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Orchids and onions side by side.

That is the startling picture presented on market day in ancient Oaxaca, Mex., the mile-high exotic capital of the state of Oaxaca. Every day is market day there, although Saturday is the "full dress" market day.

But it's only part of the picture at gay Oaxaca, some 275 miles southeast of Mexico City, which in turn is only a matter of hours from the United States via American Airlines DC-6 Flagships.

The crowded sidewalks of Oaxaca are forever laden with the famous wool serapes made by the Mixtec and Zapotec Indians; delicate filigree earrings; towels and table sets; bed spreads; hand-woven rebosas (shawls); curiously hand-etched knives and daggers; strange cheeses and an almost endless variety of other foods. All this delights and captivates the tourist.

The accent is on flowers--always flowers. In the section of the market reserved for the flower vendors can be found anything from tuberoses to baby's breath, dyed pink or blue. Great banks of wild flowers from the hillsides rub gorgeous petals with those of cultivated varieties from home gardens.

Indians set up shop on the sidewalks. A tall woman strolls by with a huge flat basket balanced easily on her head. The basket is full of garlic buds. Eventually, she will set the basket down and sit cross-legged by it, having chosen what she feels is the most favorable spot for her "trade."

Beside her will be the smiling vendor of magnificent orchids or another parasitic air plant, "the little maguey of the trees." Half a hundred, in bunches of five, can be had for just one peso (about 11½ cents).

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Whole sections of the Oaxaca market are given over to huge wicker baskets, "trucked" into market by burro. Some vendors specialize in a wide variety of hand-woven fiber mats of all sizes, shapes and decoration. Others fill their booths with gay colorful pottery which is typical of Oaxaca and ranges from the unusual black ollas (large globular clay water jars) to the more usual cups, saucers, dishes and other pottery forms, all with the Oaxaca-black finish.

There are highly colored pottery ducks, for floral arranging, and fish and frogs and monkeys and piggy banks. Name the pottery piece you want, and they have it.

When hunger strikes, try the famous steaming Oaxaca tamales, which are wrapped in savory banana leaves, instead of the better-known corn husks. The tamales are on sale in the morning. In the afternoon, you can get delicious crunchy tacos. Coffee comes in a large deep bowl, so there's never any question about getting enough.

For the most part, all these wares are brought down to market by the Indians on Saturday from the steep hills surrounding the city. Saturday is the festive market day, when one barely has room to walk in the market place.