





Treasures of the Sierra Madre

Mexico's enchanting colonial cities lie well off the main tourism thoroughfare, but squarely on the path of history

by Kerry Banks

photograph by Peter Langer/Associated Media Group

An alarm clock is not required in Guanajuato. Dawn brings crowing roosters and tolling bells, followed soon afterward by a disembodied voice intoning "El Gaaaaaas." The call, accentuated by the rapping of a wrench against a drainpipe, comes from the propane sellers who trundle through the streets each morning. Mexican culture is, by its nature, loud, and the gasmen are merely an early salvo in a daylong cavalcade of noise. Thankfully, the sonic landscape is more soothing two hours later as I take breakfast in an open-air courtyard serenaded by twittering sparrows and whistling workmen. ►

The patio, shaded by the largest ficus tree in the city, sits smack in the centre of our hotel, a maze of brick hallways and winding iron staircases called the House of the Poets. Each room in this converted colonial mansion is named after a poet – Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, Octavio Paz – and includes a handmade portrait and verses written on the walls. Hotels named for poets wouldn't be a big seller in a lot of places, but the imagery suits Guanajuato, where culture runs as deep as the silver mines that gave birth to the city.

Guanajuato is the first stop in our tour of the colonial cities of Mexico's central highlands. Before we embarked on this trip, I admit that Anne and I knew little about Guanajuato or any of the other spots on our itinerary: Zacatecas, Querétaro and San Miguel de Allende. We're not alone in our ignorance. Although not entirely off the beaten path, Mexico's colonial gems are far removed from the main crush of gringo tourists, who gravitate toward the coastal resorts. A mixture of Spanish and Indian influences, these interior towns are drenched in history and genteel old-world atmosphere, and though English is not widely spoken and the high altitude can prove taxing, they represent vast treasure chests for those adventurous enough to open the lid and peer inside.

Located 355 kilometres northwest of Mexico City, Guanajuato was settled in 1558 when Spanish conquistadores found a

(page 25) Ex-church and ex-monastery of San Francisco, Zacatecas. (this page) Part of Guanajuato's magic is its rabbit warren of tunnels, where the bulk of traffic goes, leaving many streets above free for pedestrians; even the street signs are works of art. (opposite) Mexico is deeply Catholic, but behind the façade of Rome lies shamanism, ritual and superstition.

its status. Traffic lights, neon and billboards are banned in the downtown core, and there is nary a Burger King to be found. Instead, Guanajuato resembles a living museum, a place where the past overwhelms the present. Yet despite its heavy medieval cloak, the city pulses with a youthful exuberance, due largely to the influence of the 30,000 students who attend the local university and pack the bars and cafés at night.

Art is everywhere. The house (now a museum) where famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was born and spent his youth, is a block from our hotel. Minutes away is another museum, dedicated to Don Quixote, and an exquisite opera house (Teatro Juárez), its neoclassical façade crowned by bronze statues of the Greek muses. Three nights a week a symphony orchestra plays in the central plaza, Jardín de la Unión, a red-tiled triangle with a topiary roof of laurel trees. Each October the city hosts Latin America's largest arts festival, the International Cervantes Festival, which attracts more than 2,000 artists from 30 countries.

Guanajuato's streets are littered with



Guanajuato resembles a living museum, a

motherlode of silver in the surrounding mountains. The town's name derives from a Tarascan Indian word that means "place of frogs," but it could just as easily mean "place of crazy geography." The city looks like it has been poured into place, its pastel-hued villas and basilicas dripping down either side of a steep, narrow gorge of the Sierra Madre before spilling out in a labyrinth of winding, cobblestone streets, stepped lanes and subterranean tunnels. The tunnels, which were built in the early 1900s to divert flooding of the Guanajuato River, now serve as the main roadways within the city.

Guanajuato was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988, and strict laws preserve

plaques and statues honouring fallen leaders of the revolution and cultural icons. Indeed, it's hard to find a lane or *plazuela* ("little plaza") without a legend attached to it. The most revered is the tiny Callejón del Beso (Alley of the Kiss), where star-crossed lovers once pined for each other from houses on opposite sides of the metre-wide alley. The tragic tale ends with an angry father catching the couple daring to kiss across their respective balconies and killing his daughter in a rage.

