

# CHICUEYACO: DAILY LIFE IN A NAHUA VILLAGE

Text and photos by Jennifer Larson

Juanita Chepe wakes up early to make breakfast for Antonia, her 84-year-old mother, before beginning her 45-minute walk and bus ride to her job in the neighboring town of Cuetzalan. Along with 70 other Nahua families, Juanita and her mother live in Chicueyaco, a small, mountainous village three hours North of Puebla, Mexico.

The Nahua people's language—Nahuatl—is the language of the Aztecs, Toltec, and others. (The words avocado, tomato, chili, coyote, and chocolate have Nahuatl roots.) Today Nahuatl—with approximately 1.4 million speakers—is the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico. An estimated 190,000 of those people who speak only Nahuatl. Here in the region of Cuetzalan, the Nahua remains the dominant ethnic group in terms of population and have been largely successful in both adapting to the modern economy and maintaining their culture.

Juanita walks up a rocky path through the coffee trees and underbrush with occasional vista of the green mountains and valleys beyond. Many days the clouds fill in the valleys, obscuring the view and providing a misty rain. Juanita walks past the schoolyard and Chicueyaco's stone church to the road that stops at the edge of her village and continues her climb. At the top of the hill, she waits for the white *combi*, or mini-van, for the 15-minute ride into town.

Juanita manages an eco-lodge called Hotel Taselotzin on a hill overlooking Cuetzalan. When she and 44 other women from five Nahua communities near Cuetzalan were having difficulty supporting their families by selling their traditional weaving and stitching, they managed to get funding from the Mexican government and international and national organizations to build the hotel. The women each invested their own money and labor into the hotel as well. In exchange for their work at the hotel, they receive food, clothing, and soap for their families.

The women take what they need and share the rest as necessary with the community: Nahua society maintains a strong sense of cooperation. Most of the men tend to each family's farm plots, growing crops like potatoes, mushrooms, and peppers. Each family also harvests coffee from its own trees both for home use and for sale in town or to a coffee cooperative. Although agriculture remains the primary source of income, the in-kind earnings from the hotel have a significant impact on a family's well-being, even more so for unmarried women like Juanita. In this still-lightly touristed region, manufacturing and sales of stitched crafts have not displaced agriculture.

Hotel Taselotzin caters primarily to urban Mexican clientele seeking an escape from city life, who enjoy the packed market days on Cuetzalan's cobblestone streets and nearby caves, Totonc ruins, a waterfall, and a swimming hole. The lush gardens on the hotel grounds grow herbs for the restaurant's menu, rose petals for the soap made on site, and orange blossoms for tea. A Nahua woman elder runs the sweat lodge. Antonio, the husband of the soap-maker, runs the spa and doubles as watchman and gardener. Staff are careful to recycle goods and separate organic and inorganic waste, to lessen their impact on the land. Each semester the lodge receives University of Mexico interns who are studying Indigenous People, sustainable tourism, and economic development.

Today Juanita leaves the hotel early, since there is work to do in Chicueyaco at the health center that enables people to get some health care directly in their own community. The white health center, which was built by the community, stand in a clearing on land donated by one villager. For a number of years, the clinic has provided prenatal care, vaccinations, screenings, and other minor procedures with some funding and support from the Global Citizen Network, an NGO from the United States. This week, the work focuses on building a bathroom and a patio. The patio will double both as a waiting room and a needed community gathering space. The bathroom will make the health center more attractive to potential nurses and doctors—and their patients. Everyone does their part moving piles of sand and gravel down the steep path to the health center, one bag-full at a time. They also mix concrete and build the patio and bathroom walls. This self-sufficient community works together to provide a practical service that makes it easier for people to stay in their village—and preserve their Nahua way of life.

At the end of the day, Juanita hurries home so she can catch a soap opera with her mother, Antonia. Although Antonia speaks only Nahuatl, not Spanish, she loves the Mexican soap operas anyway. Tonight, Juanita and Antonia can laugh together at the crazy soap opera fights.

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Concha Huego Diego makes tortillas by first soaking dried corn kernels overnight in lime water to soften them, next grinding the corn in a machine, and then mixing the dough, or *masa*, with a *mano*, or stone rolling pin. She slaps the tortillas into shape from small balls of masa and then fries them.





Left: Nicolasa Vasques Huero is one of about 1.4 million people in Mexico today who speak Nahuatl, the language of the Nahua people. In Chicueyaco, a village of 70 families, many of the elders and young children speak only Nahuatl.

Below: At a community celebration outside the church as the community watches and laughs, a toddler learns the proper technique for hitting the piñata. Kids are raised speaking Nahuatl and start learning Spanish in school, but the schools are bilingual (Spanish/Nahuatl) and receive government support for bilingual materials. As a result, the older children retain their native tongue and are seamlessly bilingual. All the women at the hotel speak both Spanish and Nahuatl except for the elder that runs the sweat lodge.







Above: Juanita Chepe shares a laugh with her 84-year-old mother, Antonia Diego, who has lived in this home since she was a 17-year-old bride. Antonia used to walk to market in Chuetzalan with a basket on her head carrying bananas, sugar cane, and oranges to sell. Now she can't walk much past the house since she can no longer navigate the rocky trail. The community has had electricity for 20 years, so since Antonia now is quite isolated, Juanita bought a TV for her last year.

Below: At Magdalena Latino Francisco's house, brown pots underneath the roof tiles buzz with bees that make honey for the family. Chickens peck about the yard and roost in boxes and baskets in corners of the house. Villagers harvest coffee from family plots both for home consumption and for sale in town and to the coffee cooperative TOSEPAN that handles international export of most Indigenous-grown coffee in the region. This past spring the first deep frost in 35 years devastated the coffee crop, which has recovered poorly, leaving Cuetzalan-area farmers concerned and uncertain about finding alternatives to supplement their income.







Above: The village of Chicueyaco provides community leadership and organization through three main committees: the church committee, the school committee, and the health care committee. Here members of the health care committee, all women, plan for a community work day at the health center. Ocotlán Latina (left), Nicolasa Latina (behind her), Ignacia Cruz Huero, Francisca Morales, Elena, Gabriela (president of the committee), and Elpidia Salgado.

Right: Nicolasa Valera and Mauricia Allende carry gravel down the main trail to the health center, where workers will mix into concrete for the bathroom and patio. No roads lead down to the health center, so all supplies must be carried, either by humans, or, occasionally, by horses.







Above: José Salvador (left) and Francisco Latino (right) work to finish the outdoor bathroom, complete with running water from a rooftop tank. Such amenities will help attract doctors and nurses to work in this rural location.

Right: Miguel Limon measures a board for the patio. The patio will double as a waiting room for patients and a community meeting place.







Above: Roberta Limon Baltazar and her baby see a nurse at the health center rather than going to town for checkups.



Left: Cuetzalan's Hotel Taselotzin launched in 1997 with government and NGO funding, along with the labor and the investment of 45 women who oversaw and provided all the services the hotel offers, from linen service and meals to a spa and a traditional sweat lodge.

Right: Today 58 women, like head chef Victoria Contreras Coyota, are actively involved in the cooperative venture. The most recent members each paid 300 pesos (about \$25) and donated 10 days of (unpaid) work. In return, they are paid in food (beans and rice) and in clothing. Some of the women create stitchery and weavings for sale at the hotel; others make rose-petal soap or orange-blossom tea, both for use at the hotel and for sale.



