



Renewal in a Mexican Sweatlodge

By Laurel Kallenbach

WHILE I EXPECTED MASSAGES, watsu treatments, snorkeling, pelican watching, and beach time from my visit to Punta Serena Holistic Retreat (located on the remote Pacific Ocean cliffs north of Manzanillo, Mexico), what I really wanted was to witness wild dolphins cavorting in Tenacatita Bay, an opportunity I've missed on previous ocean pilgrimages. However, on my final evening in this tropical paradise, I found myself lying face to the ground, weeping into the earth after finishing a Native Mexican *temazcal*, or sweatlodge, ceremony—a revitalizing and life-affirming experience offered at Punta Serena. I'm crying from joy and gratitude, with tears for the dolphins who eluded me even though I scanned the bay for three days—after yoga class, while soaking in the cliffside Jacuzzi, while waiting for my open-air massage, and during each al fresco meal.

Punta Serena's seaside location was once sacred to the local Indians, so it's fitting that it still provides sanctuary for those of us in need of renewal. In fact, the resort employs a resident shaman who consults with guests privately and leads the twice-weekly *temazcal*, held in a circular, oven-heated, mud hut. Used since ancient Aztec

times, the *temazcal* (whose name means "bath house") is a place to pray, sweat, and become physically and spiritually purified. The round structure represents the womb, which we re-enter and emerge reborn. "I feel like the midwife of this ceremony," says shamanic leader Gretchen Andersen, who has studied Mexican shamanism for twenty years. "People can have truly cathartic or life-changing experiences inside the *temazcal*," she explains.

When I and eight other participants arrive at the *temazcal*, it's decorated with hibiscus and bougainvillea blooms. Gretchen, our "birth coach," gathers us on palm-frond mats and explains the ceremony's protocols and that bathing suits are optional. We begin the ceremony by honoring the spirits of the four compass directions before parading with drums and tamarind-pod rattles to the private beach for our preliminary purification by mud and brine.

One look at the buckets of thick black mud waiting for us convinces me to peel off my swimsuit. Others in my tribe do the same. Then, we smear mud from head to toe (faces too). We laugh and lose our inhibitions as we help each other slather our backsides. Goopy and black-skinned, we drop

and roll in the sand like giddy kids, coating ourselves like breaded chicken ready for baking. We hush, though, when Gretchen reminds us that covered in earth elements, we're loved and protected by Mother Earth. Then we each scoop up a handful of sand, representing something we want to release, and toss it over our shoulders into the surf. At last, we plunge into the waves to have the ocean lick away the mud—a salt-water baptism. I emerge Venus-like from the sea: naked, cleansed, and radiant.

Now our troop crawls through the *temazcal* portal into the warm, dim womb of the hut where we receive a bundle of medicinal herbs to slap up and down our bodies to heal our physical or emotional wounds. Afterwards, we stamp the bundle with our feet to remove the toxins. We also rub aloe vera, a sacred plant to Native Mexicans, over our skin and hair. Then Gretchen pours a dipper of lavender-infused water over the hot stove, creating a fragrant steam, which she stirs by whirling lemongrass leaves like a lasso. Four times throughout the hour-long ceremony, we send prayers into this steam, and each time the door is briefly opened to allow our airborne prayers to ascend to the spirit world.