

Out on a limb with Isabella Tree

BY JIM JOHNSTON
Special to The News

Writers from the British Isles have a history of fascination with Mexico. Fanny Calderón de la Barca keenly observed details of her life as an ambassador's wife in the classic, "Life in Mexico" (1843). Sybille Bedford carefully balanced her martinis as she romped through the hills of Michoacán in "A visit to Don Otavio" (1953). D.H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry and Graham Greene are among other notable English writers who warmed to the southern sun.

Inhabitants of the country that brought us William Shakespeare and four-o'clock tea seem magnetized by the exuberant, the tribal, the surreal and the irrational in Mexican culture.

Isabella Tree adds her name to this distinguished list with her book "Sliced Iguana," originally published in England in 2001, now reprinted in paperback by a U.S. press.

One standard of good travel writing is the question, "Would you like to travel with this person?" If the ability to explain the complexities of Mexican history with clarity and a sense of drama, an artist's eye for sensual detail, a wry sense of humor, and a readiness to knock down a few tequilas at the end of the day seem like good criteria to you, then go buy this book.

Tree has a family connection to Mexico that runs as a thread through the book. Her great-grandfather, Weetman Pearson, worked for Porfirio Díaz as an engineer, building the railroad across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and installing the system of drainage canals that run beneath Mexico City to this day.

Each of the book's six chapters takes place in a different location, and each mixes history with personal anecdote. In Mexico City, friends introduce her to pulque ("like drinking saliva") during a boat ride through the canals of Xochimilco. The shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe inspires a discourse on Aztec goddess worship and the Catholic church (the Jesuits used the Virgin to "make submission a dignified, heroic and perpetual state of being").

"After what felt like a lifetime's incarceration in steel and concrete grey, it was like driving into a paintbox," Tree writes of arriving in San Miguel de A llende, where she meets gringas recovering from plastic surgery and flagellants in a Holy Week procession.

"Both were incising the flesh for the good of the soul, and submitting themselves to the sweet reconstructions of forgiveness and rebirth."

In the Oaxacan town of Juchitán she attends a transvestite ball and un-



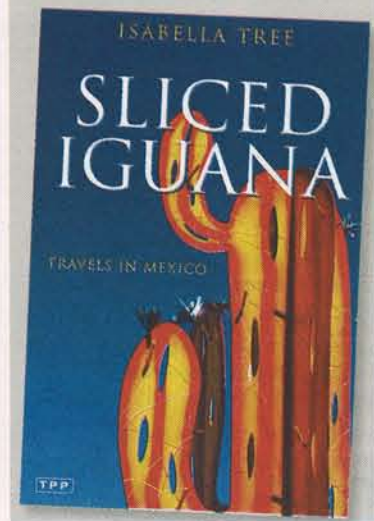
British writer Isabella Tree has a family connection to Mexico that runs through her

COURTESY OF ISABELLA TREE

MORE INFO
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"Sliced Iguana, Travels in Mexico"

By Isabella Tree
Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2008
336 pages



dergoes a ritual "limpia" (cleansing of evil spirits). Later, she's found running away from tourists on Day of the Dead in Pátzcuaro, dropping in on an Evangelical church service in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, and squatting in a cave in the hills of Jalisco, chomping down peyote buttons during a Huichol rain ceremony, and learning the cure for a scorpion bite ("catch the offending scorpion and eat it").

Seamlessly changing perspectives from up-close and personal to broadly historical, the author mixes adventure and philosophy, seasoning it judicious-

ly with her tart sense of humor.

One of the book's pleasures is luxuriating in the writer's literary style. She has a fine sense of the poetic, the metaphorical, and the ironic, but it never impedes the flow of the prose.

In the following example, Tree manages that oh-so-Mexican propensity for combining the sacred and the repugnant (she's writing about a bowl of soup used in a Huichol indigenous ritual).

"The soup was blood temperature from its incubation in the sun. The beast it was derived from had probably been killed at least 10 days before the ceremony began, in a distant part of the forest beyond Huichol boundaries where deer stocks were still high, completing its final journey in a sweltering bus. Every step of its transformation from quarry to corpse to cooking-pot would have been attended by complicated and emotional rituals. The resulting soup contained the essence of its spirit. Drinking it was like taking communion. I raised the bowl to my lips with irreverent but instinctive hesitation. Blobs of fat interrupted the flow when I finally let the soup into my mouth. Its smell fled up my nose and lodged somewhere deep inside the cortex. The liquid was pure animal – musky, pungent, fox – and fizzed gently on the tongue. It tasted alive."

At the end of the book Isabella Tree leaves Mexico for her London home with "a different understanding of life and time," an understanding she successfully shares with her readers.

Jim Johnston is author of 'Mexico City: an Opinionated Guide for the Curious Traveler'. His blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com.

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