

I have been intrigued by this place since Morgan Freeman, pants rolled up and shoes flung casually over his shoulder, strode towards Tim Robbins fixing up his old boat on the beach (if that doesn't ring a bell, it's time to re-watch *Shawshank Redemption*). It's obvious to me now that this scene was filmed far from Pacific Mexico, but that knowledge does nothing to dampen its allure in my mind.

The name itself, Zihuatanejo, leaps out of your mouth in quick, crisp syllables. It's nearly impossible

to frown and say it at the same time. The town has all of the best attributes of Pacific Mexico – long stretches of white sand beaches, delicious and inexpensive food, a protected(ish) bay for anchoring, and a town square that seems nightly to accommodate a parade, basketball game or celebration of some kind. Gaggles of “free range” pre-teens munch on street food and wander the square, laughing and teasing each other. The atmosphere is relaxed, festive and family friendly even late into the evening.

Overseeing the activities in town are seven prominently placed statues of women. As we wandered the streets the first day we ventured ashore, already smitten with the bay and the town, we encountered these statues, each one standing bold and confident, and I was in love. These bronze statues represent the seven regions of the state of Guerrero, each one embodying the region's contributions to the state. That they are all women speaks to the matriarchal society of the area's native tribes, and to the history of the town's name.

Learning about Zihuatanejo's

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One of the seven bronze statues of strong women. Photo by John Guillote.

The Place of Women

By Becca Guillote

matriarchal foundation, of their tribute to women and acknowledgment of their suffering has augmented my connection with this place. I am inspired by these women, standing confident and proud, presenting the abundance of their home to those that pass below them.

This connection is a new one for me. I have spent a good portion of my life ignoring the fact that I am female. When I started climbing at age 14, I saw no reason why I couldn't climb the same routes

as my climbing friends (almost all guys), though I did recognize I would have to tackle the problems differently. I couldn't simply haul my body weight through a difficult maneuver, but I could reach my heel above my head and use a straight arm to leverage my body through the same maneuver. I learned to use my specific assortment of skills and talents in creative ways to accomplish the goal at hand (which was always to get to the top). When I climbed a route, it looked nothing like the moves my friends made, but that made no difference to the elation of overcoming a difficult problem and the collective celebration at the top.

I was still ignoring my female-ness when I started sailing and eventually found myself racing with an otherwise all-men's team in the Puget Sound. As we approached the start line one cold, wet Saturday, powered up and heeled over, the wind already sending seawater in our faces, I was grinding. We powered over the start line and immediately tacked onto port, certain we could eek out in front of the pack. The jib came across and I hauled on the

winch handle with all the strength and leverage I could find, but within two rotations, the drum stopped, refusing to budge. My measly arms were no match for the load of a number 1 jib in 20 knots upwind.

Yelling, hustling, curse words. A huge hand grabbed the winch and a few of my fingers still attempting to push and ground the jib in, my arm following his motions like a child. The whole ordeal must have been less than five seconds, but those were precious seconds lost. We turned down to regain boat speed and as a result of my underpowered arms, had to duck boat after boat, as if bowing in submission, as the fleet flew by on starboard.

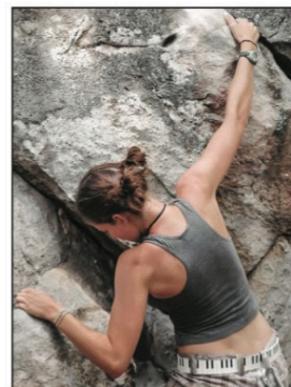
My fingers throbbed and my confidence crumbled. I wanted to hide in a hole. I blamed my deficiency on my female-ness; if a guy had been sitting there, that jib would have flown in and we would have strode out in front of the fleet. I was not as good as my male counterparts.

Of course the despair passed, and I soon found my home on the bow, where being small and nimble is an advantage.

I regained my confidence in my sailing capability. But my habit of ignoring the fact that I am a woman began to falter. I started to accept the idea that I could admit to being a woman and still be a great sailboat racer. That the problem solving and finesse I had to master as a climber because I couldn't muscle my way up a route were more than coping mechanisms to compensate for being a girl; they were valuable life skills.

Sailing humbles even the saltiest sailor. We find ourselves at the mercy of winds, waves, corrosion and broken plastic fittings. There are so many situations that crumble the tenuous foundation of confidence and courage. These challenges are not specific to me, and they are not specific to women. Sailing has taught me that to request help, to acknowledge my limits, to feel overwhelmed, these are not a sign of weakness – they are a show of respect of the sea and confidence in yourself.

And that is what these statues remind me. They remind me that my skills and abilities are comprehensive and valuable, and I should depict them with pride and courage. They



Young Becca showing feminine strength and ingenuity to climb difficult routes.

remind me that I can be both female and confident. They remind me I am capable.

Becca and John are still in Zihuatanejo. Follow their journey at halcyonwandering.com

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