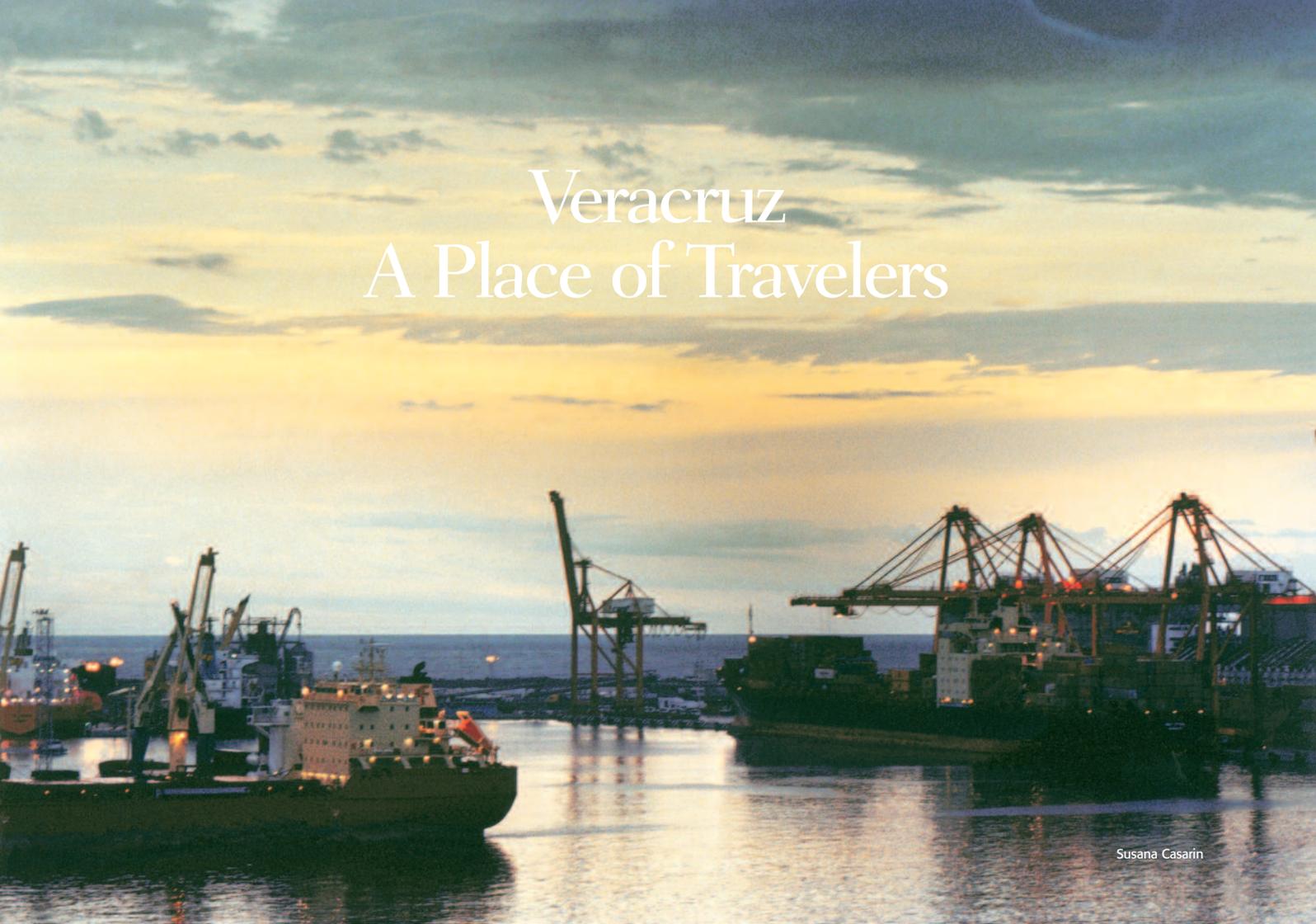


Veracruz

A Place of Travelers



Susana Casarin

*Veracruz, little corner
where the waves of the sea
make their nest.*

*Veracruz, little piece of homeland
that knows how to suffer and sing.*

AGUSTÍN LARA

In Veracruz the aroma of the sea and the attraction of the provinces merge in a morning with the taste of coffee and *picadas* in the city's arched walkways. Regardless of the passing years and the modernization that inevitably plagues it, this port continues to belong to its inhabitants who have not moved aside or turned over their streets and plazas to the indomitable travelers and modern tourists, as has happened in many other places.

