island is surrounded with an array of colors and textures that makes me feel like I've died and gone to Heaven. Like an angelic guide meeting me at the pearly gate, a young woman invites me to walk along with her and sample anything that sings to me.



The sweetness of life brings us the veil-rifting inebriation of death

Soon, sampling is not enough. I must indulge. Pointing to one entrée of manna after another, my celestial servant places a finely crafted scoop of each into my bowl.

The Gate Opens

I sit down at a table to enjoy my selections, but I can't. Surrounding me on all walls are dioramas of larger-than-life — or I should say death — skeletons dressed in the traditional styles of the various regions of Mexico. Some are in carriages or old cars, others are riding horses, and others are engaged in the affairs of what was once life for them.



Living death



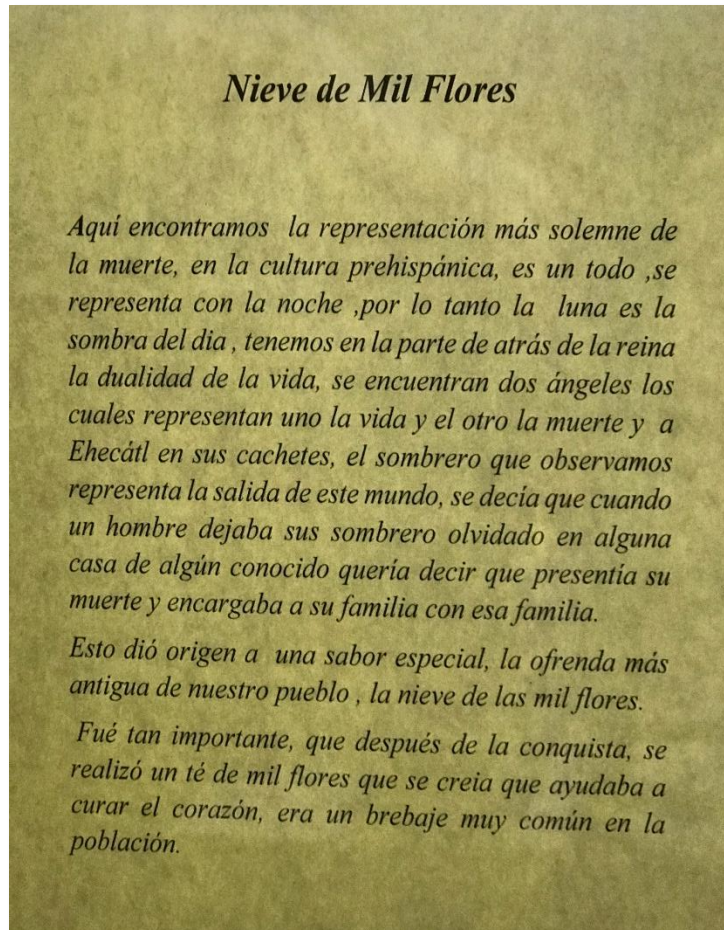
The Quest continues



Life goes on in the parallel reality

Were it not for the creepy feeling and otherworldly themes of the dioramas, I could just as well be in a cultural history museum, as the quality of dioramas is on that level.

A placard is mounted on each diorama that recounts the regional legend that is depicted.



One of the diorama placards

A minute ago, I said to one of my pilgrimage companions, "Wow, this has to be the premier ice cream parlor of the galaxy. There aren't just 31 flavors here, but hundreds!"

Now the names of those flavors, some of which are right here in my bowl, are coming back to me. They're not just someone's clever inventions; they're themes from *Día de los Muertos* — The Day of the Dead. This is far, far from any ordinary ice cream parlor.

The Forgotten Ones

One reason I came on this pilgrimage is to explore the portal between life and death, which has largely been forgotten or ignored in my culture back home. Many of us know it exists, but out of either fear or ignorance, and perhaps lack of guidance and example as well, we don't go there. In one way or another, we consider death a closed door to life.

Sure, we have pictures and memories of our grandparents and others who have passed on, but that's about it. Whatever we might believe or not believe about an afterlife, seldom does it include any real or regular communication with those no longer in our midst.

The schism usually starts long before death. Our youth culture gives little time or space to its elders. We shuffle them away to quiet out-of-the-way places that are nearly always isolated from life as we know it — and as they once knew it. With them no longer in our midst, we no longer have their guidance or example for our youth. We no longer have their counsel to help us with decision-making. And we no longer have the continuity of culture over the generations that they once provided.

