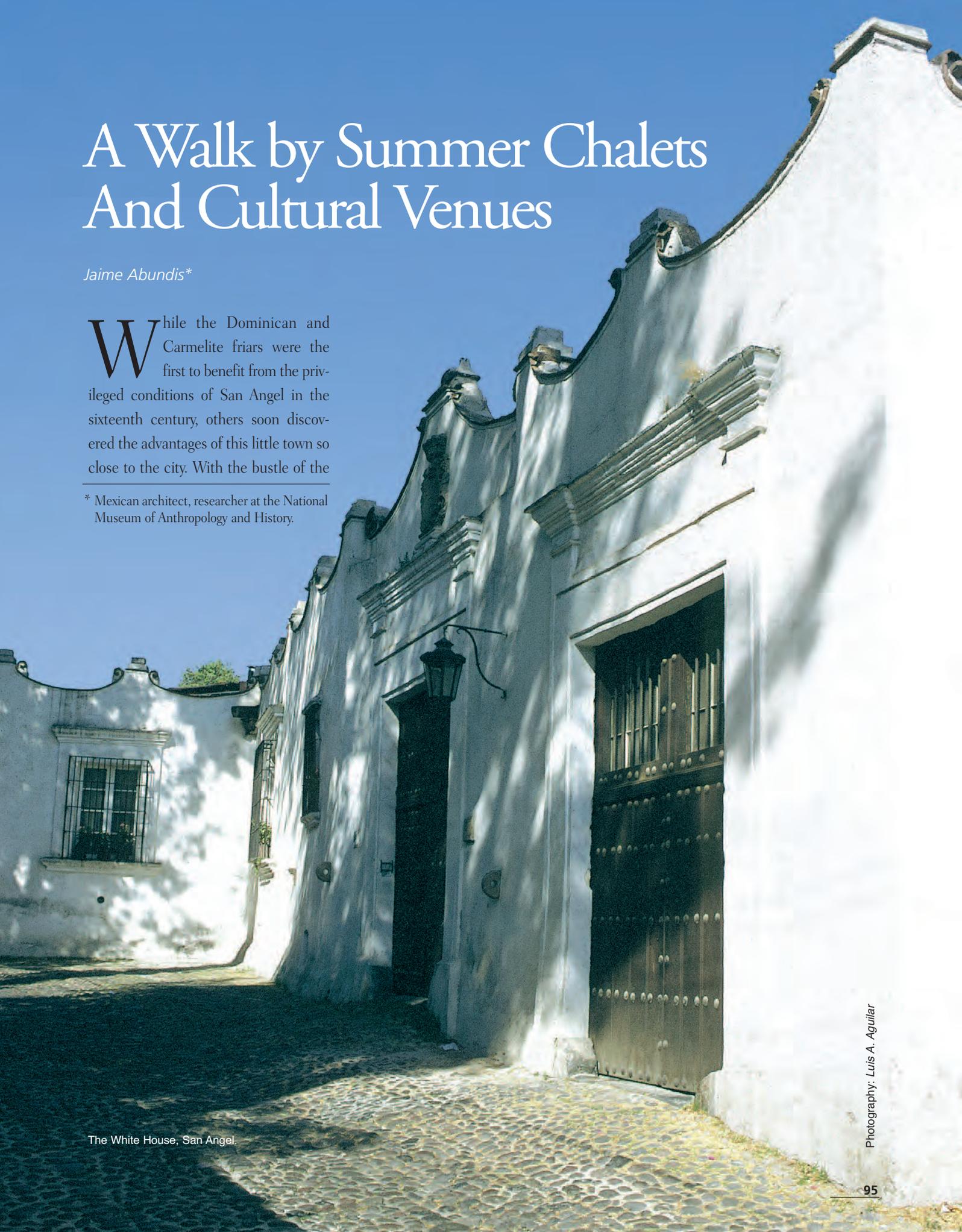


A Walk by Summer Chalets And Cultural Venues

*Jaime Abundis**

While the Dominican and Carmelite friars were the first to benefit from the privileged conditions of San Angel in the sixteenth century, others soon discovered the advantages of this little town so close to the city. With the bustle of the

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The White House, San Angel.

Photography: Luis A. Aguilar

town's Carmelite college in the seventeenth century, the number of visitors increased. A few well-off gentlefolk acquired land there to build summer houses surrounded by large gardens and orchards.

The area's attractions were myriad: mountains covered with thick forests, glens crossed by crystalline streams, waterfalls and cascades everywhere, more refreshing temperatures than in the city, no pools of water to bring mosquitos; trees, flowers and the majestic scenery of the Valley of Mexico with the city on one side and the volcanoes on the other, sprinkled with a multitude of hamlets in the most transparent air imaginable.

