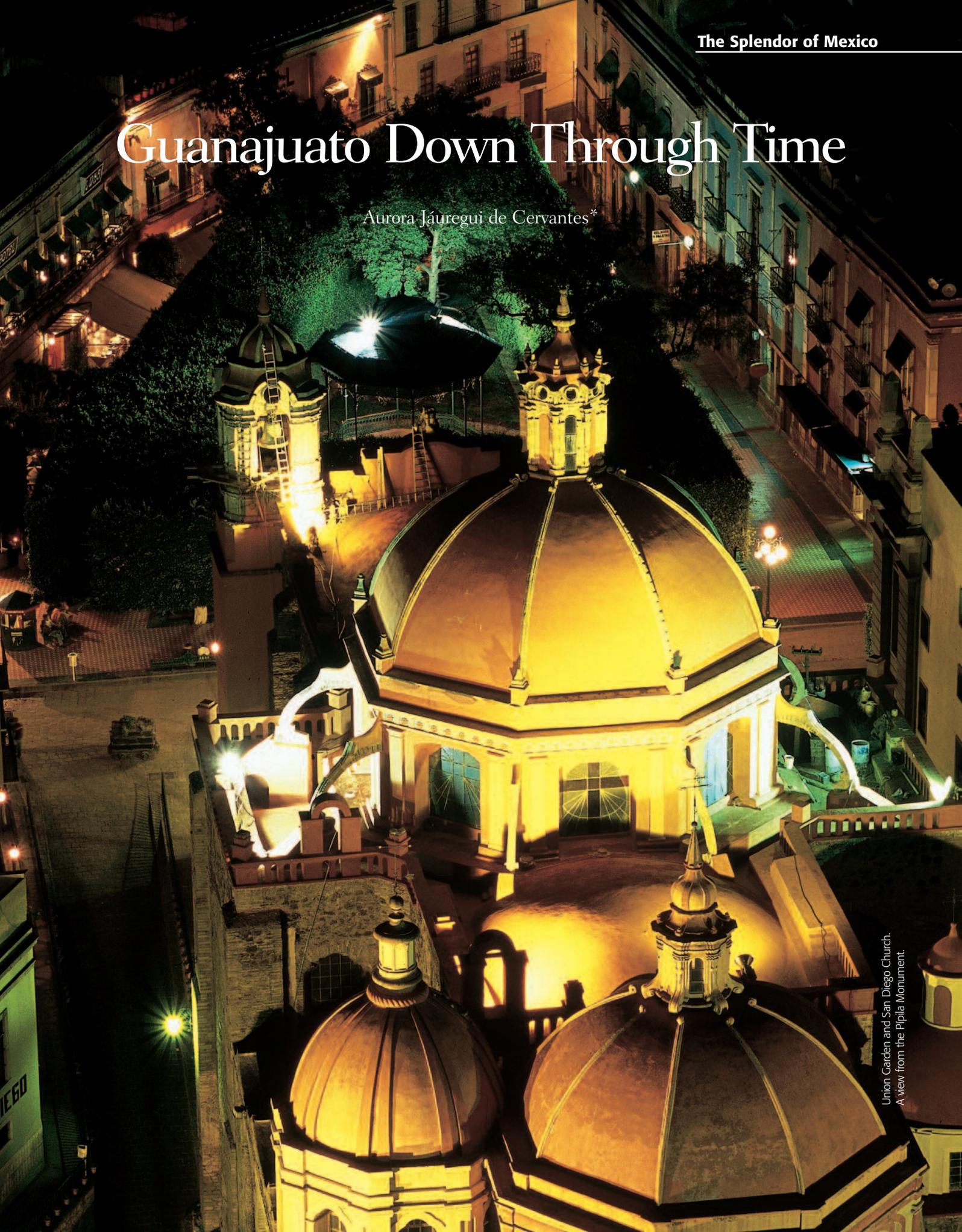


# Guanajuato Down Through Time

Aurora Jáuregui de Cervantes\*



Union Garden and San Diego Church.  
A view from the Pipila Monument.



Any city that has made history has a singular origin, and Guanajuato is no exception: it was born by chance during the Spaniards' search for metal ore in the region they knew as "The Great Chichimeca," and it grew where they dug their mines. This and the agricultural and cattle ranching haciendas made the area self-sufficient.

