



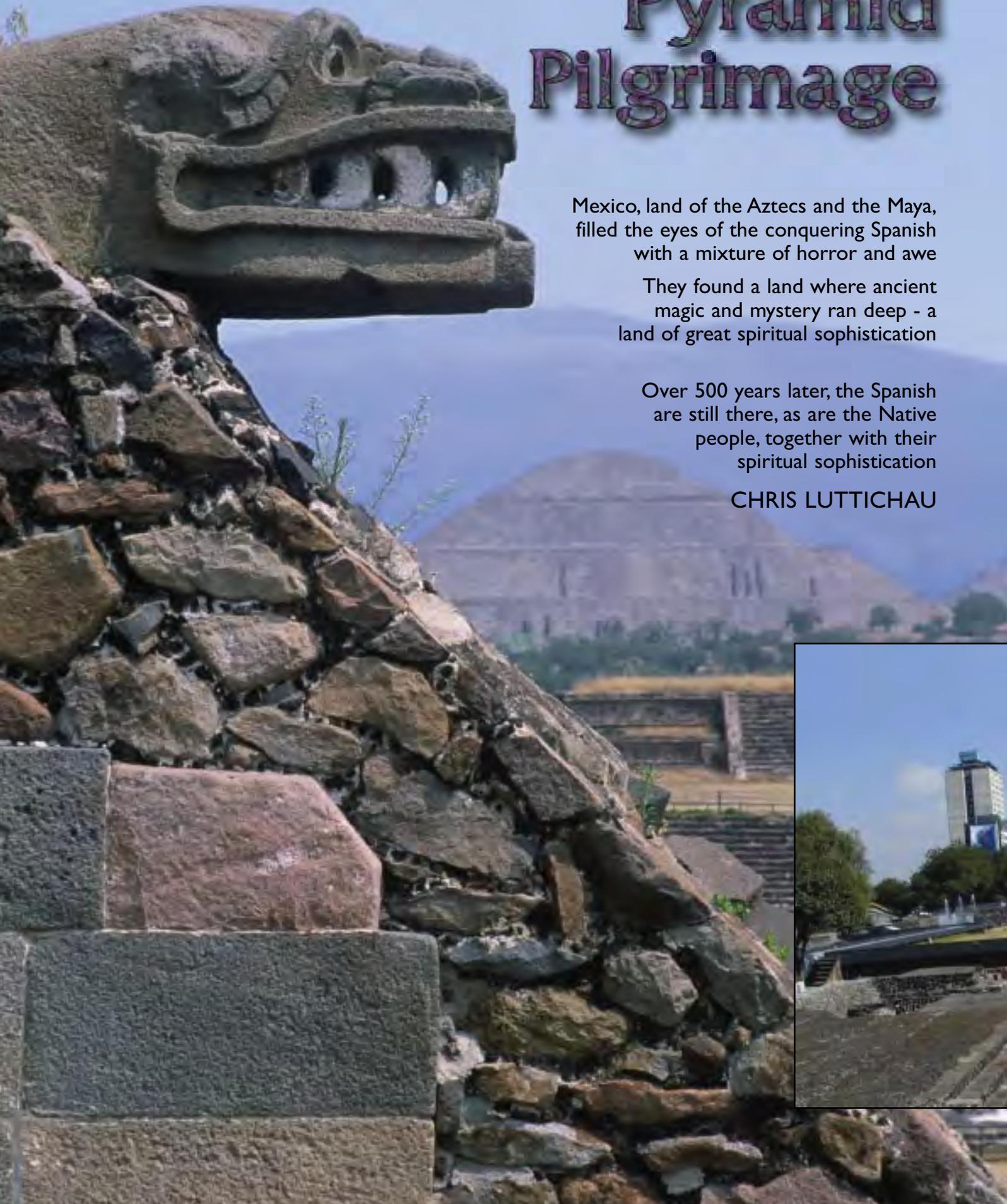
Pyramid Pilgrimage

Mexico, land of the Aztecs and the Maya, filled the eyes of the conquering Spanish with a mixture of horror and awe

They found a land where ancient magic and mystery ran deep - a land of great spiritual sophistication

Over 500 years later, the Spanish are still there, as are the Native people, together with their spiritual sophistication

CHRIS LUTTICHAU





"Welcome to magical Mexico!" Aztec (Mexihka) *curandera*, Eloxochitl, greeted me with a strong embrace upon my arrival in a hot, late night Mexico City. Our group had just landed from London, and Eloxochitl said she had a bus waiting for us which her brother-in-law drove. Like herself, he followed the old native ways.

