



Textile Travels: Part V
Michoacán, Mexico

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An outdoor market in Tzintzuntzan,
Michoacán, Mexico. 2009.
All photographs by the author.

In Part 5 of our online travel series, Gwen discusses her recent return visit to the state of Michoacán, Mexico. In Part 1, Gwen told how she began her textile collection with treasures bought in Honduras and Guatemala; Parts 2 and 3 are accounts of her stay in Ecuador; Part 4 includes her favorite shopping spots in Mexico City and Oaxaca (to access Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4, click on Free Projects & Articles, then on Articles). All of the countries visited in the series continue to draw textile lovers.

IN 2009, after an absence of seventeen years, my husband, Alan, and I returned to the state of Michoacán, which borders the Pacific Ocean in southwestern Mexico. Known worldwide for its handcrafts and folk art, Michoacán was once home to the Purépechan Empire, a pre-Columbian civilization that ruled a vast territory from about A.D. 1100 until the population was devastated by smallpox introduced by the Spanish in 1522. In 1533, the priest Don Vasco de Quiroga (circa 1470–1565) arrived in the Purépechan capital, Tzintzuntzan. Appointed bishop of Michoacán by Emperor Charles V (1500–1558), Don Vasco was mandated to establish colonial order. At the same time, however, he befriended the indigenous people and tried to help them improve their lives.

A crocheter in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico. 2009.



When the Spanish arrived in Tzintzuntzan, they found a population of 40,000. Today, only about 4,000 inhabit this sleepy village. The archaeological site of the former capital, located on the eastern shores of Lake Pátzcuaro, is worth a visit, and a substantial tourist trade thrives in present-day Tzintzuntzan. The market is a feast for the eyes: The mobiles and Christmas decorations made from vegetable fibers and reed from the shores of the lake are the pride of Tzintzuntzan, but embroidered textiles and other handcrafts from all over the state are also sold here.

In any country that I visit, it always makes my day when I meet a fellow crocheter. One woman was crocheting a delicate edging on a handkerchief as I passed her makeshift booth in the city of Pátzcuaro. When I told her how much I love to crochet, she asked me to teach her something. Her skills were already well honed, but I thought perhaps crochet with wire would interest her. The next day, I sat in the plaza and crocheted two floral motifs using some of the 26-gauge craft wire I had brought along. When I presented them to her and told her all she needed was a pair of ear wires to make them into earrings, she seemed very pleased.

In the town Santa Clara del Cobre (*cobre* is Spanish for “copper”), population 12,000, more than 300 traditional family workshops create copper vessels, plates, jewelry, and utensils ranging in quality from souvenir to high art. Copper objects have been crafted here since the Purépechan Empire. Each August, a juried show of artisans’ work draws many tourists.

Needlework abounds in Uruapan, Michoacán’s second largest city (population about 239,000). The women use cross-stitch or drawn-thread work (*deshilados*) to embellish tablecloths, napkins, and blouses with thematic designs representing their lives. They also are prolific crocheters of mats and doilies. On my first trip there in 1991, on a high shelf in one of the many small shops along the square, I spotted—and subsequently bought—a ceramic pot covered in crochet. I prize it for its uniqueness and love any other media that is enhanced with crochet!

Handcrafts are for sale at weekly markets and in stores that line the squares in each city and town in Michoacán. In addition, the website www.michoacan-travel.com (in English) offers much information on places of interest (including the Tzintzuntzan Archaeological Site Museum and the Copper Museum in Santa Clara del Cobre), markets, hotels, restaurants, and festivals. I hope you'll be able to visit Michoacán; it's one of my favorite destinations. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. *Gwen Blakley Kinsler, founder of the Crochet Guild of America, is an author, teacher, and designer. Her latest book, The Fine Art of Crochet, will be available in fall 2010. She lives in Rolling Meadows, Illinois. Visit her blog at <http://crochet queen-royalramblings.blogspot.com>.*

FURTHER READING

Sayer, Chloe. *Arts and Crafts of Mexico*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990.



Ceramic pot with a crocheted cover. Purchased by the author in Uruapan, Michoacán, Mexico. 1991.