Guanajuato took shape slowly. It took a few streets, many alleyways, several plazas—like the one called Cuesta del Marqués, today Plaza de la Paz; the San Diego or San Pedro Alcántara Plaza, now the Union Garden; and the San Roque Plaza—and many bridges over the river that ran through the bottom of the gorge bordering on the mining haciendas to make the beginnings of an urban area. All this can be seen in the city maps and the Indias and Rozuela Archives.

The climate and beautiful scenery makes the geographical area where Guanajuato lies

---

\* Former chronicler of the city of Guanajuato.

ideal. Its urban layout is irregular since it developed with no specific planning. Originally, the area was a woody glen inhabited at different times by different pre-Hispanic tribes. Some of them settled in what is today the Pastita neighborhood: the Otomíes called it Mo-o-ti, or "place of metals"; the Nahoas called it Paxtitlán, or "place of hay" or "ancient place"; and the Purépechas called it Quashuato, or "mountainous place of frogs."

The primitive Real de Minas de Santa Fe—as it was called—which included the Reales of Tepetapa, Marfil and Santa Ana, was elevated to the category of *alcaldía mayor*, or town, in 1574. In 1679, it was given the rank of *villa* and in 1741, that of city, by decree of King Felipe V. The cover sheet of the document of incorporation as a city, deposited in the Alhóndiga de Granaditas and the mayor's office, has the city seal representing faith and the words, "Title of City conferred by His Majesty Señor Don Felipe V—may God keep him— on the Villa de Santa

Guanajuato, land of legend,  
perfect for combining  
fantasy and reality.



Plaza de la Paz.



The Alley of the Kiss, an obligatory stop for any visitor.

Unless otherwise specified photos by Daniel Munguia

Fe y Real de Minas de Guanajuato, for its merits and services.”

The document then enumerates the qualities taken into account to raise it to the category of a city:

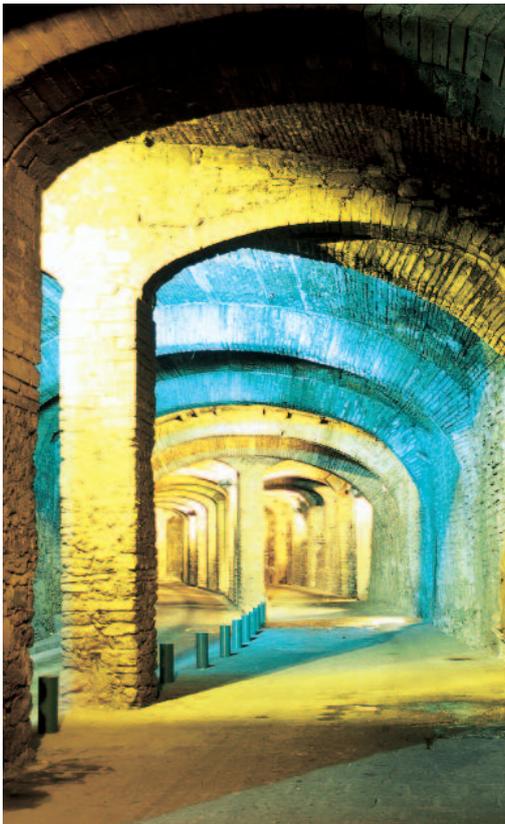
Its situation and temperament... its good and copious fruits... benign climate, purity of air and water and other prerequisites stipulated in the First Law, Title Five, Book Four of the Compendium of the Indies, for the obtainment of the title of City, in addition to the advantageous conveniences of its abundant silver and gold mines; its area, population, buildings, haciendas, rooms have increased considerably, and many visitors pass through for its increased trade and commerce, attracted by its wealth and abundant riches; and that it is at present one of the most useful mining towns in New Spain, so much so that it is singular and estimable, among all those discovered and worthy of the most distinguished honors for its copious contribution and the splendor of its

most important neighbors....This *villa* is situated near one of the mines themselves, the main ones of which are called Rayas, Mellado and Cata... becoming a City it will be to the benefit of my Royal Treasury. Therefore, by my Royal Title, I wish and it is my will that the said *Villa* will henceforth and always be known perpetually as the city of Santa Fe y Real de Minas de GUANAJUATO...