We arrived in Mexico with only our hand luggage, as we had had to leave our backpacks and suitcases behind at the airport in England when the computerised luggage-handling system had broken down at its inauguration. Therefore it took us very little time to board the bus.

We drove into the mysterious, vibrant, fragrant night, full of excitement and with a sense of being fully alive, and ready for adventure. We were heading for the pyramids of the ancient cultures of the region, where we would be undertaking ceremonies for the next couple of weeks.

The first great teaching in the line of many on this trip had already come at the airport in London. The message was clear: "Don't bring your baggage, leave behind your

old beliefs, its time for renewal, time to let your heart experience. Mexico is a place of the heart and the earth - the perfect location for a shamanic adventure".

THE PYRAMIDS SPEAK

The following morning I left the hotel early and went to the nearby ancient site of Teotihuacán, while the rest of the group had the day off to settle in and explore the local market, and spend some time by the hotel pool.

Teotihuacán is a massive, ceremonial area with pyramids and temples laid out on both sides of a central road, called the 'Avenue of the Dead', which runs through the whole complex and at one point crosses a river. According to an official version, the place is about 2,000 years old, but some local indigenous people say it is a lot older, up to 20,000 years. In their time, all the buildings were painted in bright colours, decorated with jaguars, eagles, butterflies and flowers. Some buildings still show their original paint, but on most it had worn off, leaving only the colour of the stone.

The ancient past is still alive however, in the strong, cleansing

odour of the trees and the smell of burning copal resin incense, lit by people performing ceremonies. Everything about the place has a quality of light, and not just because of the strong presence of the sun.

I had deliberately not read anything about the pyramids and their history before the trip, and I told the group to do the same, knowing that the written history came from the same culture which has done everything it could to destroy the native spiritual traditions, and their keepers. I wanted to let the land and the pyramids themselves tell me their story and guide me on the ceremonies we would perform there. So that first day I went from pyramid to pyramid, praying, meditating and listening to the ancient voices that still are present. They spoke clearly, and by late afternoon I knew which ceremonies to choose for the group.

Over the next three weeks we would perform a series of ceremonies at three different pyramid sites, Teotihuacán being the first, as we travelled on our way out towards the Pacific coast of the country. At each location we would learn that the temples had kept their old power, and that they were willing to work with us. This gave us some amazing experiences. Each place had a specific power with which we would align and work according to the needs of the group as well as the individuals.

Facing Page:
The majestic
pyramids of
Teotihuacán

Left: a flower
seller glides in
the still waters
of the ancient
floating Aztec
gardens of
Xochimilco in
Mexico City

Below: ancient
Aztec ruins, a
post-conquest
church, and tall
modern buildings
all mix to make
Mexico city
what it is today





Above: the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacán

THE SUN AND THE MOON

Two of the main pyramids at the Teotihuacán complex are known as the 'Temple of the Sun' and the 'Temple of the Moon', and it was here that the group made their first encounter with the ancient spirit of place still present.

My first intimate sight of the Sun Pyramid was an unforgettable moment; I felt the power of its ancient wisdom, while behind me a local Indian made the cry of the eagle with a whistle. The Sun Pyramid held the power of the type of light and consciousness that comes from the sun, and consequently we used this place for ceremonies relating to such powers. Both men and women worked there.

The Moon pyramid however, seemed to have a very different power, and I wanted to know more about this, so I met and talked with

