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A Glimpse of Cuernavaca

Leonardo Sepúlveda*

Cuernavaca: “the city of eternal spring.” Its abundant vegetation and warm climate invite relaxation, but also dreams and ideas.

Evidence shows that the valley was inhabited 2,000 years before the arrival of the Spanish, and it was believed to be the site of a mythical paradise called Tamoanchan. It was the Tlahuicas, however, the last tribe of the Nahuas to

arrive in the Valley of Mexico, who founded there a large settlement called Cuauhnahuac, meaning “near the woodland.”

The Spanish arrived in the area only a couple of months after conquering the Valley of Mexico and, reputedly, unable to pronounce the name Cuauhnahuac, they rechristened it Cuernavaca. It was there that the Franciscans founded their fifth monastery and that Hernán Cortés settled when the crown made him Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca in 1529. Since that time, sugar cane has been cultivated in the region. At the end of the colonial period, with

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Daniel Mungua

The Castle Photography Museum.



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View of the Borda Garden.



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The garden of the India Bonita Restaurant in the Mañana House built by U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow.

the outbreak of the War of Independence, General José María Morelos y Pavón and other rebel leaders were imprisoned there.

The town's prosperous tranquility was disrupted again in 1855 during the War of the Reform when Juan Álvarez, a rebel against the dictator Santa Anna, was proclaimed president there and Cuernavaca designated as the national capital for a little over two months.

In 1862, Emperor Maximilian was captivated not only by the town's climate, but —legend has it— by the charms of “a pretty Indian girl” with whom he would have an affair that prompt-

ed him to acquire the Borda Garden and other properties.

In 1911, Emiliano Zapata occupied the town in support of the Revolution headed up by Francisco I. Madero and in the following nine years, the city was occupied successively by the different warring groups.

After the peace, Cuernavaca was rediscovered as a retreat and inspiration for different writers and artists. The Britain Malcolm Lowry wrote *Under the Volcano* there in 1947; the German Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man* in 1964, among other works; and Britain Rosa E. King finished her *Tempest Over Mexico: A Personal Chronicle* (1970). Diego Rivera painted his first historic mural there in 1930 and muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros set up his atelier in the town. These were the first of a long list of visual artists, writers, intellectuals and celebrities who have lived in Cuernavaca and continue to do so.

Today, the city also offers the visitor many places of interest, appropriate for short tours, for a glimpse of its history, traditions and art.

DOWNTOWN

In downtown Cuernavaca, the most outstanding building is the Palace of Cortés; construc-



Murals by Diego Rivera in the Palace of Cortés.



Bajo el Volcán Hotel.

tion began on it in 1525 and it has served at different times as the seat of the state government, a jail and the town hall. Near the entrance are three enormous pre-Hispanic monoliths brought from different parts of the valley: one depicts an eagle, another a reptile and the third has several symbols for which it has been named “the stone of charms.” The palace holds the Cuauhnahuac Museum with its collection of regional objects and works of art. The second floor boasts a mural by Diego Rivera that depicts his own particular vision of the history of the state of Morelos.

Leaving the palace and walking west, the visitor can take in several sights, including the Zacate Plazuela, Las Casas and Tepetates Streets and the Morelos and Juárez Gardens. The latter holds an old kiosk built in 1890 with stands selling a wide variety of juices, fruits and fruit drinks; on Thursdays and Sundays local bands play concerts for the public there.

Further west is the cathedral. Inside the church are several paintings from the colonial period that depict the life of Mexico’s first saint, Felipe de Jesús, slaughtered on a missionary voyage to Japan along with 25 others. Worthy of note are the enormous baptismal font, the Franciscan monastery’s cloister and the art work in the gallery, foremost among which is a wooden sculpture of Saint Christopher carrying the Baby Jesus. Around the cathedral are four chapels, in-



The Palace of Cortés.

cluding the Open —or San José— Chapel and the Chapel of the Third Order.

On that same block is the “House of the Tower,” as the Brady Museum is called. Originally part of the monastery, it was purchased by artist Robert Brady who amassed an enormous collection of art work during his travels. A few meters away is one of Mexico’s first sports clubs, the Revolution Garden.

A few steps from the cathedral is Cuernavaca’s most romantic park, the Borda Garden. Built in the eighteenth century by one of the scions of the Borda mining dynasty, it holds a large



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Cloister of the Ascension Convent.

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The Palace of Cortés, one of Mexico's oldest civic buildings.

fountain, an artificial lake and several buildings in which the Morelos Cultural Institute carries out its intensive program of activities. Next to the garden is the Guadalupe Church, also built by the Bordas. After it was built, people said that “God gives to Borda and Borda gives to God.”

Two blocks to the north is the Mañana House, built by U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow and which is now a restaurant. Legend has it that the house got its name because when the ambassador asked the builder when he would finish, the answer was always, “Mañana.”

Other places of cultural interest are The Castle, or Photography Museum, a nineteenth century red brick building; the Calvary Chapel; the interior of a building which was originally the Bellavista Hotel, and now functions as a bank, in which Alfonso Xavier Peña painted murals on Mexican dance. Another nearby hotel, named Bajo el Volcán (Under the Volcano), was the home of Malcolm Lowry. The Miguel Salinas Public Library also has murals by Norberto Martínez worth a visit.

SUBURBS AND ENVIRONS

Other places in Cuernavaca like the Porfirio Díaz Park and Bridge, the Barrancas Walk, with its hanging bridge, Salto Chico and the San Antón Cascade all are alive with natural beauty and a rich history.

Further away from downtown is the Olindo House in the Acatzingo neighborhood, where Maximilian apparently lived with his indigenous mistress; Siqueiros' atelier, offering the visitors the sight of several murals, in the Jardines de Cuernavaca neighborhood; the pre-Hispanic ruins of Teopanzolco in the Vista Hermosa area; and traditional neighborhoods like Tlatenango, San Jerónimo and Los Reyes Magos.

In the suburbs is Sumiya, an authentic Japanese villa in the middle of Mexico, whose buildings were brought piece by piece from across the Pacific Ocean. Near there is Palmira, which boasts a church designed by Félix Candela, one of the international pioneers in modern architecture. **MM**