Instead, we are left with epigenetic memories and wayward relational patterns that we have inherited, but we don't have the stories that go with them or the daily examples to show us where those memories and patterns will take us. Instead, we are left to fend for ourselves with the mute ghosts of our ancestors haunting us.

But something has begun to happen back home. Some of my friends are creating space in their homes for their elderly parents and grandparents. Home funerals and green burials are becoming more and more known and recognized. Some people are starting to recognize the ancestral memories that come to them as intuitive voices and dream guidance. There is a growing desire to look beyond the whole me, me, me movement with its focus on success, security, and status and look more at what we are passing on to the coming generations and in what health we are leaving our own precious earth mother. Those are the core reasons I have come on this pilgrimage.

Yes, it's fun to joke around about coming to the galaxy's premier ice cream parlor — and it probably is that — but until I stepped foot inside, I could never have imagined its deeper theme and the true gift it had for me.

Día de los Muertos

So here I am, immersed in a culture that honors its elders on an everyday basis and honors those who have passed on with a ritual that opens the portal to their dwelling place so that they can come back to share stories, offer guidance, and even feast, sing, and dance with those they left behind.

This ritual portal is known as Day of the Dead, or Día de los Muertos in Spanish. It is celebrated each year from October 31st through November 2nd. During this time, the boundaries between life and death blur, as elders and youth, men and women, honor the bonds between themselves and their loved ones who have passed away.

Contrary to how somber such an honoring might seem to some, this is a joyous, celebratory occasion. Families build altars in their home that are festooned with memorabilia and pictures of those who have passed on, along with special little gifts.



An Altares de Muertos (Altar of the Dead), also called Ofrenda a los Muertos (Offering to the Dead), created by local friends of Lety and Tamarack

Memorable and humorous stories of those who have passed on are shared. Gravesites are spruced up and decorated, and they are visited at night to the accompaniment of music. Special sweets and the favorite foods of those who have passed on are left for them at the gravesites.

Skeletons (calacas) and skulls (calaveras) play prominent roles in the ritual ways of the Day of the Dead. Skulls were prominent in Aztec rituals, and skeletons symbolize what lives on after the flesh is gone. As with the dioramas now surrounding me, skull-skeleton motifs play a prominent role in nearly all phases of Day of the Dead practices.



Calaveras (skulls) on Lety and Tamarack's Ofrenda a los Muertos



To invite their Ancestors to come through them, people paint skulls on their faces, along with flowers

Ah, I get it! This place I'm in, this portal to those who have passed on is entered only through the sweetness that first greets those who enter. The theme is prominent throughout. Painted flowers on skulls, singing and dancing in cemeteries, special drinks and condiments on memorial altars (Altares de Muertos or Ofrendas a los Muertos), rather than somber prayer, drab dress, and heads cast down. The people are gaily dressed as they eat and drink with the ones who are no longer with them in the flesh. What a stark and vivid portrayal of what we have lost!



Visiting the Ancestors' graves

A Market between Two Worlds

After spending a good share of the morning absorbed by the dioramas — and their sweet counterpart, of course — I let the cobblestone street guide me down to the market, which is even bigger than Cuernavaca's. There are more food stands with many serving items you never see north of the border. The market square, which is all under canopy, must be the size of a back-home city block, with hundreds of vendors who are spilling out up and down the sides of adjacent streets. The array of art and craftwork from all over Mexico has to be seen to be believed.

The fruit and vegetable stands display dozens of varieties that I've never before seen, along with several that I would never guess to be edible.



My breakfast of exotic fruits

Armadillo, Anyone?

There is one food stand in the middle of the market that stands out from all the others. It's called El Tlecuil, Cocina (Open-Charcoal Cuisine), but what caught my attention was the byline *Tradicional Prehispánica*. What ever could that be?



The stand is surrounded by benches on all sides, which face countertops that are stacked with what Lety, our translator, tells us are pre-Hispanic foods. I don't recognize anything I see other than some decorative ears of dried corn. There are no tacos, enchiladas, or burritos, and no beef or chicken. Instead, I am told, these dishes are made from snake, armadillo, deer, and bugs; along with various cactus leaves, flowers, wild greens, roots, and seeds.