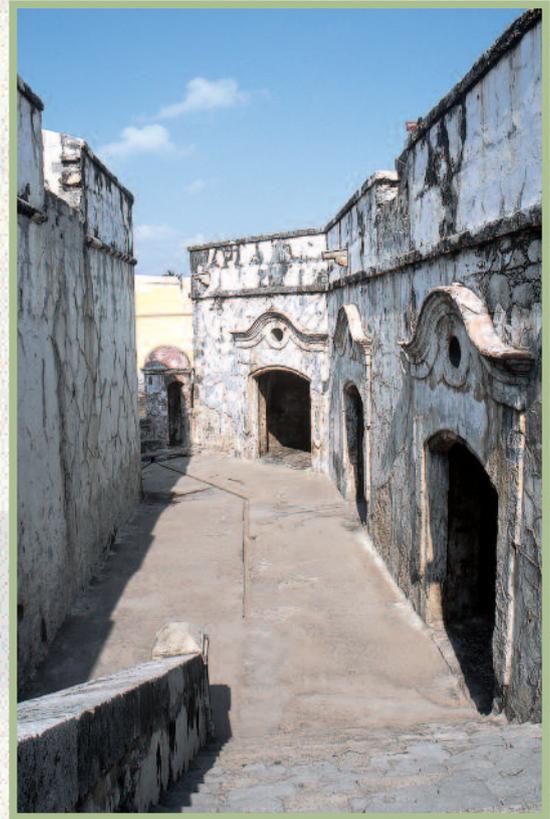
The thing is, people know about travelers in Veracruz. It was born as a jumping off point and

a destination, a port, a refuge for men and women of all races, the port of entry for invaders, a place for the exchange of uncounted riches and novelties. Here, the Spaniards founded their first settlement on continental America, men from unknown lands, so unknown that our people believed them to be gods and gave them their treasures as well as awakening their ambitions. The centuries passed and they never stopped coming, but neither did they stop leaving: from this port, outstanding figures in Mexico's history left, never to return, like Don Porfirio Díaz; but the Spanish exiles also arrived here to build their second homeland in our country. During the colonial period, Veracruz was the most important center for warehousing and trading goods between Spain and New Spain; products from the Philippines made their way from Acapulco by land and were sent to Europe; this turned it into prized booty for pirates and privateers. Four different invading forces landed



Daniel Munguia

The Venustiano Carranza lighthouse.



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San Juan de Ulúa fortress.

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on its shores: Spaniards, French and Americans attacked it, laid siege to it and sometimes occupied it for months, finally leaving again, with or without having achieved their ends.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE CITY AND ITS HISTORY

Veracruz is Mexico's largest port, located in a rich, exuberant state divided into four regions along the Gulf of Mexico. Here we find archaeological sites, colonial cities and ecological reserves that justify the Spaniards' first impression when they landed here in the sixteenth century.

The Villa Real de la Vera Cruz was founded in 1519 by the conquistador Hernán Cortés who wanted to empower himself to be able to justify his rebellion against the authorities of the Spanish empire on the island of Cuba. Later, the city was

moved 20 kilometers to the north to a place known as La Antigua, on the banks of the Huitzilapan River. But, before that, his idea had been to move it a few kilometers further north across from Quiahuiztlan Bay, where Cortés had ten of the 11 ships that he had brought with him in his expedition sunk to ensure that his men did not turn on him and return to Cuba. Finally, in 1600, Veracruz returned to its original location. Today, three places close to the city could be symbolic of its history.

