

# Xalapa The Garden City

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Photos by Susan Luna

View of the Orizaba Peak from the city.



San José Church. With its baroque style with moorish influence, it is one of the best preserved in Xalapa.

Xalapa was never part of the conquistadors' *encomienda* system, since it was taxed directly by the Spanish crown.



Rojas Alley, one of downtown Xalapa's most traditional places.

Xalapa, the capital of the state of Veracruz, is a unique city. Its name, from the Nahuatl words *xalli*, meaning sand, and *apan*, meaning river or spring, means "spring in the sand." Situated 1,427 meters above sea level in the transition between the Eastern Sierra Madre and the Gulf of Mexico coastal plain, the city developed in accordance with the whimsical geography at the foothills of the Cerro de Macuiltépetl and the eastern spurs of the Cofre de Perote.<sup>1</sup> With a population of about 400,000, Xalapa is privileged in its orography and climate, which create a humidity that fosters diverse, majestic vegetation.

With abundant rainfall in the summer and early fall, the soil is suitable for the growth of deciduous forests (which lose their leaves in unfavorable environments) of holm oak, cedar *chijol*, sea grape trees, *chacos*, poplars and many others. Its green areas' uniqueness is one of the city's main attractions for residents and visitors alike. It is precisely this wealth of flora, one of the country's most important, that has led it to be dubbed "the Garden City" or "the City of Flowers."

## HISTORY

We know that four indigenous groups settled in this region in the fourteenth century: the Totonaques, the Mexicas, the Toltec-Chichimecs and the Teo-Chichimecs. They founded four towns: Xallitic, to the north, today part of one of the city's downtown areas, crossed by a bridge of the same name decorated with a mural that looks like a pre-Hispanic codex, depicting Hernán Cortés's passage through Villa Rica on his way to Mexico City; Techacapan, to the east, whose center was at what is now the corner of Xalapeños Ilustres Avenue and Landero y Coss Street; Tehuanapan (or Tecuanapan), to the south, located on the spot now occupied by the state government palace and extending to José María Morelos Street between

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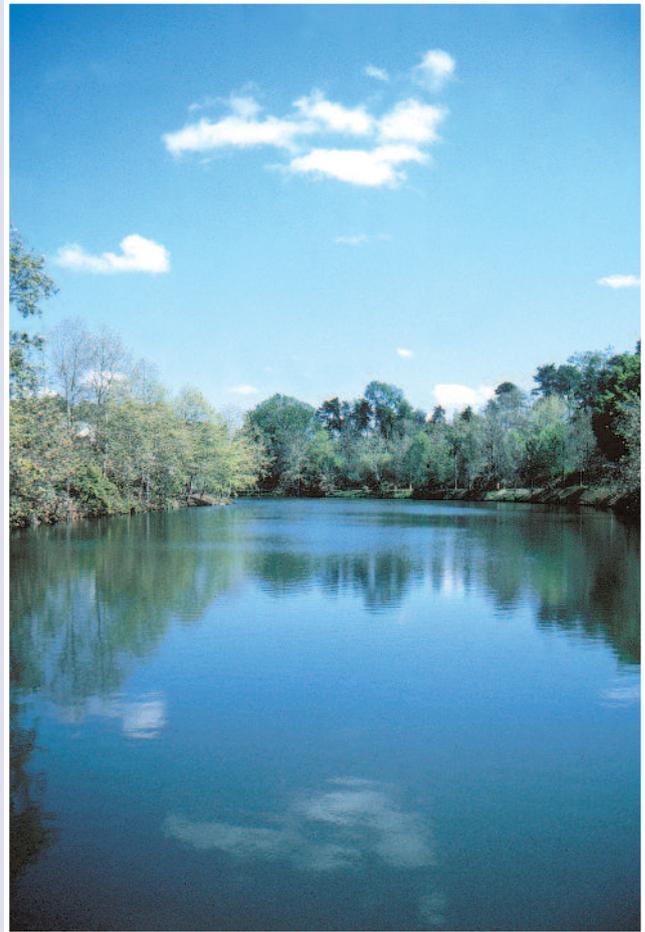
Sebastián Camacho and Barragán Streets; and the town of Tlalmecapan, to the southeast, which extended from the Santiago Chapel to what is today the Mexican Social Security Institute clinic (previously the Railroad Hospital), to Venustiano Carranza Avenue and the country house that belonged to the old Tlalmecapan ranch founded by Don Juan de Bárcena y Gutiérrez.<sup>2</sup>

