



Hola! My name is Amelia. I wanted you to know that my husband Manuel and I made your new purse. We certainly hope you like it and will continue to enjoy it for many years to come. Probably one of the reasons you bought this bag was because you would like to know more about the people who made it, and how it is produced. So this note will tell you a bit about me and my family, where we live, and how we made your purse. We are proud of our work, and wish we could thank you personally for your support.



We live in southern México in the state of Oaxaca and in the Zapotec pueblo of Teotitlán del Valle, a small town about 20 miles from the state capital of Oaxaca de Juárez. The valley of Oaxaca has been occupied by indigenous people for about 10,000 years, and contains two distinct UNESCO World Heritage sites. The religious/administrative center of Monte Albán, which was begun by Zapotecs in 400 BC, draws visitors from around the world. Most people living in Teotitlán today are descendants of that Zapotec culture. We are very proud of our heritage and work hard at conserving our language and traditions.



In Teotitlán, weaving is a family affair. We start to learn as children helping our parents because most of us are self-employed, working out of our homes. We like this style of work because it allows us to combine our family lives with our work; everyone has a part, even if it is only to learn. Above I am starting a fire in order to heat water so the local wool we use will take and hold the color of the dye. Petra, my daughter, is watching to see what color the wool becomes after cooking in the dye for about twenty minutes.



We make a bag using a series of steps. The outer portion is woven on our manual looms from local wool. Each side of the bag is woven as a separate piece, and the sides joined together in a later stage. In that way, it is easy to have different designs front and back if that is wanted. The weaving of an average size handbag takes about two days if the pattern is already known. To make a custom pattern or a larger size takes longer because some experimentation is involved. To make several articles of the same size and pattern is easier because the setup time is less. The final construction of all the different parts is not very time-consuming, and can be done at the rate of several bags a day. For that reason, it is normal to dye several lengths of wool first, proceed with the weaving, and finally sew together the various parts of several bags at one time.

A woven article can be made from different types of wool, each with its own unique natural color, but that palette is limited to shades from white through brown to black; we make bags from all natural wool on special order. For more colorful products, we must use dye. While we know how to make dyes of several colors from local plants and insects, this is very time consuming, and so the cost of the article goes up. Due to the increase in cost, as well as a broader selection of colors, most of our bags are dyed with commercial dyes.

The final price of a bag reflects several cost factors plus our profit. The obvious cost factor is the time we spend to make the bag, but a more difficult one for us to manage is the cost of the materials. The wool thread, dye, wood we buy to heat the water, and other options such as a zipper or the material for lining the purse, must be paid for in advance. Often we must wait until we sell some things before we can buy more raw materials. If we could buy materials in larger lots, it would lower our cost of production. This barrier of up-front cost is common to most small businesses.



By far our biggest challenge, however, is to reach a larger marketplace with our products. Often we must sell to a distributor at a lower price than we would receive if we could sell the goods directly. Because we work in our home, we have no store in which to sell our goods, so it is difficult to reach potential customers with our products. By your purchase you have participated in an effort to present our products directly to a larger market of people who have an interest in supporting our work, and we thank you very much for your patronage.