

# The Monasteries of Morelos

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Photos: Daniel Munguía

Passageway in the Tepoztlán Monastery.

Once the Spanish conquest headed by Hernán Cortés from 1519 to 1521 was completed, the services of missionary friars were required to help incorporate the enormous indigenous population into the new system the conquerors were imposing.

The first 12 Franciscans arrived in 1524, therefore, and, allied with Cortés, began their difficult missionary labors, for which they were favored by the conquistador.

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To balance out the strength the Friars Minor acquired, the Dominican preaching friars arrived in 1526. In addition to blocking Cortés' aspirations, they would be responsible for setting up the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, whose power would last for a good many years during the viceregal period.

And finally came the Augustinians in 1533 to complete the trio in charge of disseminating the new Christian doctrine and bringing new faithful into the fold, thereby peacefully achieving the total domination of the populace.

To give an idea of the myriad of architectural styles and riches found in the monasteries in the state of Morelos, suffice it to note that the UNESCO has declared 11 of them World Heritage Treasures.



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Interior of the Atlatlahucan Monastery.



Sarah Peing

Saint Augustine Monastery, Jonacatepec.



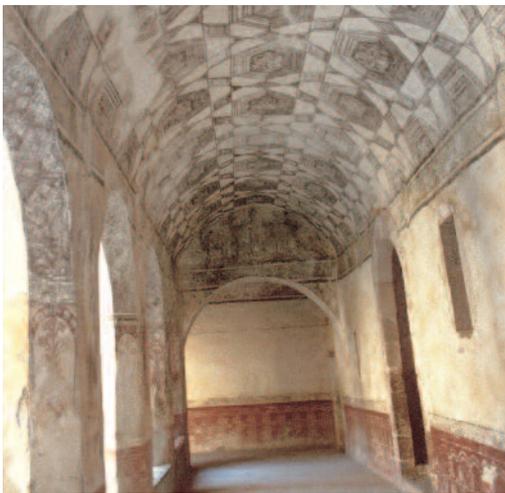
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St. James Chapel in Tlayacapan.

The architectural by-product of the friars' activities, although based on that of their European counterparts, developed their own characteristics in order to resolve the needs that came with the conversion of large numbers of native people to the new religion.

Many of the ceremonies were carried out in the open air; to that end the open chapel was invented, in which the Holy Eucharist and the priest were under a roof and the rest of the faithful were in the open air in the main atrium. At the center of the atrium was a cross with the symbols of the passion, but never a

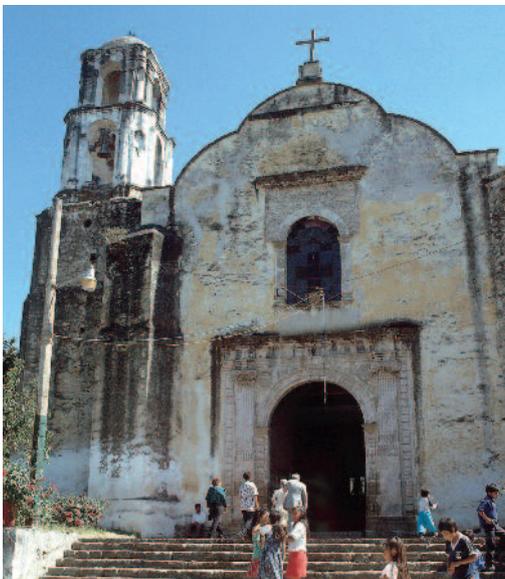
crucifix because it would have been difficult to justify the condemnation and prohibition of human sacrifices when the Catholic Church venerated a body hanging on a cross. Later, the processional path and chapels set along the way were included in the atrium so the procession could stop there and sing a response. There the processions were carried out and the Eucharist was set on an improvised altar to venerate it before continuing to the next chapel. Extraordinary examples of these chapels can still be seen today in Atlatlahucan and Tepoztlán.



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The painted, vaulted ceiling at the Yecapixtla Monastery.

The styles are mixed:  
 a Romanesque foundation might  
 be surrounded by  
 Gothic elements, finished  
 with plateresque, Mudéjar, Herrerian  
 or mannerist decorations and  
 culminate in a unique style  
 of baroque.



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The oldest mission in the state of Morelos, in Ocuituco.



