

# Purepecha communities fight to survive

By Brian Levinson

The Purepecha of Lake Patzcuaro in the state of Michoacan have spoken the same language and lived in the same villages for 1,000 years. The ruins of their once great ceremonial centers still decorate the horizon.

But younger generations are not learning much of the native tongue, and the Purepecha way of life does not always harmonize with modern Mexican society.

Arminda Flores Lucas was born to a Purepecha family in Patzcuaro. She currently lives with her second husband, a U.S. citizen, in a ranch outside of an indigenous village called Ihuatzio.

At 11 years old, Flores was taken in by a well-to-do artist, Marco's Huerta, and his wife. She lived four years with them in Patzcuaro, Mexico City and later Guadalajara. "I come from a poor family. This was the only way to get out of the house and away from an alcoholic father and a neurotic mother."



**Fishermen off the shores of Janitzio Island raise their butterfly nets in search of carp, white fish and charales. Janitzio draws more tourists every year, even as waves of local residents emigrate in search of jobs.**

Her mother, Doña Martha gave birth to 15 children, six of whom passed away. She died of cancer in 1993 at 54 years old. Her husband quick drinking soon after, and continues to attend his Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every night.

Flores, like many young Purepecha, eloped with her boyfriend in order to avoid paying for an expensive traditional wedding. But it was an abusive marriage and she left her husband while pregnant with their second child.

The community shunned her.

"You are branded," she says. "They treat you like a prostitute. I couldn't go out on the street without people saying nasty things to me." She calls it a character-defining time in her life.

Her luck began to change at 23 years old when an American tourist, Kevin Quigley, came by wanting to hear pirekuas, the Purepecha music that Flores sings. They fell in love and married within a year.

In the Patzcuaro lakeside communities, even mestizo Mexicans -- much less white Americans -- are dubbed tourists. But Quigley decided to live here with Flores. They have two daughters of their own. Quigley's American-born son, from a previous marriage, grew up in the village and has also married a Purepecha woman.

Quigley and Flores have little by little converted their ranch house into an attractive bed and breakfast (see sidebar). Quigley also returns every couple of months to San Francisco, where he

paints houses for a living.

In that respect, he is not very different from his Purepecha neighbors who are crossing over to the United States in droves. "In this area, most of the young men are working in the U.S.," says Quigley.

Dago Morales operates a minibus around the lake. He returned in October 2004 after spending more than a decade in Oregon, which like North Carolina has become a destination for migrant workers from Michoacan.

"I didn't speak any English during the first year. I went to McDonald's and tried to order a hamburger. But they didn't understand, and served me 15," he says.

He agrees with Arminda Flores that, despite high rates of immigration, villages like Ihuatzio will continue to exist thanks to strong traditions that draw emigres back every year.

The hilly island of Janitzio, crowned by a statue of rebel hero Jose Maria Morelos, is perhaps the focal point of Lake Patzcuaro tradition. Every November, thousands of tourists come for the island's candlelit Day of the Dead celebration.

But at least during the rest of the year, Janitzio seems more like a tourist trap set within a murky lake. The winding streets up to the Morelos statue are almost completely lined with tourist stalls sell-

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## B&B offers harmony in nature

Casa Santiago, run by Kevin Quigley and Arminda Flores Lucas, is an attractive bed and breakfast just five minutes from Ihuatzio and twenty minutes from the city of Patzcuaro.

"It's not for people that want parties and discotheques," says Quigley, "but for those who enjoy walking to the lake, being near an indigenous village and feeling in harmony with nature."

Quigley has become something of a patron of the arts, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the famed crafts that are made and sold in Lake Patzcuaro communities. He leads tours by request.

Only a short drive away is the Ihuatzio archaeological zone, one of the Purepecha's three ceremonial centers in pre-Hispanic times. The excavated portion of the site contains an expansive "Parade Ground" and two rectangular pyramids.

Casa Santiago is located on the road between Ihuatzio and Cucuchucho. Call (434)3440880 (land line), 4433766942 (cell) or log onto [www.geocities.com/theothermexico](http://www.geocities.com/theothermexico) for more information.

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ing t-shirts, cloth knapsacks, pirated CDs and kitschy religious images.

"You don't feel very isolated," says Janitzio native Victor Gabriel Martinez who sells food and drink near the statue. "Life is here kind of like in the city, exception construction work is a lot more expensive." Materials must be transported by boat and then hauled up the hillside.

Just as on lakeside communi-

ties, schools in Janitzio are mostly in Spanish even if the kids grew up speaking Purepecha.

"Tourism is the main source of employment," says Martinez, "and the minority are fisherman." But an ever-growing number of islanders are heading off to the United States. Off-hand he was able to name six friends and relatives.

They come back with a lot of money, but do not always know how to spend it. "Many go over there, return with cash but then drink a lot and are left with nothing." □