

# In the Village of the Zapatistas

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The entrance to Oventic, a village in the Chiapas highlands about an hour north of San Cristóbal de las Casas, is easy to miss. It's a simple metal gate with nothing in particular to distinguish it. Cargo trucks and Nissan taxis roll by as they do anywhere else in the state, and in the cold fine mist of an October morning, Oventic seemed to vanish behind the gate into thick fog.

That was oddly appropriate, given that Oventic is an autonomous enclave run by the [Zapatista National Liberation Army](#), the armed, largely indigenous rebel group that for many in the [United States](#) is synonymous with Chiapas. It was the Zapatista uprising on Jan. 1, 1994, that put Chiapas on the political map and drew attention to the group's war against [Mexico](#)'s government over the poverty of peasants in Chiapas.



A mural in Oventic, a village run by Zapatistas.

With the suave, pipe-, balaclava-clad Subcomandante Marcos as their mysterious frontman, the Zapatistas captured towns (including San Cristóbal), issued communiqués and declarations from the Lacandón [jungle](#) (whose outer edge I visited last week) and managed to negotiate agreements with the government on land reform and autonomy for the region's native people. Those agreements, however, were never fully enacted, the Mexican military occupied swaths of Chiapas, and paramilitary groups killed Zapatistas sympathizers (the most notorious being the 1997 massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians in the village of Acteal). Rarely, if ever, were tourists affected by the conflict.

In the last several years, however, the conflict has calmed significantly (although not necessarily to the Zapatistas' benefit) and receded from international view, leaving the movement of today a bit of a

mystery. After reading “The Zapatista Reader,” an anthology of essays, magazine articles and documents, I wanted a firsthand view of life in a modern Zapatista community. As it happened, Oventic, which is apparently open to visitors, was just a 30-peso colectivo ride away from San Cristóbal.

First, however, I had to get through the gate.

“Your passport,” said the man standing guard, his voice muffled by a ski mask.

I handed over my passport, and he walked into a nearby shack, emerging a few minutes later to escort me in. Inside the shack, two men sat at a table, ledgers open, while three others stood around them. All wore ski masks as well, not — as I’d first thought — to ward off the chill but to hide their identities.

They, too, asked for my passport and began to fill out a form. Where did I come from? Why was I here? How long did I hope to stay? All were easy to answer — until they asked my profession.

The problem: As a travel writer, I’m not supposed to reveal my identity to the people I’m writing about. This is primarily to prevent hotels, restaurants and other businesses from giving me special treatment, but it’s also so that I experience places as an everyday tourist would. To tell the Zapatistas I’m a writer would alter their attitude toward me, and worse, I wouldn’t be able to find out if a regular tourist could visit.

Still, I hated lying — I couldn’t simply invent a profession. Fortunately, as a freelancer, I technically don’t have a job. Plus, my wife was about to have a baby, and we’d decided that I would stay home to take care of our child. Conveying this arrangement, however, was a challenge. A jobless American on vacation without his wife, but planning to watch the baby? Leaving the form blank was an impossibility — they may have been rebels, but they were also bureaucrats.

Finally, after several minutes of questioning, we settled on a profession: *amo de casa*, the male version of *ama de casa*, or housewife.

A guide brought me out of the shack, and I began to get a sense of Oventic. Structurally, the village was simple. A wide, straight concrete road led steeply down the hillside, with buildings on either side. Some had obvious functions — a hospital, a school — while others did not. Many were low, wooden buildings with corrugated tin roofs and brilliant murals mythologizing the struggle. Emiliano Zapata — a hero of the 1910 Mexican Revolution — stared out from the *Snail Mu’ktal Tzob’onbail* (in Tzotzil, the House of Grand Meetings), machete in one hand, an army behind him. A purple-faced woman, the red handkerchief around her face stamped EZLN (the movement’s Spanish abbreviation), looked out from another wall under the slogan “There is no weapon more effective than truth in thought.”

The guard led me to another shack, on whose door was a painting of an ear of corn, each kernel representing a masked Zapatista. The room was decorated with leftist paraphernalia from around the world: posters of [Che Guevara](#) and [Hugo Chávez](#), the flag of the Landless Workers Movement, a banner calling for Basque prisoners to be returned to Basque country, and even a big Mexican flag. The Zapatistas may be rebels, but they’re also patriots.

From behind a wide table, two middle-aged men in balaclavas — one portly and sleepy, the other thin and earnest — invited me to sit down on a bench and asked me for the same information (my passport, name, origin and profession) causing the same confusion along the way.



The Explanation Committee.

Formalities out of the way, the thin one — who identified himself as the Explanation Committee — began to tell me the Zapatistas’ story. Before 1994, he said, poor people in Chiapas couldn’t get clinics or schools built in their communities, or have electricity installed, or benefit from the gold, oil and other valuable commodities on the land.

Now, he said with some pride, they had their own towns that existed entirely apart from those governed by Mexico, with their own clinics and schools. Oventic — named for a local tree — was just one of the many Zapatista ejidos, or communes, throughout the state, with new inhabitants joining all the time. How many? “Muchos,” he said.

The Zapatistas’ separatism was not, however, without its drawbacks. The government may tolerate ejidos such as Oventic, but it still restrains the movement. When I asked about the military checkpoints along the Chiapas highways, the Explanation Committee got emotional. The military, he said, often denied his people passage, justifying the blockade by saying, “These roads and bridges are only for Mexicans, and since you’re in opposition to the government, you’re not Mexican.”

I then asked about Subcomandante Marcos, the charismatic and still-unidentified Zapatista frontman, who has written everything from elliptical political tracts to children’s books. The Mexican government has been saying for years that he was in fact Rafael Guillén, an economics professor from [Mexico City](#). Who, I asked, was he?

“Es muchos,” said the Committee, seeming to smile under his ski mask. He is many.



The road in Oventic.

Outside, the mist felt colder and thicker than before. I wandered — alone, unescorted — down to the bottom of Oventic’s main road, where it dissolved into a muddy field. It looked like the edge of the world.

Maybe it was the dreary, cold weather that day, but Oventic hardly felt like a place where “muchos” lived. The only people in the street were 16 unmasked men hoisting a new electrical transformer atop a pole, and I watched them work from the veranda of the only open business in Oventic, a general store, where I bought a cup of coffee (10 pesos) and a folk CD, “Canta David del EZLN y su Guitarra Volume 2” (20 pesos). Perhaps the most surprising thing about Oventic was its normalcy. Apart from the masks and the murals, this could have been any sleepy ejido in Mexico.

At the same time, I knew there were things as an outsider I could never see, like the weapons the Explanation Committee said they still possessed. While the officials and citizens of Oventic calmly answered my questions, they were not exactly outgoing. (Perfectly understandable, given the history.) And while I was allowed to take pictures, I was twice told not to include people in any of them.

Then, with nothing more to do in Oventic, I left through a smaller side gate, hailed a pickup-truck colectivo and climbed into the back, where two boys were hanging onto the railings and enjoying the rollercoaster ride. We stopped once on the way down, to pick up an older couple and their plastic crate full of hot corn on the cob. The smell was wonderful, and as I inhaled deeply, the old man offered me one. I pulled off the husk, removed a small worm that had been steamed along with the kernels and, in the honest chill of the highlands, ate my last lunch in Chiapas.