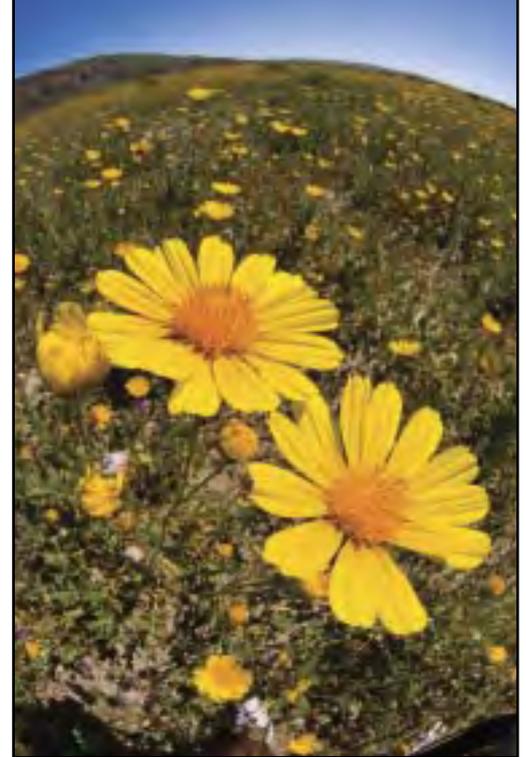
some local medicine people, and they all said it was a place for the women to do ceremony - not the men. So when it was time to visit the Moon Pyramid, only the women went up and did work relating to women's teachings and their connection to the moon there. The moon is the 'chief of all women,' as one of my teachers in North America calls her.

Awakening, raising consciousness, strengthening, initiation and healing were the main themes of our work at Teotihuacán, and the spirit of the ancient ones was there to guide and teach us throughout.

TEACHINGS OF THE FLOWERS

As we left Teotihuacán, we travelled overland across Mexico to visit the other sacred sites. Some of the temples we visited were well-known and well-frequented, but others were far more remote, and these we had almost to ourselves.

All of them were immensely beautiful and powerful, and we could only marvel at the thought of what they would have looked and felt like in the old days, when they were painted in bright colours, and used and maintained by the people who honoured them, and understood their secrets.



The second pyramid site we visited was Xochicalco, We were told that traditionally it had been a place where people would seek to find and awaken within themselves the qualities of flowers. This temple complex seemed to have an amazingly pure and high vibration, and members of the group had strong healing experiences with the flower qualities that played a central role in the spiritual tradition of the ancient peoples of these lands.

According to the teachings we received, one of the qualities of flowers is flexibility. Flowers, like humans, are sensitive beings, easily affected by the forces around them. Still, they bend and rise up again when the strong winds blow, or if a hailstorm hits them.

Our psyche is delicate and can easily be torn, just like flowers.

Below: the Avenue of the Dead from the slopes of the Pyramid of the Moon. The Pyramid of the Sun is on the left of the Avenue





Above: the temple of Xochicalco

Like flowers, we can develop emotional flexibility and resilience, so that we can recover quickly and rise again.

Flowers also possess will-power. They survive and flourish under difficult conditions. They adapt to their surroundings, even under very difficult circumstances. I saw flowers growing out of rocks with just a little bit of soil and very little rain during the summer time, and still they were bright and shining.

The teachings state that by meditating on the flowers and their qualities, we learn how to live, how to express ourselves, and to be in the world with all of our colours, fully expressing who we really are. I was told that the old people of Mexico perceived the teachings of the flowers directly in this way, and made space and time for such insights in their lives.

RUNNING UP THAT HILL

The third pyramid location we visited was built high in the mountains, close to Tepoztlan, and we hiked a long way to reach it. It felt very close to the roof of the sky; vultures circled at eye level or in the valleys below us. The trail led up through a mystifying landscape of ancient trees, vines with huge fragrant flowers, mysterious boulders and large birds of prey wheeling above.

Native people, both men and women, ran up and down the steep, rocky trail leading to the pyramid near Tepoztlan, a trail that challenged most others even at a slow pace.

Indigenous people from South, Middle and North America are known for their ability to run with incredible endurance, performing feats that defy natural law. Their abilities include running in the dark, even on bumpy, stony terrain, and running for very long distances without rest, food or water. This kind of running tradition has

mystical elements, but it also served practical purposes such as being able to swiftly bring messages from one location to another. It was part of the people's way of communicating and staying connected, and they depended on these runners. Their skills could be of vital importance in case of danger or threats to the community.

As a runner, I could really appreciate what I saw on the route to this particular pyramid. The runners were able to place their feet on the jagged, rock-covered trail with speed and accuracy. I learned more about running by watching them, than from all the reading I had done over the years.

Their state when running is fundamentally a shamanic one, where a power greater than the mind takes over and enables them to accomplish what would be impossible in a normal state of consciousness. Amongst shamans this consciousness is often connected to the spirit animals and the esoteric teachings that relate to them. The ancient people of Mexico knew this way, and it seems to have survived.

