

Oaxaca Medicinal Plant Lore

By Ann Gerhardt, MD

December 2016

The article is about Pueblos Mancomunados, not analysis of herbal medicine. Most of the plants described here do not have proven safety or efficacy. Do not take this as a recommendation to use these herbs.

I spent four days hiking in Pueblos Mancomunados, a huge mountainous area of Oaxaca state in Mexico. The entire area is eco-protected and mostly forest, dotted with 8 tiny villages and ‘campos,’ plots of land farmed by individual families. The only ‘industry’ is eco-tourism, guiding hikers who stay in tiny cottages. The area is strictly protected and communal: Everyone grows their own food and must spend a year every three years as a volunteer doing some job to run the place. Governmental officials, the guides, maintenance workers and even the women who cook for the eco-tourists – all are happily obligatory volunteers.

Each day we had a different guide, a man from the pueblo at the beginning of the hike who took us to the next pueblo. These guides weren’t professional guides and didn’t have the most knowledgeable answers to my questions about medicinal plants. A poleo plant one day might look completely different from the one shown to me the next day. I took a lot of pictures, many of which don’t match the appearance of the plants’ internet pictures. For that matter, there are a lot of medicinal plant pictures on the internet that don’t match each other.

Until recently, medicinal plants were the only medicines available to the pueblos’ residents. At the turn of the 20th century, war wounds and fractures were healed with the roots of Hoja de quebraduras, and the residents are sure it kept their mortality rate low.

Camphor (shown in picture) is used as a local anesthetic and anti-microbial when applied to skin.

Barba de chivo is a dental anesthetic and apparently can make the face numb. The guide picked a leaf, but I did not test it.

Poleo tea, the only tea available in the Pueblos, is used for respiratory ailments and to help drunks to recover.

It tastes good, so I drank it at least twice a day with meals until a guide told us it contains a liver toxin that killed his grandmother who drank it three times every day.

Zarzamora root is used for dysentery (shown in picture),

The male guides all told us about Pincel de Indio flower tea that helps “women problems.” No one elaborated about the nature of those women problems.

Gordo lobo tea is used for cough. Others relieve fever, gastrointestinal distress and heart disease.

There are more than 100 agave species, most of which can be used to make an alcoholic beverage



(mezcal). Only one type, the maguey agave (shown in picture) is used to make pulque. We declined a sample of pulque, having tasted something called pulque in the past that tasted like what I imagine crank case oil would taste.



The facts may have been squishy, but the beauty, simplicity and peacefulness of the area were intoxicating.