



Patzcuaro's Lakeshore Towns and Villages

Alberto de Lachica* Miguel Monje**

The crossroads is certainly intriguing. All three directions seem equally enticing: General Docks, San Pedrito Docks and Erongarícuaro. From both San Pedrito and General Docks, you can reach the four islands in Lake Pátzcuaro by boat. Janitzio is the one with the towering statue of Generalissimo Morelos, a Mexican national hero who lent his name to Michoacán's capital city, Morelia. The murals decorating the inner staircase that lead visitors to its top, much like the Statue of Liberty, are beauti-

fully reviewed in another article of this issue. The other three islands are Pacanda, with its poultry industry; Tecuen and Yunuen. It is impossible not to recall the beautiful songs dedicated to two of them: "Janitzio," by Agustin Lara, and "Yunuen" by Gonzalo Chapela y Blanco.

If you take the far left and go to Erongarícuaro, you enter a unique region whose euphonic, proparoxytone town and village names along the southern and western shores of kidney-shaped Lake Pátzcuaro are music to the ear. Some of their meanings pose some pleasant surprises: Tzipecua, "a rock where you can contemplate"; Huecorio, "a place where you can fall"; Santa Ana Chapitiro, "a place where you can find milled wood"; San Pedro Pareo and San Bartolo Pareo,

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both mean “a place of cacti”; San Andrés Tócuaro, “a place of a stone called ‘Tocua’, suitable for making axes”; Arocutin, “on the shore”; Jarácuaro, “a place of worship of the god Xaracua”; San Francisco Uricho, “a place of artisans”; Erongarícuaro, both “a place of waiting/hope/ expectation” and “watch tower”; Napizaro, “place of acorns”; Pua-cuaro, “place of snails”; Oponguio, “place for bathing”; San Andrés Tzirondaro: “marsh”; San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro, “place where ceramic pots are sold”.

Pátzcuaro’s name has several meanings: “where people are painted in black”; “place of foundations”; “place of belfry walls”; “place of joy” or “place of *cues* (temples)”. Janitzio means “corn-cob flower”; Pacanda, “to push something in the water”; and Tecuen, “wild, ferocious animal”.

This is also a region of awesome landscapes, ancient history, interesting traditions, wonderful crafts, amazing colors and tasty food. You should

make the most of your trip by navigating through their history, deeply enmeshed in the works of Don Vasco de Quiroga (*Tata Vasco* for the indigenous), a famous sixteenth-century lawyer-bishop inspired by Saint Thomas Moore’s *Utopia*. *Tata Vasco* soon became the foremost protector of the indigenous people. Wisely and kindly, he laid the foundations for their education and established a socio-economical organization that is still operational in many ways; you can easily trace the origin of much of the craftsmanship back to those days. He developed skills, allotted materials, recognized their wealth in natural resources and assigned profitable activity to many villages, so they specialized in a specific art or craft. In these towns, wood, textiles, clay, copper, leather, paper, just to name a few, are lovingly and miraculously crafted to this day. Quiroga also organized hospital and trading towns and brought banana and sugarcane seedlings from La Hispaniola Island in the Carib-

bean Sea (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti), today widely cultivated.

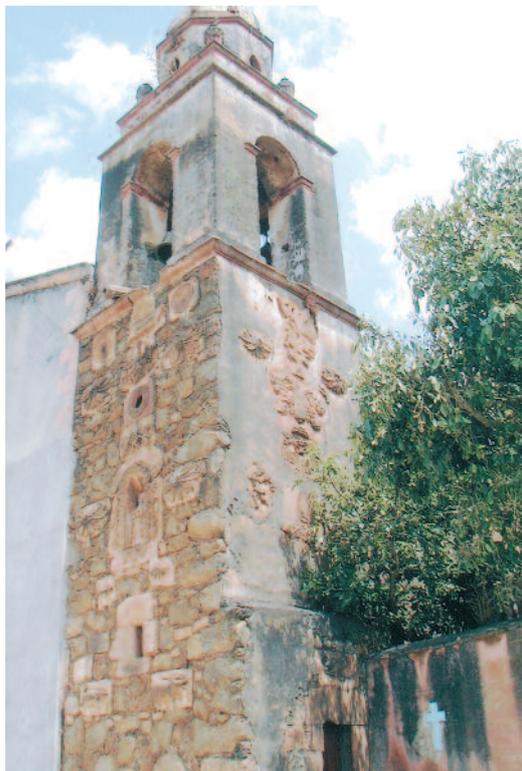
Though similar at first sight, all the towns are distinctive. In Tzipecua, for example, General Francisco J. Múgica (a former student of the priesthood turned socialist and revolutionary, Michoacán representative in the Congress that drew up the present 1917 Constitution, and reportedly the driving force behind Mexico's 1938 oil nationalization) built a mansion atop a rock. A crony of General Lázaro Cárdenas, a powerful political figure and president of Mexico from 1934 to 1940, Múgica fell out with his former ally and died without being made the candidate for the presidency. Many a celebrity visited his house: Leon Trotsky; André Breton; Diego Rivera; Frida Kalho, all hosted by its Marxist owner. There are plans for establishing an Indigenous Cultures Museum here.