Our group having a feast that words could hardly begin to describe

Chef Arturo, busy at work amongst the pots and griddles in the middle of the stand, is said to have gained an international reputation by gathering recipes and ingredients from elder women in the far mountain villages who still prepare the pre-contact wild foods on which they once subsisted.



Chef Arturo — a walking encyclopedia of traditional Mesoamerican cuisine

It doesn't matter that everything is unknown to me, as I'm going to sample everything anyway. There is so much variety that I have to take a doggie bag in order to make sure I don't miss anything. Serving myself is like selecting items from a produce stand, and eating is like nothing I've experienced, as every bite is virtually guaranteed to be a new taste sensation.



Rich and crunchy Grasshopper stew

As I leave El Tlecuil, Cocina and wander through the market, I feel myself getting more and more comfortable with the culture. The sense of family, the depth of tradition, the qualitative values reflected all around me...the overall effect nearly brings tears to my eyes. There is something innately whole and enriching that feels right to me and natural for me. And I don't have to do anything special to experience it, other than just be. I sure hope I can somehow bring this sense of living culture back home with me so that I can share it with others.

Dream Dragons

While visiting the stands and talking with their tenders, I realize that the Day of the Dead is a predominant theme. I see many of the items that I either saw or read about at Tepoznieves: colorfully decorated skulls made of sugar, paper cutouts of Day of the Dead scenes that are used in banners to decorate family altars, a wide variety of ceramic and wooden skulls and skeletons, and colorful clothing appropriate for the ritual.

One item stands out. Back at Tepoznieves, there were some fanciful creatures in a couple of the dioramas that looked like mermaids and other half human – half non-human animal beings.



A messenger from the Dreamtime

Here at the market, I am seeing something similar, only they are very small and brightly colored. They superficially resemble animals I am familiar with: Armadillos, Rabbits, Coyotes, Cats, even Dragons. I need to stress the 'superficially,' because their contorted shapes and wild colors make them look like they've come straight out of a nightmare or a trance journey.



Alebrijes straight out of the imaginal realm we call nightmares



The Dragon's breath lures the Shaman on a soul retrieval



*All of the above, from Lety and Tamarack's Ofrenda a los Muertos,
stand ready for requests to enter*

Sure enough, our translator says that's exactly the case. The figurines are called *Alebrijes*, and they are a part of the Mayan tradition of central and southern Mexico. What one of us might dismiss as a weird creature from a crazy dream is taken seriously and listened to by Mayan people. When they are visited by such a creature in a dream or soul journey, they hold on to the significance of the visitation by recreating the personage out of sacred wood. That explains why the few *Alebrijes* that are found here are up on special shelves. I'll bring home one that speaks to me to remind me about the sacredness of dreams, and to have an example showing others that the voices that speak to me in the dream time may be of value.

How Conquerors Seduce

On the far side of the market, I come out on a veranda with another archway looming before me. The symbolism does not escape me, and I look ahead to see what my next steps might hold in store. There, at the far end of the large courtyard stands a cathedral that would rival many of Europe's medieval classics.