Less romantic perhaps, but of greater historical significance, is the alley by which Father Miguel Hidalgo and Ignacio Allende entered the city with a ragtag rebel army in

1810 to lay siege to the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, a granary where the local Spanish population had taken refuge. The walled fortress was almost impossible to assault, but the rebels prevailed in this first battle of Mexico's War of Independence when a young miner nicknamed "El Pípila" strapped a paving stone to his back as a shield from the Spanish guns, made his way to the front door and set it afire so the troops could gain entry. Today, the Alhóndiga de Granaditas houses a museum with exhibits of pre-Columbian artifacts, colonial history and regional crafts, as well as bronze depictions of Father Hidalgo and other heroes of the independence. Hidalgo's sad, staring



place where the past overwhelms the present

eyes conjure the memory of his grisly fate. A year after the storming of the granary, he and Allende and two other rebel leaders were captured by the Spanish and beheaded. Their heads were taken to Guanajuato, placed in cages and hung from hooks at each corner of the granary, where they remained for 10 years as a warning to rebellious locals. After Mexico won its independence in 1821, the skulls were taken down and buried, and the four men were declared national heroes.

The Mexican fascination with death, a product of the fusion of native religions and Spanish Catholicism, becomes even more evident when we visit Guanajuato's most

popular tourist attraction – the Museo de las Momias (Museum of the Mummies). On display are more than a hundred twisted, leathery, mummified corpses, all of them dug up between 1896 and 1958, when, due to the growing tally of burials, the local cemetery began exhuming and cremating bodies after five years. (A fee could be paid to ensure that a relative stayed buried, but most families did not, or could not, afford to pay it.) Viewing these mummies, naturally preserved by the dry climate and chemical composition of the soil, is an eerie experience. Some still wear the clothes they were buried in, many have their mouths open as if screaming. One woman was reportedly

buried alive; her expression of terror, her crossed arms and the scratches on her forehead support the theory. There are babies as well, and a six-month-old fetus, billed as the smallest mummy in the world.

There are no mummies in San Miguel de Allende, but there are ghouls. Three of them, wearing hideous makeup, ragged clothes and oversized shoes, are gleefully stuffing severed body parts into a soup cauldron directly above us. The occasion is an evening performance of *Peer Gynt*, staged before a crowd of several hundred in the city's main square, but the play bears faint resemblance to Henrik Ibsen's original

script about a wandering salesman. The actors utter few words, preferring broad pantomime, slapstick and acrobatics. They ride unicycles, walk on stilts, juggle and dance to the tinny, dirge-like music being pumped out by a band of percussion and horn players.

Our arrival has coincided with a week-long theatre festival devoted to experimental productions. The eccentric touch is fitting as San Miguel de Allende is a haven of non-conformity. The city's most famous landmark, for example, is a bizarre,



fantastically fluted neo-Gothic pink cathedral designed by Zeferino Gutierrez, a self-taught local stonemason who took his inspiration from European postcards. Consistent with the theme, one of the town's most popular festivals is Día de los Locos (Day of the Crazies). Held on June 13 to celebrate spring, it is highlighted by a costumed parade of cartoon characters, political figures and swarms of men in drag.

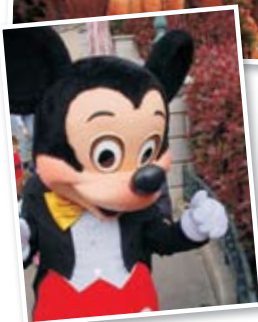
Founded in 1542 as a mule train stop-over on the Camino Real, the "Royal Road" along which silver shipments were sent to Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende shares the pastel buildings, cobblestone streets, opulent mansions and baroque churches of other colonial cities, but its history is very different. After the War of Independence, as mining operations subsided, the city drifted into a state of oblivion. By 1900, it was in danger of becoming a ghost town. The seeds of its revival began in 1926 when the Mexican government declared the entire city a national historic monument; modern construction was prohibited downtown and the old buildings were restored. In 1938, an art school (Escuela de Bellas Artes) was founded. The town soon began to attract foreign artists, writers and eventually a large influx of American tourists. In 1950, a second arts school (Instituto Allende) was created. Today, the two institutions continue to thrive, offering classes in language, sculpture, silverwork, jewellery, textile design, printmaking, painting and ceramics. (Because of their influence, San Miguel has the highest ratio of art galleries per

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(this page) Hand-painted Talavera tiles (an art introduced by the Spanish, who learned it from the Arabs); the art and crafts of the Huichol Indians (Tutukila's *The Idol of Tatewari*). (opposite) Sculpture (just one of the Rafael Coronel Museum's 4,000 ceremonial masks, Zacatecas); staircase in San Miguel de Allende.