The English Dominican Friar Thomas Gage and the Carmelite Friar Isidoro de la Asunción, resident in the San Angel College, left us their impressions from the seventeenth century. However, the best descriptions of these promenades and clearings are found in the romantic writings of people who lived in the nineteenth century like Frances Erskine Calderón de la Barca,¹ Manuel Payno² and Justo Sierra.³ The short junkets from San Angel to nearby towns, the religious and popular fiestas with their processions, *jaripeos* or Mexican rodeos and dances these writers describe give us an idea of the charms that attracted outsiders to the town. These customs were witnessed and described by Hans Lenz Hauser,⁴ probably the last of San Angel's illustrious chroniclers.

The yearly arrival of the city folk to San Angel as summer neared was quite an occasion. They made all the preparations for the move from their homes in the city: the journey in the local stage and carts included servants, furniture, vict-



Oil painting of the Cabrío Falls on the Magdalena River, as painted by José María Velasco.



The San Angel Cultural Center.

uals and animals; and the fiestas, social evenings and walks or horseback rides in the environs were eagerly awaited. The Cabrío waterfall on the Magdalena River next to the La Hormiga factory was a "must" meeting place for all the summer visitors.

Let us take a look at the most important houses that remain to us, a testimony to a gentler time.

On the street that goes up to the west from the Licenciados Plaza is the building called the White House, considered the oldest in San Angel, said to date from



The summer house of the marquises of Selva Nevada.



Many of these houses have niches on the outside.



The Licenciadados Plaza, named after the lawyers who lived in the area.



The entrance to the White House.

the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century it belonged to an infantry colonel, Don Diego de Arce y Chacón, count of the Valley of Oploca. Above the main entrance, in fact, is a slightly worn coat-of-arms said to be his family crest. Surrounding the house were vast gar-

dens and orchards that bordered on the Goicoechea hacienda. On the corner of what are now Hidalgo and Reyna Streets is another summer house of a noble family, the marquises of Selva Nevada. Don Manuel Rodríguez de Pinillos, the first marquis of his line, man-

aged the interests of the marquise of the Valley of Oaxaca in Coyoacán at some time during the eighteenth century. It should be remembered that when he died, his wife decided to retire to the Regina Coeli nunnery in Mexico City, where she asked no less a personage than Manuel



House of Bishop Madrid y Canal.



The Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio-House Museum.



Corner Niche, house of Bishop Madrid.



The Archangels Plaza.

The House of the Bishop, first owned by Joaquín Fernández Madrid y Canal, canon of the Mexico City cathedral and later bishop of Tanagra, has a beautiful central patio.

Its facade is fortunate in its mortar coats-of-arms and monograms, the ironwork of its windows, the railings' inverted arches and pinnacles and the corner niche with the sculpture of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



The exquisite Porfirian architecture of the home of the Misses Coudurier captivate the observer.



The home of the Misses Coudurier.

Tolsá to design her cell.⁵ The baroque niche with its sculpture of Saint Anne and the Child Virgin in her arms on the house's exterior corner is of note.

Another house was built on the land that was part of the San Jacinto Dominicans' orchard and vegetable garden until the eighteenth century, though no construction was erected on the corner itself, leaving room for the little Licenciados Plaza, named after the lawyers who lived in the area. One of the lawyers was Rafael Martínez de la Torre, who owned the house in the nineteenth century and became notorious for his unfortunate defense of Emperor Maximilian in Querétaro. In the twentieth century, the house was bought by Luis Montes de Oca, a cabinet minister under Lázaro Cárdenas, who added to its main entrance the primitive portal to the chapel of the Saint Joseph of the Natural Hospital, retrieved from the building when it was demolished in the 1930s.

Where Juárez, Aureliano Rivera and Amargura Streets cross is a triangular lot

where the so-called House of the Bishop stands, first owned by Joaquín Fernández Madrid y Canal, canon of the Mexico City cathedral and later bishop of Tanagra. This one-story building has a beautiful central patio. Its facade is fortunate in its mortar coats of arms and monograms, the ironwork of its windows, the railings' inverted arches and pinnacles and the corner niche with the sculpture of Our Lady of Guadalupe topped with a flower-festooned stone cross.

Few visitors really look at the house that hosts the famous Saturday Bazaar at one corner of the San Jacinto Plaza. Some say it was owned by Don Antonio López de Santa Anna during the nineteenth century,⁶ although this should be taken with a grain of salt. What is not in question, however, is the house's eighteenth-century origins, as testified to by its window jambs, extended to the cornice over the lintels.

A few steps from this house, also on the San Jacinto Plaza, is the Risco House,

dating from the seventeenth century, with modifications from a century later. Outstanding features of this building are its door with the baroque niche ornamented with a stone sculpture of Our Lady of Loreto; the look-out used by officers in both the Mexican and U.S. armies during the events of 1847; the patio; and most of all the crag-shaped fountain made of New Spain Majolica, Asian and European porcelain and sea shells topped with a sculpture of Hercules or Sampson fighting a lion. The Agreda family owned this house in the nineteenth century; it passed to the Payró family in the twentieth century and was then bought by Isidro Fabela⁷ to live in. He filled it with great works of art and antiques that he later donated to the people of Mexico.