In San Pedro Pareo the most attractive and interesting feature is no doubt its church, particularly the tower, with high-relief stone images whose interpretation still raises some questions. Dog-

like animals; fish; flowers; the founding of Mexico-Tenochtitlan; a naive depiction of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, with a thrown rider lying on the ground in awe and wonder beholding the miracle; an Indian with his feathered head-dress shooting arrows: these are some of the figures depicted. At the entrance, atop the wooden door, is a remarkable carved silhouette of His Holiness, Pope John Paul the Second.

San Andrés Tócuaro, on the other hand, has earned a place of its own through its unique craft: masks and wooden sculptures. Masks were widely used in pre-Columbian days for worship, dance and funeral ceremonies; they were made out of stone, ceramics, precious stones and wood. Tócuaro excels in the latter. Most artisans belong to the Horta and Castillo families, whose craft secrets have been transmitted from generation to generation with awesome results. Strolling through Tócuaro's many homes-ateliers is a most rewarding experience.

Jarácuaro, formerly an island and now a peninsula, reachable through a causeway, is remark-



The San Pedro Pareo Church tower.

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Detail, indigenous with *carca* pot at the San Pedro Pareo Church.

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able for its unique tradition in dance: the many spectacular dances, with costumes, music and steps, blend Indian and Spanish folkways. The most noticeable of them is the Dance of the Old Men, especially the rendering by *Tata* Gervasio: with its accelerating tempo, its railroad-like sound and the forced pirouettes dancers disguised as old men have to make, it is really something to see. Jarácuaro hosts 22 musical-dance festivals a year, so you stand a chance of running into one of them.

Erongarícuaro used to be a main place of worship of Curicaveri, god of the sun. According to legend, the Spaniards peacefully converted the rebellious Indians to Catholicism thanks to a miracle: Young Prince Curatame of Naranxan (one of the three realms that formed the Tarascan Kingdom) came here to wait in great expectation for Princess Inchátiro, from Jarácuaro. But her parents did not approve of the romance; they had promised their daughter's hand in marriage to a prince from Tzintzuntzan, another realm. With no way out, Princess Inchátiro decided to drown herself in the lake during a storm. Her body was

recovered and taken immediately to the Temple of the God of the Sun in Erongarícuaro and kept there all night while ceremonies and prayers were held in the hope that the rising-sun god would bring her back from darkness, but nothing happened. Later on, that same day, Brother Juan de San Miguel, who happened to be passing by, knelt and prayed, holding his golden monstrance with a holy wafer. Miraculously, Princess Inchátiro came back to life. The indigenous people were impressed and devoted themselves to Brother Juan's beliefs and his sun-like monstrance, so the formerly ferocious Indians became docile and sincerely accepted the new religion, making the conquest and the spread of Christianity possible in the whole region.

Later, Brother Jacobo Daciano, a relative of the king of Denmark, designed and built the Franciscan convents in Erongarícuaro, Tzintzuntzan, Tarecuato and Tzacapu, true masterpieces of their architectural style.

Erongarícuaro was also an important trading post because of its strategic location. It supplied



The San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro Church.



Michoacán's Tourism Office

Dancers wearing masks for the traditional Dance of the Old Men.



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Third Order Chapel, San Pedro Pareo.

the mines in Coalcomán: wood, cloth, tools, animals, food and even slaves were traded here, and it also became a port for lumber and silver, gold and tin from the mines.

A curious place was built in this town by a British World War I veteran. Having survived the war, he still felt the need for protection and built air-raid shelters on his estate, now used as a summer camp for children who learn arts and crafts and survival techniques in the open countryside. They enjoy trekking and biking in the most beautiful surroundings and are fed organic food, grown on the estate itself and nearby.

In Napizaro a large church painted bright yellow and built like a French Saharan fortress is the most striking feature, recently collectively erected by residents. Each family performed a different task: brick laying; plastering; painting; carpentry; electricity, and so forth. But everything pales when you learn that the massive, solid doors were entire-

ly cut, assembled, polished, plugged, varnished and glazed by Don Juan, an artisan blind from birth! He can also detect and identify many different kinds of wood by sound, just by knocking on it.

In the lake-side town of San Andrés Tziróndaro, you must not miss the church, which boasts an imposing, dramatic sculpture of Jesus chained to a column. San Andrés and San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro are the largest of all the towns on the southern and western shores of Lake Pátzcuaro; they are very neat and generally well preserved, although many modern and fancy houses, a byproduct of the dollars sent back home from migrant relatives, are severely damaging the town's landscape.

Other shores and other towns and villages are as interesting as those commented here, particularly Lake Pátzcuaro's three gems: Pátzcuaro City; Tzintzuntzan and Santa Fé de la Laguna with a long history of traditions and crafts. But that is another story. ■■■



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