As these communities grew under Aztec domination, they joined together to form a single town, later called Xallapan; the Spanish-language version of this name has endured to this day.<sup>3</sup>

According to Xalapa-born historian Gustavo A. Rodríguez, the first inhabitants of Xalapa were Toltecs from what is now the state of Hidalgo who were migrating south, probably to Yucatán and Guatemala. In the opinion of historian Leonardo Pasquel, the foundation of Xalapa cannot be pinpointed for lack of source material. However, another noted historian, Manuel Rivera Cambas, thinks that it may have been founded in 1313, the year in which legend has it that Mexico City was also founded.

Conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Xalapa on August 14, 1519, accompanied, among others, by the man who would years later become the famous chronicler, Bernal Díaz del Castillo. When they arrived, the Spanish changed the names of the Techacapan, Xallitic and Tlalmecapan neighborhoods to Santiago, Santa María de la Concepción and San José de la Laguna, maintaining the name of Xalapa for the town itself.<sup>4</sup>

After 1521, when it became part of Spain's dominions, Xalapa began its slow, difficult growth as an urban center, a process that would take three centuries. Its evolution included long periods of hardships and severe economic depression. In contrast with other towns, Xalapa was never part of the conquistadors' *encomienda* system, since from the beginning it was taxed directly by the Spanish crown. The Spaniards' traveling on the old De las Ventas road that connected the Veracruz coast to Tlaxcala and Tenochtitlan, the construction of a monastery and a hospital and the naming of a *corregidor*, or magistrate-mayor, Alfonso de Buiza, with both civil and criminal jurisdiction, favored Xalapa's development as a city.



Lake Walkway in the university area. In the nineteenth century it was a dam.

Like most of the cities in Mexico, Xalapa became modern in the second half of the nineteenth century.



Nineteenth-century public laundries in the centrally located neighborhood of Xallitic.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Xalapa became an important commercial center thanks to its geographical location, which encouraged its being a gathering place for travelers, merchants and cattle herders who transported merchandise from the port of Veracruz to central New Spain. This was one of the city's most prosperous times,<sup>5</sup> a prosperity consolidated when the government picked it as ideal for holding the trade fairs for products shipped through Veracruz. Thus, in 1720, the viceroy of Baltasar, the Marquis de Valero and Duke of Orión, decided that the first fair would be held; it began with the arrival of General Fernando Chacón's fleet. Fourteen fairs were held in the city between 1723 and 1778, when Carlos III's Rules and Duties on Free Trade Between Spain and the Indies canceled them.

After independence, like most of the cities in Mexico, Xalapa became modern in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly during the *Porfiriato* (the 30 year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz that ended with the 1910 Revolution), when two governors, Juan de la Luz Enríquez and Teo-

doro A. Dehesa, were in office for a little over a quarter of a century, from 1884 to 1911. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, civic architecture became predominant over religious architecture and modern buildings began to be erected, like the government palace, the normal school, the high school and the Xalapa casino. These buildings contrasted with the traditional houses of timber and shingles that characterized colonial architecture. Later, new constructions appeared like the modern beer factory, La Estrella, that contrasted sharply with the Dique and San Bruno plants, old textile factories, while others disappeared. This gave Xalapa the image of a city whose past was rapidly disappearing, immersed in a present completely in tune with the modernization process of the twentieth century.

The twenty-first century presents us a Xalapa with a radically different profile: new, broad avenues; increasingly heavy traffic; its own media (newspapers, magazines, television, radio, cable television, Internet, etc.); modern, efficient commercial areas vied for by both local and outside



Juarez Park and the city hall at the historic downtown area.