Quiahuiztlan, an archaeological site located on its hillsides with its back to the sea, seems to be an old Totonac cemetery made up of innumerable pyramids that bring to mind a stone model more than a pre-Hispanic city. The largest pieces are to be found on the site's highest spot with its spectacular view.

Even closer to Veracruz is Cempoala, another pre-Hispanic settlement. It is thought that Cortés

established an alliance with its ancient inhabitants to face the forces of Emperor Moctezuma. The largest temple, known as the Chimney temple, and the Smiles and God of the Wind buildings are some of the constructions located here.

The passing of the centuries can be felt in La Antigua. At the top of the street from the main plaza, where the ruins of what is said to be Cortés's house are to be found, is the Rosario Hermitage, one of the first in the hemisphere. Its low wall and small whitewashed nave have been silent now for several centuries. When you go down toward the river, you encounter the Silk-Cotton Tree, old and surrounded by a chain, which marks the limit of where the Huitzilapan River used to come. Legend has it that this tree, which used to be immense, caught Cortés' ship. In 1942, a hurricane buried it

and what visitors see now is a new tree that has sprouted from the roots of the original ceiba; the chains surrounding it are replicas of the ones found incrustated in the original.

To continue to dig into Veracruz's past, we will have to talk about the San Juan de Ulúa Fortress, whose history is intimately linked to the port itself. Known above all for the horrors that prisoners endured there for more than 150 years, it is one of the port's most interesting buildings. The main door still allows the visitor to see the materials used to build the entire structure, coral. Built on an island held up by a coral reef, the architects and engineers faced the problem of transporting building materials, so they decided to use large blocks of coral that they joined together with lime and sand. The building was erected in different

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stages over several centuries, which is why it displays different architectural styles. It was a hospital, a warehouse, a government house, the bulwark of the city and, above all, a prison. The humid dungeons where stalactites formed from water filtration and minerals still hang testify to the darkness and suffocating atmosphere the prisoners had to endure inside its thick walls. The fortress has a museum with old maps, models and information about its history.

Like all important ports, Veracruz was subjected to intense piracy and banditry; this meant that the city and its inhabitants had to be protected by walls. The Santiago bulwark, dating from 1654, is the only one left standing of the seven that were part of the wall that surrounded the city to protect it from pillage. Other places that are part of the paradigm of the city and its inhabitants are the Venustiano Carranza Lighthouse, the Plaza de Armas, the cathedral, the post office and telegraph office buildings, the seawall walkway and the market, all dating from different moments in history.

In Veracruz, a coffee producing state par excellence, drinking coffee is one of the city's indubitable traditions, the explanation of why its residents take the time to enjoy a cup of coffee at any hour of the day. In the afternoon, once a week people dance the *danzón*—an enduring tradition—

in the Plaza de Armas, where to the rhythm of an orchestra the customs associated with this dance are respected, turning it into a symbol of Veracruz' popular culture.

The port's aquarium is one of Mexico's largest, with nine tanks for fresh water marine life and 16 for salt water animals, including the ocean tank that offers a panorama of the fishes' comings and goings. Other species also live in their natural habitat. Endangered tortoises come to lay their eggs on the Isle of Sacrifices, located just off the coast, where the Spaniards found traces of human sacrifices offered up to the god Tajín; and reptiles, birds and sharks also live nearby.

The list of places of interest and the virtues of this port city is as long as travelers and inhabitants decide. This has been the case for five centuries. That is why traditional Veracruz, that skirts the sea and reaches to the wharf from which the San Juan de Ulúa Fortress can be seen, dwarfed by the huge cranes of what is still our country's most important commercial port, has no pretensions other than to be a place that has grown old gracefully and has much to offer the traveler. **NMM**

Elsie Montiel
Editor