Another important house in San Angel was that of Don Francisco Fagoaga, the marquis of Apartado. This house has had many owners, some of whom used it as a station for the stages that ran the regular



The house of lawyer Rafael Martínez de la Torre who became notorious for his unfortunate defense of Emperor Maximilian in Querétaro.

route between Mexico City and San Angel before the advent of the steam engine and the railroad. The house had ample grounds where, when sold, five houses fit comfortably, in addition to the picturesque Amargura Alleyway. The house seems to date from the eighteenth century, although it was remodeled in the nineteenth century with balustrades and clay urns.

At the Amargura Street corner of Plaza del Carmen stands the house that belonged to the descendants of Tristán de Luna y Arellano who undertook the conquest of Florida in 1565, embarking

from San Juan de Ulúa, Veracruz, for whose services the Crown gave him the title of Marshall of Castile. The house's main points of interest are the facade's lace-like plaster relief and the gargoyles on cherubim brackets.

To the left is another magnificent house, for many years inhabited by the Misses Coudurier, sisters known for their close friendship with Porfirio Díaz. Despite its current state of disrepair, it still catches the eye: the fine design and careful proportions, and the alabaster capitals that top the portico columns.

Unfortunately, many houses were torn down to make way for what people thought was modernity; among them, the so-called House of Dynamite and the home of Don Ignacio Cumplido.⁸

But not everything in San Angel is nostalgia for things past; it has other, more than alive, up-to-date attractions, particularly cultural venues.

You just have to cross Revolution Avenue from the El Carmen Museum to enjoy lectures, exhibitions, concerts, courses and more in the San Angel Cultural Center.



Facade of the Risco House, built in the seventeenth century.

A few steps away is the Jaime Sabines House, which also offers cultural activities. It is a shame that the old Carmelite cistern has been defaced, but just west of it is the portico built for the Carmelites' spiritual conversations, for years used as the concert hall of pianist Pedro Luis Ogazón and today the dining room of a day care center. In the San Jacinto Plaza, besides the Risco House, is the Isidro Fabela Cultural Center with its library specialized in international law.

On the corner of Revolution Avenue and Altavista is a modern building that houses the Alvar and Teresa Carrillo Gil Art Museum, whose painting and sculpture exhibitions make it well worth a visit. On Altavista itself, across from what was the main house of the other Goicoechea hacienda, today used as a restaurant, is the house Juan O'Gorman⁹ built for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, now dubbed the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio-House Museum,¹⁰ with its excellent permanent collection and temporary exhibits.



The house's fountain, made of Majolica, porcelain and shells.

In what was once the Loreto paper mill, at the corner of Revolution and Magdalena River Avenues is a shopping mall that houses the Soumaya Museum, with outstanding pieces in its permanent collection, including sculptures by Auguste Rodin. We cannot leave out the Mexico Condomex Historical Studies Center on the Federico Gamboa Plaza (also known as Chimalistac Plaza), that boasts one of the best specialized libraries in the country and offers history lectures to the public. But we must not leave San Angel before wandering though and enjoying its tree-filled corners like the Archangels and Licenciados Plazas, the River Walk with its bridges built by the Carmelites, the little winding streets of Chimalistac with its "Secret Chamber," its La Fonte Plaza and its modified open chapel. And we must make time to walk through the Tagle, Bombilla, San Jacinto and Art Garden Parks. The San Angel of remembrance and evocation still appeals to the visitors of today who know how to discover what is not always visible at first glance. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Scots wife of the first Spanish ambassador to Mexico, who wrote *Life in Mexico*, in which she describes the country's nineteenth-century landscape and customs.

² Mexican politician and intellectual who loved San Angel, where he died.

³ Founder of the National University and a cabinet minister to Porfirio Díaz, Justo Sierra was an assiduous visitor to San Angel.

⁴ Hauser was the last owner of the Loreto paper factory before it was converted to a shopping mall.

⁵ Tolsá was the director of sculpture of the San Carlos Royal Academy, the sculptor of the equestrian statue of Carlos IV, known in Mexico as *El Caballito*, and designer of the Royal College of Mines building, masterpieces of the New Spain neoclassical period.

⁶ Santa Anna was president of Mexico 11 times between 1833 and 1854 and is infamous for being responsible for the loss of a vast stretch of Mexican territory (Texas, Arizona, Colorado and California) to the United States.

⁷ Politician and diplomat from the first half of the twentieth century.

⁸ The first editor of the most famous newspaper of the time, *El siglo XIX*.

⁹ Juan O'Gorman was also an internationally recognized painter.

¹⁰ Read about the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio-House Museum in *Voices of Mexico*, no. 39.