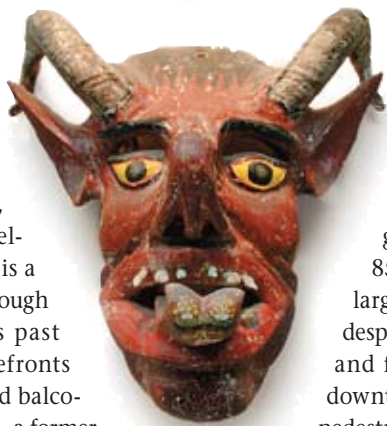
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capita of any city in Mexico.) We also find an array of outstanding handicrafts including tinwork, blown-glass, papier-mâché and jewelry. But the highlight is a 10-minute taxi ride through the congested streets past mariachi-blasting storefronts and bougainvillea-laced balconies to Fábrica la Aurora, a former textile factory converted into a stylish art and design centre with more than 30 artist studios, galleries, restaurants and antique shops.

Another sidetrip takes us to the nearby town of Dolores Hidalgo, where we visit an emporium specializing in Talavera pottery (colourful glazed earthenware introduced by the Spaniards in the 16th century) and its attached factory in which the artisans share floor space with cages full of noisy, fighting cocks. Besides pottery, Dolores Hidalgo is also known for its homemade ice cream, sold by vendors in the main plaza. Not only is the method of display unique (the ice cream is nestled in wooden, steel-lined buckets arranged atop ice-filled sacks), so too are the flavours, which include tequila, pork rind, avocado and mango chili.

From San Miguel de Allende, we take a bus (reclining in air-conditioned comfort while viewing Antonio Banderas's *Zorro*) to Querétaro, a former Franciscan



centre where missionaries were trained and dispersed to evangelize the heathens as far away as California and Nicaragua. With a population of 850,000, Querétaro is the largest city on our tour, yet despite its sprawling suburbs and factories, the compact downtown core, replete with pedestrian alleys linking lively plazas, is an ideal sanctuary for travellers who prefer the arts and romance to water sports and two-for-one margaritas. Strolling the narrow passageways of this UNESCO World Heritage Site, we pass lunch counters packed with local workers feasting on *gorditas* (tortillas stuffed with stewed meat), craft shops and homemade-candy stands featuring the skeletal figure of an elegant lady in a feathered hat known as La Catrina (Lady Death). Popularized by artist José Guadalupe Posada in his political lampoons of the corrupt regime of dictator Porfirio Díaz, the caricature's role, then and now, is simple: She reminds us that rich or poor, famous or unknown, we all eventually become skeletons.

Querétaro buzzes with history. Its landmarks include the house where the fathers of the Mexican Revolution conspired to overthrow the Spanish, the place in which the treaty of the Mexican-American War was signed in 1848 and the theatre in which the modern constitution of the Republic of Mexico was signed in 1917. Querétaro is also where Maximilian of Hapsburg, after a three-year reign as Emperor of Mexico, was executed by a republican firing squad in 1867. Likewise, evidence of the power of the Catholic Church fills more than 40 churches, of which the most impressive may be the Church of Santa Rosa de Viterbo. Completed in 1752, its unusual baroque design includes an intricate bell tower fashioned after an Oriental pagoda, the first multiple-face clock built in the Americas, and inverted flying buttresses, each decorated with a gargoyle sticking out its tongue – said to be the architect's riposte to his critics. Another architectural wonder is

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the city's former aqueduct, a massive series of 28-metre-high sandstone arches stretching 1.3 km across the urban landscape. The aqueduct, which supplied the city with drinking water from natural springs from 1738 to 1940, was built over a 12-year span by nobleman Juan Antonio de Urrutia y Arana, supposedly at the request of a Capuchin nun with whom he had fallen in love.

The aqueduct ends at the Church and ex-Convent of Santa Cruz on the site of a battleground, where, according to legend, a heavenly apparition of St. James on

horseback, bearing a mighty cross, convinced the Otomí Indians to surrender to the conquistadores. Built in 1654 to mark that historic moment, Santa Cruz later served as a training school for Catholic missionaries, including friar Antonio Margil de Jesús, who, in 1697, reportedly stuck his walking stick in the monastery orchard and lay down to sleep. Soon afterward, a tree sprouted from his staff bearing cross-shaped thorns. The miraculous tree, now more than 300 years old, still thrives in the monastery's courtyard.