I, THE KING (signature)

The title of city was not actually bestowed on Guanajuato in the town itself until 1746 because bureaucratic red tape had slowed down the process. But the celebrations to commemorate the royal decree began on July 31 of that year, celebrations which lasted several days.<sup>1</sup>

At the time the city was incorporated, the Mina de Rayas mine, worked by Don José Sardaneta y Legaspi, was bringing in 17 million pesos for the crown. When this mine passed to his son and grandson (the first and second



The underground street, an impressive example of colonial engineering.

The underground street's winding pattern follows the river on the banks of which Guanajuato was founded.



The University of Guanajuato, a center for academic and cultural activity.



Plaza San Fernando, ideal for a rest or having a snack.



The Basilica, where Our Lady of Guanajuato is worshipped.



Plaza El Baratillo, where indigenous peasants used to sell their produce and grain.

Marquis de Rayas, respectively), they each paid the same amount annually. The city's golden age spanned 100 years, from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century.

In the late eighteenth century, the La Valenciana Mine was very productive: according to Alexander von Humboldt, it sometimes produced as much as the entire kingdom of Peru. "If we contemplate the Guanajuato Mining District, just two mines of the mother lode annually produce the seventh and eighth part of all the silver produced in the Americas."<sup>2</sup> The La Valenciana Mine made an annual profit of between 400 million and 600 million pesos for 40 years, which is why Humboldt classified it as the richest mine in Mexico.

Guanajuato has a glorious past as the hearth where our nationality was forged. Here and in the surrounding area, the mixing of the races took place more rapidly than in other parts of the country. Notable civic buildings and the city's churches began to be erected in the mannerist and baroque styles in the seventeenth century. This process continued in the eighteenth century, producing such buildings as the Saint Pedro Alcántara (San Diego) Monastery, the San Francisco Church (previously Saint Juan), the Parish Church (today the Basilica), the Belén Monastery, the Holy Conception, Company and Valenciana Colleges, etc.

In 1786, Guanajuato became the seat of one of Mexico's 12 intendancies, created in that year. At that time, it had 80,000 inhabitants and was at the height of its splendor. The central plaza already held the mansions of the Counts of Rul and Pérez-Gálvez, of the Marquis of San Clemente; and in Pocitos, the mansion of the Marquis de Rayas. In 1809, the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, the great granary, was finished in the neoclassical style. One year later, on September 28, the first battle of Mexico's War of Independence took place there, led by Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. On March 25, 1824, after many years of struggle brought independence, Guanajuato became the capital of the state and, in 1858,

under President Benito Juárez, the capital of the republic.

In 1903, state Governor Joaquín Obregón González invited President Porfirio Díaz to inaugurate several important public works built in the late nineteenth century: the Juárez Theater, the Legislative Palace, the Esperanza Dam and two monuments (one dedicated to peace, built in the old Central Plaza, which then changed its name to Peace Plaza; and the other dedicated to Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, in Las Acacias Park).

Today the city has grown beyond the original canyon and the population has increased. The State College became the Autonomous University of Guanajuato, with a substantial campus and a symphony orchestra. Under the city are many tunnels and underground streets that give the area a mysterious, legendary air.

In 1982, Guanajuato was declared a national monument, and in 1988, it was given the title of Cervantes City by the mayor of Alcalá de Henares, Spain, where Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra was born. Guanajuato has been the host of the International Cervantes Festival for 29 consecutive years. This festival is one of the reasons cited by the director general of the UNESCO in 1988 when he declared Guanajuato and its mines a World Heritage Treasure, given that its commitment is not only to preserve the past, but to build a new future through fostering culture, creativity and education. In short, this is a city that people fall in love with and is well worth visiting. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> That particular day was picked because it was the day of the city's patron saint, Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Since 1557, the city already had its own virgin, Our Lady of Guanajuato, also honored during the celebrations, which were, therefore, religious, civic and community festivities combined.

<sup>2</sup> Alejandro von Humboldt, *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa Editores, 1973), p. 402.



Guanajuato State Tourism Office

The Juárez Theater, one of Mexico's oldest and most beautiful stages.



Quijote Plaza, in honor of Cervantes.



La Valenciana Church's gold-leaf altarpieces are a magnificent example of baroque art.