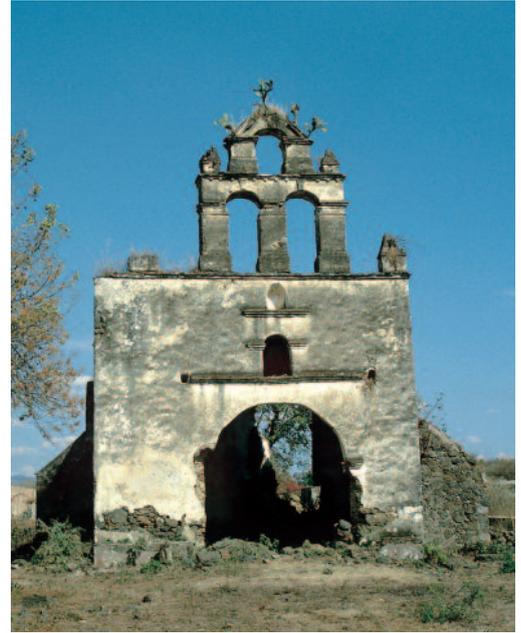
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Fresco at the Tepoztlán Monastery.



Interior of the Tepoztlán Monastery.

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King's Chapel at Tlayacapan.

Once the main parts of the church had been built, the next step was building a dwelling for the friars, what would eventually be the monastery—or convent, as the term was used at the time for both male and female religious—itsself. Usually, the monasteries were buildings with two floors. The ground floor, or lower cloister, was a patio surrounded by passageways, the sacristy, kitchen, refectory, the *de profundis* room (where the monks prayed, often beginning with a *de profundis* psalm, and sometimes kept watch over their dead), the chapter room, the pilgrims' portal (thus named because it was a roofed area used to house visitors denied access to the rest of the building) and, of course, the orchards, gardens and corrals.

On the upper floor, usually reached by broad staircases, was the upper cloister, around which were the friars' cells with romantic windows looking out over the orchard and general landscape. The prior's cell always looked out onto the atrium and was usually next to the library, distinguished visitors' cells and the access to the choir.

Finally, there was the church itself. Usually it was north of the cloister, an enormous single,

high nave—in place of the primitive carved ceilings made of wood and covered with shingles—facing west to east. In a few cases, like Tepoztlán, Tlayacapan, Jonacatepec and Tlaquitenango, prevailing winds led the builders to not place the church north of the cloister. Because these churches were the last structures built—since they represented the house of the new Lord to be praised and the most time and money were invested in them—they are the most highly and elegantly decorated of the constructions in these complexes.

The styles are mixed: a Romanesque foundation might be surrounded by Gothic elements (like vault ribs and cloisters, Yecapixtla's rose-window or carved pink granite pulpits), finished with plateresque, Mudéjar, Herrerian or mannerist decorations and culminate in a unique style of baroque.

To give an idea of the myriad of architectural styles and riches found in the monasteries in the state of Morelos, it is enough to note that the UNESCO declared 11 of its monasteries World Heritage Treasures in 1994. **MM**

# Morelos' Main Sixteenth-Century Monasteries



Daniel Munguía

St. James the Apostle Monastery, Jiutepec.



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Central Patio, Tepoztlán Monastery.



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Altarpiece of the Cuernavaca s Cathedral

## FRANCISCAN

1. *The Ascension Church*, today the cathedral of the city of Cuernavaca. Built between 1525 and 1552. Designated a cathedral in 1891. Magnificent frescoes and architectural detail. World Heritage Treasure.
2. *St. James the Apostle*, Jiutepec. Built between 1539 and 1549 and added to in the next three centuries.
3. *The Ascension*, Temimilcingo. Originally an open chapel that expanded until it became a small monastery. Data indicates that other foundations existed that either were never finished, have been drastically altered or were later destroyed. This is the case of the monasteries at Saint John the Evangelist in Xochitepec and Saint Luke in Mazatepec.

