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## Querétaro, Witness To History

By GINGER THOMPSON

TRAVELERS have marveled at Querétaro ever since the 17th century, when it was the third most important city under Spanish rule. Built from the fortunes made in the silver mines to the north, Querétaro's graceful plazas and baroque chapels, preserved in much of their original splendor, were settings for the rise and fall of colonial power in Mexico.

Now they offer a glimpse into Mexico's soul.

From the city's stone convents, which stretched deep into the Sierra Gorda, Franciscan missionaries launched methodical and brutal campaigns in the early 16th century to force Indians into slavery and Christianity. Ignacio Perez, a servant who became Mexico's Paul Revere, rode out from this city in 1810 to warn the organizers of the War of Independence that there was a plot to kill them. The last Mexican emperor, Archduke Maximilian of Hapsburg, was executed here in 1867 by firing squad. And in 1917 in the stately Teatro de la República, members of the first postrevolutionary Congress drafted the Mexican Constitution.

Unlike Mexico's most popular beach resorts, Querétaro is a perfect place for travelers seeking leisurely strolls and stylish comfort, rather than water sports and two-for-one margaritas. The narrow passageways through the center of town are lined with high-end crafts shops and homemade-candy stands. Live music fills cozy cafes. Casual lunch counters, called loncherías, are packed with local workers feasting on typical fried corn cakes, or gorditas. And the plazas, draped with red and fuchsia bougainvillea, feel like open-air museums.

"If you want to walk in history," one tour guide said, "then this is a city that has worked hard to preserve it."

Its beauty and historical importance have been recognized: Querétaro is a Unesco World Heritage Site. And during the weeks before Christmas, typically a high tourist season in Mexico because children are out of school and parents take time off from work, streets and restaurants were full of Mexican tourists. The city is an easy three-hour drive northwest of Mexico City, from which there is convenient bus service.

Hotel operators and restaurateurs said that the growing number of factories on the outskirts of town drew business travelers from the United States during the weekdays. But they lamented that few vacationers from the States come to Querétaro to relax.

One good way to start a visit is to take a trolley tour through the colonial center of town. Tickets cost about \$1.50 and can be bought at the central tourism office on Independence Plaza, also called Plaza de las Armas. There are several tours each day beginning at 9 a.m. They are offered in Spanish, but the guides -- like many hotel managers and waiters -- speak some English.

Querétaro is the capital of the state of Querétaro, and was temporarily declared the capital of the nation during the United States invasion of 1847. This increasingly industrial city was established in 1531 by a rare alliance between a Spanish explorer, Hernán Pérez Bocanegra y Córdoba, and an Otomí Indian ruler called Conin. Conin, who went on to become the first governor of the state, was baptized into the Catholic Church as Fernando de Tapia. Legend describes a "battle without weapons," in which the Indians and Spaniards were called to peace by visions of the Apostle Santiago (St. James) holding a shining cross.

The city, formally known as Santiago de Querétaro, was named for the apostle. And more than a century later, the Convent of the Cross was erected on the site of the legendary battle, called Sangremal Hill, which means "bad blood." Some 30 seminarians still study in the dark, austere cloisters. Stone and stucco interior patios are sparsely adorned with statues of the convent's founding priests, and one is filled with what looked like an overgrown tumbleweed. The bush, cultivated by the convent's first priests, grows thorns in the shape of a cross. The convent, which guides say housed the first missionary college in the Americas, later became a fortress for the retreating Spanish army. Maximilian was jailed there until his execution.

Shortly after becoming governor, Fernando de Tapia oversaw the construction of the first religious building in the city, the Convent of San Francisco. Today the sprawling baroque structure houses the Museo de la Región, where the most interesting exhibits explain the city's religious and cultural background, influenced by Spanish settlers, Indians and African slaves.

Signs of the power of the Catholic Church fill more than 40 churches and some 25 chapels in this city of 700,000. The Church of Santa Rosa de Viterbo, its curling buttresses painted to look like gray and white snail shells, is perhaps the city's most extraordinary example of baroque architecture. Guides said that the bug-eyed faces frowning down from the columns were part of the architect's response to criticism of his whimsical style.

Another architectural wonder of colonial Mexico is the aqueduct, which was built in the 1730's to carry drinking water to the city from almost 20 miles away after the river that runs through the center of town became contaminated by the rapidly growing population. The aqueduct, a Romanesque structure with some arches that are almost 75 feet high, provided water to some 70 private and public fountains across Querétaro until the 1940's.

An elegant mansion that was home to Mexico's most beloved heroine is now used as the central offices of the state government. Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, known as La Corregidora, was the wife of a former governor. Although trapped in her mansion overlooking Independence Plaza, La Corregidora was able to sneak a letter to her servant Ignacio Perez warning Father Miguel Hidalgo, the father of the Mexican War of Independence, of the plot to kill him. Upon receiving the warning, the determined priest took up arms and called Mexicans to fight for liberty.