WORK WITH A CURANDERA

Four days of our time in Mexico were spent working with Eloxochitl. She had been trained as a curandera, a healer, since childhood. Like many Mexicans she had a big heart and smiled often. She and her apprentices helped us in numerous ways during the trip, and her many sisters cooked us exquisite, traditional meals.

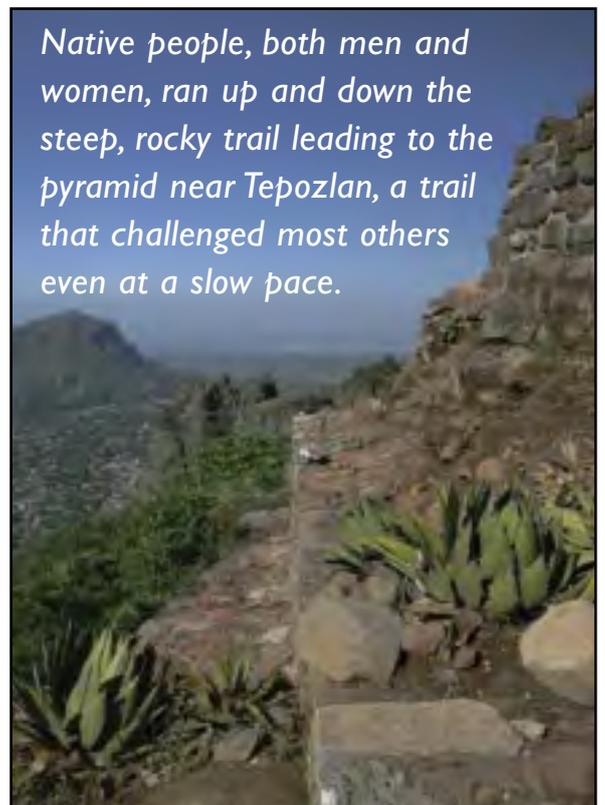
On the first day of our work with her she performed a Mexihka sweat lodge ceremony. She called it a *temascal*, explaining that the word means: 'House of stone of men's underwear'. Like a woman's womb, she told us, and like men's underwear, it is the protector of the seed of life.

The *temascal* was a permanent structure, made of clay and stone, with fragrant herbs hanging from its ceiling. It was round, and both the shape and size were like an average sweat lodge. A couple of days later, I was invited to visit a medicine man that had a *temascal* big enough to hold forty people, and so tall that there were chairs inside.

Our ceremony was in Eloxochitl's smaller lodge, where we sat on the red earth while she led the ceremony with impeccable strength and humour. Emerging afterwards from the low entrance to greet the bright sun, our group felt cleansed and blessed.

Later Eloxochitl's assistant guided us on a walk to gather herbs for healing amongst huge cacti and trees. This was a place where the old power of the land was still strongly present, and where the veil to the spirit world was thin; many members of the group had strong encounters with the forces of invisible realms, something that happened often in Mexico. Being touched by the mystery became a frequent blessing.

Native people, both men and women, ran up and down the steep, rocky trail leading to the pyramid near Tepoztlan, a trail that challenged most others even at a slow pace.





One night Eloxochitl took us up to a sacred mountain where we would spend a night of vigil, while she and her helpers stayed in a base camp half way up the mountain, tending a fire. The high altitude meant that the temperature dropped at night, and we had to make an ally of the cold. It helped us stay awake and maintain a prayerful state of mind. On that night all the members of the group understood why the locals called it a sacred mountain.

When returning to the fire after our vigil, the curandera's brother-in-law, our bus driver, greeted us with a bear hug and wrapped each one of us in a warm blanket.

Eloxochitl showed us some of the healing methods that she used herself, in her practice as the local healer. They were similar to the methods we already knew, yet distinct in some respects. She performed a healing method very like

the soul retrieval work the group was familiar with from the UK, but it was carried out in quite a contrasting manner, much more dramatically.

She called it spirit retrieval, and it involved the use of rattles, whistles or flutes, rubbing alcohol onto the body of the client, loud prayers, and verbally calling back the power that the client had lost.

It is always inspiring to see accomplished healers work, and many people in the group reported that the soul retrieval work Eloxochitl had done for them had been very effective and powerful. One woman said that for the first time for as long as she could remember, she felt alive.

