

# 100 years since controversial author's Chapala sojourn

By Ron Janoff

May and June of 2023 mark 100 years since the renowned and controversial English novelist, D. H. Lawrence, spent a remarkably productive and well-documented two months in Chapala.

Lawrence and his wife Frieda had embarked on a world-circling expedition in February 1922, traveling east and reaching San Francisco in September. They continued to Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico at the invitation of Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy American arts patron. Their stay in Taos was turbulent, and they soon decided to travel to Mexico. They reached Mexico City in March 1923, joined by two new friends from Santa Fe, the American poet, Witter Bynner, and his partner, Willard "Spuds" Johnson.

Lawrence had a very low tolerance for Mexico City and its surroundings. Determined to find what he deemed a more authentic Mexico and stimulated by his experiences at the sacred archaeological sites, Lawrence decided to set out on his own for a romantic town he'd read about: Chapala.

Upon arrival on April 29, 1923, Lawrence was immediately struck by Chapala's picturesque setting and sent his famous wire to Frieda, Bynner and Johnson: "Chapala Paradise: come at once!"—which they did.

Lawrence found a suitable place to stay, "a long house with no upstairs ... a wide veranda ..." and a dense wooded area beside it. The monthly rent of 110 pesos included Isabel, a Mexican woman, and her family, to take care of them, including a guard who slept with a loaded pistol on the veranda at night. They moved in on May 2. The house was at #4 Zaragoza (now #307), a short distance from the lake. Bynner and Johnson, more than a little uncomfortable with Lawrence's highly irascible temperament, elected to stay at the Hotel Arzapalo on the main street two blocks away.

Lawrence eagerly and quickly surveyed the town, climbed the mountain, observed the townspeople, and scanned the lake. By May 15, he began writing a novel he had been planning since Santa Fe, in which, apart from the controversial plot, he demonstrated his eye for local details and his genius for description. He went to the lake shore every morning and wrote under a willow tree in a blue copybook in his neat,



The white jacket which Lawrence wears in virtually all the photos taken during his stay in Chapala seems to have been left behind in Chapala and acquired in the 1960s by a Canadian professor. It's part of an estate collection in Toronto.

meticulous hand. He gave completed chapters to Johnson who scrupulously typed them up at the hotel (including numerous unflattering descriptions of himself and Bynner, who were now characters in the novel).

In the afternoon they went swimming, hiking, or motor-ing to nearby villages. He and Bynner began creating their own designs for blankets and serapes which they commissioned from a skilled weaver in Jocototec. Lawrence found time to edit the proofs of his most famous critical work, "Studies in Classic American Literature." In the evenings the group lounged on the terrace or went to the plaza to listen to music and watch the dancing, two elements that feature prominently in the novel.

By the end of June, Lawrence had completed a 479-page manuscript he titled "Quetzalcoatl," focused on a revolutionary revival of ancient Mexican religion mixed with Lawrence's own spiritual quest to reanimate the exhausted soul of Europe. The vivid desecration of Chapala's church and its conversion into an Aztec temple are still shocking today.

Before leaving Chapala, Lawrence and his group rented a boat for a tour of the lake. The four-day trip at the start of the rainy season proved to be turbulent. They were driven ashore at Tuxcueca, and even had a brush with a waterspout. Undaunted, Lawrence and Frieda departed Chapala by train on July 9, 1923. Johnson had completed typing the manuscript up to chapter five. A less skilled typist finished the task in Dover, New Jersey where they summered.

"Quetzalcoatl" was revised in Oaxaca during another trip to Mexico from November 1924 to February 1925. Despite being seriously ill, Lawrence doubled the size of the book. He added over 20 religious poems or hymns, expanded on the mythological themes, and renamed Chapala "Sayula." Published in late 1926 as "The Plumed Serpent," the novel has been alternately criticized as racist and proto-fascist, or praised as prophetic and profound. Surprisingly, Mexican critics have generally received the novel positively. The original "Quetzalcoatl" was finally published, much later, in 1995 by New Directions.



The D. H. Lawrence Room at the Hotel Villa QQ on Calle Zaragoza in Chapala is filled with period furniture.



An early draft of "The Plumed Serpent," which D.H. Lawrence finished in Chapala, was published as "Quetzalcoatl."

Ever small and frail, but with a fiery red beard and bright flashing blue eyes, Lawrence wrote one more novel, "Lady Chatterley's Lover." He died of tuberculosis in Italy in 1930 at the age of 44.

Years later Bynner and Johnson returned to Chapala. They purchased the former Barragan house at Madero, 407 (currently under renovation by the Chapala government). There, in the late 1940s, Bynner wrote his vivid and often acid reminiscences of Lawrence in "Journey with Genius," published in 1951.

Lawrence's 1923 stay is memorialized by the Hotel Villa QQ on Calle Zaragoza.

His "cottage," incorporated into the hotel as the D. H. Lawrence Room, is filled with period furniture. The hotel itself was expanded over the years, in particular by Luis Barragan in 1941. Three of its suites are named for his novels and its popular restaurant and bar are called "Chatterley's."

A curious footnote: the white jacket which Lawrence wears in virtually all the photos taken during his stay seems to have been left behind in Chapala and acquired in the 1960s by a Canadian professor. Now part of an estate collection in Toronto, the jacket remains intact but tattered and soiled. It is very small.

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