Heriberto Jara Corona Stadium.

businessmen that compete with traditional markets and small businesses; large parks that are the pride of the city and one of its most important tourist attractions; protected ecological reserves like the Macuiltépetl Hill, the botanical garden, the university area, the El Castillo Lagoon, and others that symbols of the city, like the Benito Juárez Park, in the downtown area, and the Los Berros Park, near downtown.

Archaeological sites are sprinkled throughout the city, the vestiges of its ancient inhabitants and the cultures that flowered with them, including Macuiltépetl, 21 de Marzo, Lucas Martín, Palo Verde, Los Mísperos, los Metlapillis and Xolostla. One singular monument is the San José Church, built in 1770 in the Techacapan neighborhood. Its austere architecture, representative of the period and well preserved, is of historical importance: here Antonio López de Santa Ana, the much discussed military officer and Xalapa-born politician and former president of Mexico, was baptized. The body of the frustrated emperor of Mexico, Maximilian of Habsburg, also spent one night in this church on its journey to Veracruz on its way to Europe.

Today, Xalapa plays an important role as the dynamic center of the regional and state economy, mainly in the area of cultural and educational services. It is home, among others, to prestigious institutions like the Veracruz University, the Enrique C. Rébsamen Veracruz Normal School, the Ecology Institute, the National Pedagogical University and the Veracruz Pedagogical University.

Cultural activity has been one of the city's hallmarks, for which it is nationally and internationally recognized. It is said that when Baron von Humboldt visited the city 200 years ago, he dubbed it the Athens of Veracruz, and he was not in error. Innumerable spaces are dedicated to cultural, scientific and artistic activities. Among them we can mention the State Theater; the Anthropology Museum (second only to Mexico City's); the Museum of Science and Technology; the El Lencero Museum; the Diego Rivera Picture Gallery; and the Ágora, a space comprised of a picture gallery, workshops, an auditorium where Xalapa's students congregate, and a cafe with a splendid view of the city. Every year, fairs of different kinds are held in the city, attracting hundreds from different parts of

the region and the country, and Xalapa's Symphony Orchestra holds its yearly concert seasons.

Subject to the whims of its geography, this city, submerged for most of the year in fog, is an ecological and cultural paradise like very few others nationwide. **NM**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Cerro de Macuilitépetl, situated at 1,580 meters above sea level, is one of the symbols of the city and is part of its heraldry.
- <sup>2</sup> Aureliano Hernández Palacios, *Xalapa de mis recuerdos* (Xalapa, Veracruz: University, 1986), pp. 15 and 17.
- <sup>3</sup> The city was renamed Xalapa de Enríquez after the March 17, 1892, death of General Juan de la Luz Enríquez, governor of the state of Veracruz, in honor of his support for the capital.
- <sup>4</sup> As a result of efforts by local inhabitants and Veracruz Intendente Don Pedro Corvalán, with the support of the viceroy, the second Count of Revillagigedo, on December 18, 1791, King Carlos IV bestowed the title of "villa" and a coat of arms on Xalapa. The new villa got its first town government three years later in 1794. On December 12, 1830, Xalapa was finally awarded the status of a city.
- <sup>5</sup> In the eighteenth century, production of a plant called *la purga de Xalapa* (the Xalapa purge) was very important; its curative properties were widely publicized throughout the old and the new continent. Its name, *Xalapae Convulvis*, printed on thousands of porcelain jars sold in pharmacies, made it world famous. *Purga de Xalapa* was one of New Spain's most important products. Alexander von Humboldt, who visited Xalapa in 1806, estimated that in 1802 the plant had represented 60,000 pesos a year in exports, making it one of the colony's four most valuable products. Alexander von Humboldt, *Tablas geográfico políticas del Reino de Nueva España* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1993), p. 97. An image of *purga de Xalapa* can be seen on the city's coat of arms.



Watercross Park. Humboldt wandered these paths, a favorite of Xalapa residents since the eighteenth century.



Juárez Park's El Ágora cultural center.



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