WORK WITH THE SPIRIT HELPERS

After leading a beautiful thanksgiving ritual one night, Eloxochitl explained the Mexihka world of spirit helpers and allies. As with her healing methods, hers was fundamentally the same world we knew from our own and other traditions, but in different clothing and colour.

The concept of power animals was basically the same as the one we were familiar with. There was an emphasis on spirit teachers being your friends with whom you can share everything that is happening in your life, and they will help you let go of what needs to be released. We were told that you can have many different ones, and that you can choose which ones you want. They could be anything from a tree to the sun. Generally there was an emphasis on the importance of developing close relationships with your spirit helpers.

This particular perspective, born from the ancient magical Aztec and Toltec traditions, was very inspiring for me to hear, because it showed me that the native people

of Mexico have kept their precious spiritual teachings alive, in spite of all the odds, and in spite of the incredible brutality of their conquering invaders.

THE LIZARD AND THE CHURCH

In one of the small towns we visited, I wandered around a colourful market where they sold everything from beautiful native handicraft to chilli pepper ice cream. I suddenly found myself by a walled churchyard and I felt drawn to enter through the gateway, which revealed an old colonial church. I sat down on a bench to watch the local people coming and going through the wide wooden door. People ate their lunches on the grass, old men and women dozed in the shade of tall trees, young lovers lounged on the benches.

At one point I noticed a lizard crawling on a tree close to me. The lizard stopped and watched me with its characteristic eyes, its body rising and lowering, before it climbed again. I began to feel a strong energetic connection between us, so I kept watching.

The lizard had led me into the dreaming, and the energy of the churchyard opened up in front of my eyes and revealed itself in its spirit form. As reality expanded I experienced the sacredness of the whole area around the town and the impact of the nearby pyramid became clear. I then remembered the curandera's words: "Welcome to magical Mexico!"

MEETING MOTHER OCEAN

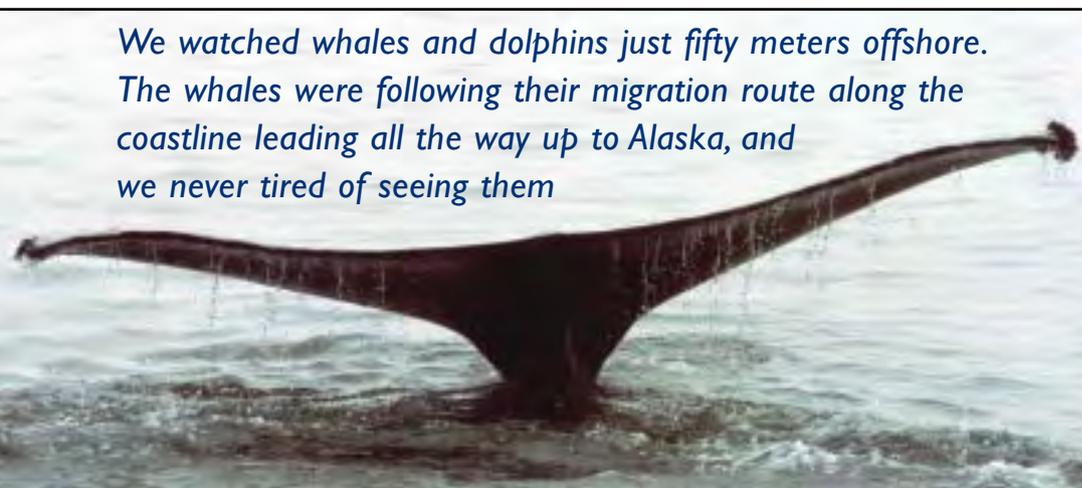
During the last part of our trip we came, at last, to the Pacific Ocean. Here we had the time we needed for taking in all the teachings and the ceremonies we had experienced. We swam in the warm waters, paddled in a stunningly beautiful lagoon, watched amazing exotic birds, rode speedy and well-groomed horses on the sand, and ate more superb Mexican food.

For eight days we watched whales and dolphins, just fifty meters offshore. The whales were following their migration route along the coastline leading all the way up to Alaska, and we never tired of seeing them surface, their imminent appearance announced by a fountain of water.

One of the great teachings the trip had given was that of being part of a group, part of a tribe.

Below: whales swim in the warm waters of the Pacific of the Mexican coast

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This was the way my teachers in North America had taught me for over twenty years, and this was what we practised on this trip.