And you might visit the Cerro de las Campanas, or Hill of Bells, a half-hour's walk west of the town center, where the hapless Emperor Maximilian gave up his empire and his life. The hill's name comes from stories that said that the rocks there chime like bells when banged together. Around the small chapel at the top of the hill is a large green park with playgrounds and an artificial lake. A towering statue of former President Benito Juárez was erected there in 1969.

Some of the finest hotels are as important to the city's history as its convents and museums. Most notable among them is the Casa de la Marquesa, built in the mid-1700's as a home for the wife of Don Juan Antonio de Urrutia y Arana, builder of the city's aqueduct. Legend has it that the real inspiration for the urban castle was a beautiful Franciscan nun, who asked the duke to build her the grandest house in the city as a sign of the love he secretly professed for her. Indeed, its Moorish-style stonework, ornate chandeliers, split arched stairway and mosaic walls make it the perfect place for a romantic retreat or a special dinner. Its large guest rooms, with 25-foot ceilings, are decorated with elegant antiques but have modern amenities.

About an hour's drive south, the town of Tequisquiapan is an inexpensive spa with natural hot springs and hotels that offer beauty and fitness services. Loosely translated, its name means "place of cleansing water." A quiet, laid-back place that so far draws few foreign tourists, it remains a popular weekend getaway for residents of Mexico City. The colonial town square was established by Spanish settlers, and the many colonial mansions, with arches covered with bougainvillea, give Tequisquiapan a village charm. The square, a local meeting place on most weekends, is surrounded by quaint cafes and gift shops. Local artisans weave straw into gorgeous baskets, hats and seat cushions.

For those interested in ecology, Sierra Gorda, about 70 miles out of town, boasts the country's greatest biodiversity, its 14 eco-systems range from semiarid desert to mountain cloud forest. Stretching across the northern part of the state, the Sierra Gorda rises 1,150 to 10,170 feet. Over 350 bird species have been identified in the reserve; guides often take visitors to an area called El Sotano de las Golondrinas for bird watching.

The five missions built by Father Junípero Serra across the Sierra Gorda are considered gems of Mexican religious architecture. The missions are a couple of hours by car away from the city, and have been beautifully preserved, still serving as churches for local residents.

Before he left the region to proselytize anew in the Mexican state of Baja California, Father Serra remarked on the beauty of Querétaro's landscape.

"In this place," he is reported to have said, "the land and the skies sing to their creator."

Along quiet streets that belie a colorful past

### Getting There

There is daily bus service between Mexico City (North Bus Station) and Querétaro; the trip takes three hours. The major lines are Estrella Blanca, (52-55) 57 29 07 07, \$14 one way, at 9.5 pesos to \$1; E.T.N., (52-55) 52 77 65 29, \$19; and Primera Plus, (52-55) 51 33 24 24, \$15.

### Where to Stay

La Casa de la Marquesa, Madero 41, Centro Historico, (52-442) 212 00 92, fax (52-442) 212 00 96, is a romantic mansion from the colonial era filled with antiques, Persian rugs and handpainted tiles. The hotel has 25 suites that range from \$190 to \$380.

Doña Urraca Hotel, 5 de Mayo 117, Centro Historico, (52-442) 238 54 00, fax (52-442) 224 0212, www.donaurraca.com, looks something like an Arabian villa with white stucco walls and sweeping patios. It has a pool, full-service spa and 24 suites, at \$170 to \$270.

Plaza Camelinas, Avenida 5 de Febrero 201, (52-442) 216 54 94, fax (52-442) 216 34 94, www.camelinas.com.mx, has 160 rooms and 3 suites, a restaurant, pool and gym. Doubles are \$121.

### Where to Eat

Restaurant 1810, at Andador Libertad 62, Centro Historico, (52-442) 214 33 24, is on the scenic Independence Plaza. Traditional Mexican food; the chicken mole de Querétaro, a rich and spicy chocolate-based sauce, is terrific. Lunch for two, with two glasses of wine: \$40.

Meson Chucho el Roto, Pasteur Sur 16, Centro Historico, at Andador Libertad on Independence Plaza, (52-442) 212 42 95, has a long, often crowded bar, and good beef and seafood. Dinner for two with wine: \$70.

### Sightseeing

Convent of the Cross, Plaza Venustiano Carranza, Centro Historico; open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 4 to 6 p.m.; closed Monday, free. Guides are available.

Museo de la Región, Church of San Francisco, Corregidora Sur 3, Centro Historico, (52-442) 212 20 31; open Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.; \$3.25.

Church of Santa Rosa di Viterbo, Arteaga and Ezequiel Montes, Centro Historico, (52-442) 214 16 91; open weekdays to visitors; free.

Casa de la Corregidora, seat of the state government, at Andador 5 de Mayo and Pasteur, Independence Plaza, Centro Historico, is open daily, free.

To visit the Franciscan Missions of the Sierra Gorda, contact Jocha, at Rio de la Loza 12 Sur, Centro Historico; (52-442) 212 89 40; fax (52-442) 212 59 36. Tours, available in English, last from one to six days. A two-day tour costs about \$220 a person, with meals.