

## Useful words in Tzotzil and Tzeltal

	Tzotzil	Tzeltal
To ask permission	Chikhelav	Ya shka shan
Hello	Kúshee	Bish chee
Goodbye	Batkun	Bónish
Please	Avokoluk	Há wokolook
Thank you	Kalaval	Wókolawal
Sorry/Excuse me	Tsik bunjoomul	Pasbón
Yes	Chabal	Heech
No	Moo yuk	Ho'o

villages have retained much of their unique cultural identity, particularly in religion, which is a blend of traditional animist belief and Catholicism. The church at Chamula, in particular, is one of the most moving sights in Mexico. But it's also one of the most intensely sacred spots in the country, and photography is banned (it's also generally not appreciated by most villagers).

It's hard not to feel a sense of intrusion in these settings, where you may be a spectator at some intense religious ritual. For many visitors, an organized tour (very easy to arrange in San Cristóbal) at least contains the sense of imposition, and helps explain some of the rituals. If you come on your own, you'll feel a bit less conspicuous in busy tourist times (August, primarily), when there's a bit of crowd cover and a festive atmosphere. It may help to learn a few words of the native language. Villages to the west of San Cristóbal are generally **Tzotzil**-speaking, and those to the east speak **Tzeltal**, but each village has developed its own identity in terms of costume, crafts and linguistics. Some simple words are given in the box above.

### Transport and tours

Inexpensive *combis* leave frequently for Chamula, Zinacantán and other villages from Edgar Robledo, just north of the market in San Cristóbal. Though an **organized tour** (about M\$140/person) can feel a little rushed and contrived, it's usually more informative, not to mention easier, as there are no direct *combis* between Chamula and Zinacantán. Tours depart at 9.30am, go to both villages and return to San Cristóbal around 2pm (see "Listings", p.701, for recommendations, though there is little difference between companies).

### San Juan Chamula

**SAN JUAN CHAMULA** (usually referred to as just Chamula) is the closest indigenous village to San Cristóbal (10km), as well as the most frequently visited. Though thousands of residents have been cast out in recent decades for converting to Protestant faiths, Chamula still has a population of 15,000, with more than 90,000 in the surrounding municipality. Over the years it's been far more against change than Zinacantán, putting up fierce resistance to the Spaniards from 1524 to 1528, then acting as the centre of a rebellion described as the second "Caste War" from 1867 to 1870, inspired by the uprising in the Yucatán.

Traditional practices are maintained here, especially in religion – a visit to the 200-year-old **Iglesia de San Juan Bautista** can be a humbling and moving experience. Before you enter, buy a ticket (M\$20) from the "tourist office" in the Palacio Municipal, on the right-hand side of the plaza as you face the church. The inside is glorious, the floor covered with pine needles and the light of a thousand candles casting an eerie glow. Lining the walls are statues of the saints adorned with

offerings of clothes, food and mirrors (thought to aid communication with the laity), while above the altar, San Juan, patron saint of the village, takes pride of place. The customs practised inside the church incorporate aspects of Christian and Maya beliefs – each villager prays by clearing an area of pine needles and arranging a “message” in candles, and rituals frequently involve tearful chanting and singing. There are no priests, Masses or marriages here, only baptisms, and the church is open 24 hours, reflecting its important role as a place of healing for the sick – Tuesdays and Fridays are particularly special days for prayer.

During the annual *Kinta Jimultik*, the **carnival** (five days in Feb/March), representatives of all the villages in the area attend in traditional dress, marching in circles around the church and up to strategically placed crosses on the hillsides for the first four days. On the final day, which coincides with the last of the five ill-fated days of the Maya calendar, purification rites and fire-walking ceremonies take place in the plaza.

Admission to the church also grants entry to the **Museo Etnográfico** (daily 8am–7pm), behind the Palacio Municipal. Rooms display artefacts of village life, musical instruments and costumes from Chamula and other villages. Remember that taking **photographs** in the church is expressly forbidden, and no foreign visitors are admitted after 7pm.

### San Lorenzo de Zinacantán

An easy seven-kilometre walk from Chamula and surrounded by steep, pine-forested hills, **ZINACANTÁN**, 12km from Cristóbal, is more open than its neighbour. The locals here have embraced flowers as an export crop, and the hillsides are dotted with greenhouses. Traditional practices have not completely disappeared, and are on impressive display during fiestas. Some older men still wear the rose-pink and blue-green ponchos with silver threads (called *pok 'ul*), decorated with tassels and embroidered flowers, and the same colours and designs feature in the women's costumes. Tours include a visit to a typical house, where you'll see the family altar, women weaving beautiful table mats decorated with large embroidered flowers and the house fire where tortillas are prepared. You might also be invited to taste *posh*, the local spirit, made from sugar cane and sometimes flavoured with fruit or cinnamon. Zinacantán also has a museum, the **Museo Ik'al Ojov** (“Our Great Lord”), which has displays of costumes from different hierarchical groups and a tableau of a house interior (daily 8.30am–5pm; donation requested). The museum is a short walk downhill from the main plaza (follow the signs) and the **Iglesia de San Lorenzo**. Independent visitors must pay M\$15 at the kiosk at the entrance to the village; this includes entrance to the church, and you will almost certainly pick up a few small children who want to lead you to craft shops. It's worth going because some, such as Artesanías María Isabel, also serve delicious handmade tortillas to hungry shoppers. Note that photography isn't permitted in the church, nor even in the churchyard.

## San Cristóbal to Guatemala: Comitán and Montebello

Beyond San Cristóbal, the Panamerican Highway continues to the border with Guatemala through some of the most scintillating scenery in Chiapas. Thirty-seven kilometres from San Cristóbal it passes **Amatenango del Valle**, a Tzeltal-speaking village that's a favourite stop for tours, due to its reputation for beautiful unglazed pottery, produced with the traditional pre-Hispanic method of building the fire