## DOMINICAN

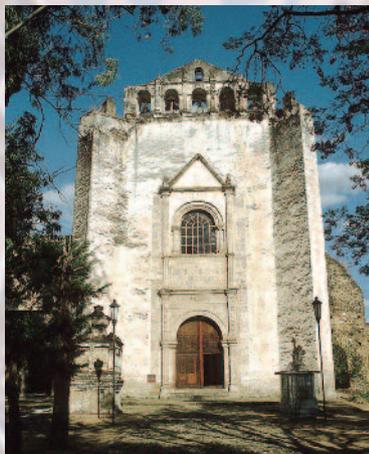
The Dominicans were the last order of monks to come to what is now Morelos. For that reason, they found the lands already distributed among the Franciscans, who arrived first, and the Augustinians. The Dominicans did manage, however, to adjudicate nine sites for themselves, although in achieving this they went through severe confrontations. The sites are:

1. *The Nativity*, Tepoztlán. World Heritage Treasure. Built between 1560 and 1570. A delicious plateresque facade and magnificent belvedere. Today, it is a museum under the auspices of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.
2. *Saint Dominic*, Hueyapan. World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1539, it was finished about 1560. It contains the extraordinary Hueyapan Niche, carved out of a single piece of wood.
3. *Saint John the Baptist*, Tetela del Volcán. World Heritage Treasure. On the slopes of the Popocatepetl Volcano, it was founded in 1563 and finished in 1581 with the participation of Friar Juan de la Cruz. A noteworthy mural and coffered ceiling in the sacristy.
4. *Saint Dominic*, Oaxtepec. World Heritage Treasure. Built between 1535 and 1586 with the participation of Friar Domingo de Betanzos. Fragments of the Tepozteco idol were used in its foundations. Noteworthy murals and quarried stone.
5. *The Ascension*, Yautepec. Finished about 1567 with lateral chapels built later on the south side.
6. *Saint Dominic*, Tlaquiltenango. Built by the Franciscans between 1530 and 1550 and ceded to the Dominicans after litigations in 1586, it boasts a mural and being the place where the Mauricio de la Arena Codex was discovered in a wall.
7. *Saint Michael the Archangel*, Tlaltizapán. Founded in 1548 and finished about



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Tepoztlán's open chapel and church facade.



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St. John the Baptist Monastery, Tlayacapan.



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Portrait of a bishop, Yacapixtla Monastery.

1553. Emiliano Zapata had a mausoleum built in its atrium for the remains of revolutionary movement leaders.

8. *Saint Dominic*, Cuautla. Finished about

1580 with many changes made in later years.

9. *Saint Catherine of Siena*, Itzamatitlán. Destroyed.

### AUGUSTINIAN

The friars of the Order of Saint Augustine built the most sumptuous of all the monasteries.

1. *Saint John the Baptist*, Yecapixtla, World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1535 by Friar Jorge de Ávila, it is reminiscent of the Gothic style, and has a magnificent rose-window, pulpit and choir railing. The side facade is plateresque.

2. *Saint John the Baptist*, Tlayacapan. World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1554 and finished by 1572. Tracery vaulted ceilings, a doubly high sacristy and a mural. Part of the monastery is now a museum.

3. *Saint William*, Totoloapan. World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1534 by Friar Jorge de Ávila. A mural with an interesting Lord's Prayer in Nahuatl. Panels depicting the history of the crucifix.

4. *Saint Matthew*, Atlatlauhcan. World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1570 and finished in the 1580s. A magnificent open chapel and crenelated processional chapels.

5. *Saint James the Apostle*, Ocuituco. World Heritage Treasure. The Augustinians first founded it outside Mexico in 1534, but finished it in 1541. Magnificent fountain. It was commissioned by Friar Juan de Zumárraga.

6. *The Conception*, Zacualpan. World Heritage Treasure. Founded in 1535 and finished by 1567. Attributed to Friar Juan de la Cruz (or Cruzate). A marvelous, massive building with a beautiful open chapel. The Rosary Chapel was added in the nineteenth century.

7. *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, Jantetelco. Probably founded by Friar Alonso de la Veracruz about 1558, it was finished in 1565. One of its cells today holds a museum dedicated to Mariano Matamoros.

8. *Saint Augustine*, Joncatepec. Founded in 1558. Friar Juan Cruzate died and was buried here in 1575. A large atrium, a mural and a wooden balcony.

### UNFINISHED OR DRASTICALLY MODIFIED

1. *Saint Andrew*, Jumiltepec. A curious monastery whose floor plan is unlike the norm, perhaps because it began as an open chapel.

2. *Saint Mark*, Tlayecac. Unfinished. With a large nave and some rooms

adjacent to the monastery.

3. *The Purification or Precious Blood*, Tlanepantla. A magnificent, single-story nave and cloister, surrounded by many chapels with eighteenth-century, bas-relief decoration.