Our mid-morning circuit of the grounds offers a tangible sense of the austere existence of the monks of that time. (In fact, some 30 friars still study in the cool, dark cloisters.) At tour's end, we relive another episode in the convent's history with a visit to the room where deposed emperor Maximilian awaited his execution. Measuring six steps by four, it contains several paintings, his desk, the remains of his army cot and, high on one wall, the window framing his only view – of the blue sky over Querétaro.

It is quite possible that Mexico has more holidays than any other place on the planet, or this may only seem to be so because Mexicans don't always wait for an official holiday to celebrate. In one week we have encountered Mother's Day and Teacher's Day and now, in Zacatecas, a festival to mark the local university's competition to choose a homecoming queen. Fireworks are booming and a 40-piece band is playing rousing music in one of the downtown squares as student drivers race through the serpentine streets with pretty candidates perched precariously on the cars' hoods. The girls gamely try to manage the difficult task of smiling and waving at onlookers while avoiding being tossed into the air.

The frenetic energy seems out of place in Zacatecas, a tranquil, mountain enclave little changed since its 17th-century heyday. Known as the city with a "face of stone and a heart of silver," its rambling landscape is bathed in dusky rose. Most every notable building is constructed of *cantera*, a locally quarried stone said to come in 12 shades of pink, from baby blush to salmon; in the high-altitude sunshine the stone takes on a luminous, magical quality. Clean, safe, sophisticated and devoid of aggressive vendors and begging children, Zacatecas defies many of the stereotypical expectations of Mexico. Though widely regarded as the most beautiful of the nation's colonial cities, it attracts few foreign tourists because of its relatively isolated location, 560 km north of Mexico City.

Founded in 1548 after the discovery of a rich vein of silver, Zacatecas was built in a narrow ravine between two imposing hills: Cerro de la Bufa and Cerro del Grillo, resulting in an eccentric layout of narrow, crooked streets zigzagging up hillsides. The town's colonial centre, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1993, features stately

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mansions and palaces, wrought-iron lanterns, charming fountains and an amazing cathedral that is considered the masterpiece of Mexican baroque. Built between 1730 and 1760, its carved façade sports a dizzying array of apostles, angels, flowers and fruit. Depending on the time of day, its colour shifts from light pink to burnt orange.

The city is also famous for its *teleférico*, an aerial tramway built in 1978. Jammed in with a carload of tourists, we "fly" over Zacatecas as our guide jokes about faulty brakes, finally exiting at Cerro del Grillo, where we board a train and chug into the Eden Mine for a sobering tour of its drafty netherworld of hanging bridges and tunnels. Native slave labourers, some as young as 10, endured terrible hardships hauling silver ore from its 450-metre depths. Few of these unlucky souls lived past the age of 35, and fatalities averaged eight per shift. Improbably, one of its tunnels now houses the city's most popular discotheque.

Despite a modest population of 180,000, Zacatecas has several top-calibre museums, two featuring the personal collections of a pair of renowned Zacatecan painter-brothers.

Set in what was once the Church of San Francisco, the Rafael Coronel Museum contains a display of more than 4,000 ceremonial masks. A former Jesuit seminary houses the Pedro Coronel Museum and a fabulous assemblage of art spanning several continents and civilizations, including works by Picasso, Goya and Miró. The town also boasts one of Mexico's finest hotels, the five-star Quinta Real, built around the ruins of the city's former bullfighting arena. The rooms are mixed in among the bleachers; the bar is in the bull chutes.

Our boutique hotel, the Casa Torres, is not so grand, but the view of the city from its restaurant balcony is unforgettable. Climbing back up to it through the steep streets after nightfall, we pass strolling lovers, shops selling leather, wood carvings and textiles and an open storefront's huge brick oven with spits full of sizzling chickens. Nearby, a *callejoneada* is forming, a piper-like parade led by horn players and a couple of drummers. There is a man with a burro loaded with jugs of fiery mezcal and another passing out ribbon necklaces with ceramic shot glasses attached. These roving parties, open to any and all, are an everyday

occurrence in Zacatecas.

Stopping to catch our breath on the final flight of stairs, we gaze down on the revellers below. Here, as in all of Mexico's colonial cities, the culture overflows with music, colour and celebration. It's odd how a world so in love with death can be so full of life. As we resume our ascent, the cathedral bells begin to toll, their deep rich tones blending with the brassy clamour of the *callejoneada*. ▣

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