It was not the kind of venture where everyone does their own thing, staying in their own isolated worlds. Shamanism and native spirituality come from cultures where the people are connected, where their minds are linked, and everyone knows how to move as a unit; where they can experience true fellowship in which people support and care for each other.

BLOODY TALES - LIAR'S SCRAWL

At one point I was asked by an English woman I met why I would take a group of people to sites where there had been so much human sacrifice carried out by the native people who had lived there.

As I thought about my answer, I remembered standing with the curandera Eloxochitl beside a temple ruin. A metal plate bore a description, written by archaeologists, of how the temple had been used. Eloxochitl said then that what we read in historic literature is not the truth, but an attempt by invaders to justify their own massacres, their slaughter of the native people, and their theft of land, by bringing out lurid reports of human sacrifice from Mexico.

Some native people told me there had been no human sacrifices at the pyramids. Others told me they had happened at one point in history when decadence had permeated society, and some of the sacred sites had been misused. However, it had not been to the extent that history likes to portray it.

Whatever the degree of human sacrifice the civilisations of Meso-America took part in, the West is besotted with tales of blood. Despite how highly-developed the civilisations in Meso-America were, despite their calendars being far more accurate than the European Gregorian calendar, and despite their cities being cleaner and healthier and much better-organised than their European counterparts, if historians find any evidence of human sacrifice anywhere they will focus on it above all else.

Buffy Saint Marie, a Canadian Cree singer-songwriter, summed it up in one of her songs: "Our history is written in a liar's scrawl..."

So my answer to the woman who had asked me why I take

people to sacrifice sites was: "If you want to know about human sacrifice, then look at what the European invaders did when they reached the shores of South America, Mexico, North America".

At the pyramid sites I found beauty, peace, healing, wisdom, strength, harmony, love and compassion. The teachings and the spiritual wisdom were in the buildings, in the layout of the city, in the architecture, in the roads. They are temple schools for awakening and raising consciousness, where sacred ceremonies were held over long periods of time.

And the ancient sacred ways have not vanished, as I found out in Mexico City when we visited the Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Eloxochitl was with us, and she performed a healing ceremony for each member of our group in front of a statue of the Virgin, while the place was crowded with people. The rituals performed there by others made it obvious that the old Indian spiritual ways had blended with those of the Church. I asked some of the native people about this, and they told me it was the only way they had been able to keep their old ways, and themselves, alive; by donning a Christian overcoat.

A MEETING IN THE RUINS

When the last day of our trip had come and the airplane would take us back to the UK in the evening, the group had the day off. We had returned to where we began, Teotihuacan, and on this last day I decided to revisit the pyramids to take some more photos.

As I sat on a rock overlooking an ancient plaza, I felt a dullness at the prospect of our trip being over, the kind of feeling that can come when leaving an old friend.

"I'd like to show you something," a man's voice interrupted my thoughts. An Indian wearing a cowboy hat, jeans and shirt was standing in front of me. He had a strong presence, like the warriors of old. I had never seen him before but he spoke as if I had.

"I come from a lineage of shamans who have lived here for a long, long time," he said. "Let's go for a walk and I'll show you something." My initial reaction was caution, but then I heard the whisper "Go with him," and so I did.

As we began to walk he told me about his spirit animals, and even more surprisingly, told me correctly what my own were. While we walked he explained the uses of the various temples and pyramids, how the ancient people had observed the stars through large mirrors on the ground made from layers of obsidian, crystal and water.

He revealed places where people had spent days in ceremonies letting go of negative thought patterns and fears, inside confined spaces built specifically for that purpose, and he described which ceremonies had been performed at the different pyramids since ancient times. He showed me plants to be used in healing rituals, and even gave me a demonstration. I listened to my companion for another hour until it was time for me to head back to the hotel, the bus and the airport. By then I knew I would be coming back.

Chris Luttichau founded Northern Drum Shamanic Centre after studying with shamans, healers and elders from the Americas for more than 20 years. He is the keeper of teachings that can be applied in all areas of life.

For more information on trainings, workshops, trips to Mexico (Feb 2009) and kayaking trips in the Finnish Wilderness (August 2009) contact:
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www.northerndrum.com

Below: through clouds of sweet-smelling copal resin incense, Mexican women walk to church, Aztec ways and Catholicism blending