The new guardian of an ancient sacred site

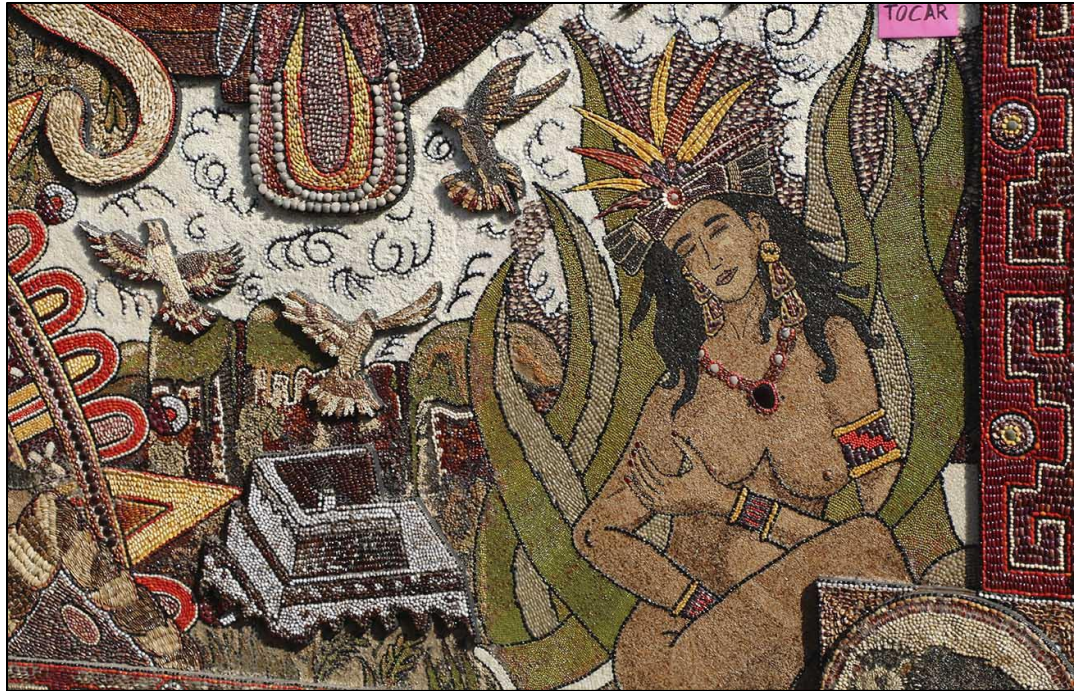
At first I am dumbfounded by the sight of such grandeur and massiveness here at the edge of a tiny village in the middle of nowhere, but then I remember the custom of the Roman Church to build impressive edifices atop the usurped sacred sites of indigenous peoples in order to entice them to convert; i.e., if you want to keep coming to your sacred site, it's now going to be through these doors and with our trappings.

Before I step through the archway and cross the courtyard to enter the cathedral, I've got to give you a description of the archway. Its face is completely covered by a mural — I should say two murals — the one on the left looks to be a scene from an Aztec legend, and the one on the right is a scene from a rural agrarian village.



A threshold to hallowed ground

This is no ordinary painted mural. It is made up of tens of thousands of seeds of all kinds and colors. I recognize bean, corn, squash, and sunflower, but I have no clue as to the other seeds. Our translator says none of the seeds have been dyed, they are all their natural color, and the local artisans come together every year to spend about four months straight creating a new mural. What dedication!



The eternal Seeds of Life

I enter the cathedral, realizing that this is another approach to death. Here, the sweet and the bitter take the form of Heaven and Hell and saints and devils, though here, it's just one or the other. Heaven is forever, and Hell is forever, and there is no coming back to visit loved ones. It is a faith of hierarchies and absolutes which leaves little wiggle room and gives lots of control.



Another portal for the ancestors

I step inside the church. I am dwarfed to nothingness by the cavernous interior. Being raised Catholic, I've seen the interior of many churches, and they have all sported two features: an altar and a confessional. In this church, there are at least eight side altars dedicated to various saints and depictions of the Christ, along with several confessionals. I'm left wondering who built this behemoth, and for whom.

Yet what hits me most is the distinction between this life and the afterlife that the very design of the church portrays. The mortals sit in row after row of wooden benches, separated by an open space and then a railing, from a splendiferous altar made of tier after tier of fine marble and carvings which ascended into the heavens. The whole scene gives a sense of something unapproachable and otherworldly, which seems to me to be the direct opposite of what the Day of the Dead is all about, with its integration of those from this life with those from the afterlife.

The Making of Virgins

When I first stepped into the courtyard, I was torn between entering the cathedral directly ahead and another courtyard immediately to the left of the cathedral. Now that I've left the church, I enter the second courtyard. It is walled in and has inlaid stone walkways and raised flowerbeds, which give the feel of a classic European castle courtyard. And appropriate it is, for on the far end of the courtyard stands what could pass for a medieval castle. Only it is a convent.



Medieval gilded grandeur to seduce the peasant

I imagine how the missionaries of 400 years ago filled the convent by telling the peasant girls stories of queens and kings in gilded palaces, and fair maidens rescued by chivalrous knights. And there they were, living in mud huts and toiling in the fields. How could a poor peasant girl resist an enchanted castle with an altar resembling a throne, and priests in raiment that makes them appear as kings.

How grateful I am to have this cathedral complex before me that graphically depicts what happened in our culture, what isolated us from our elders, our ancestors and those who have left this life before us. How grateful I am that I can walk across the courtyard and back under the archway with its depiction of the old ways that the church promises to offer respite from, and immerse myself right away in another way of being, where the temporal and ethereal dance and feast together, and where my heart finds rest from its long journey home.