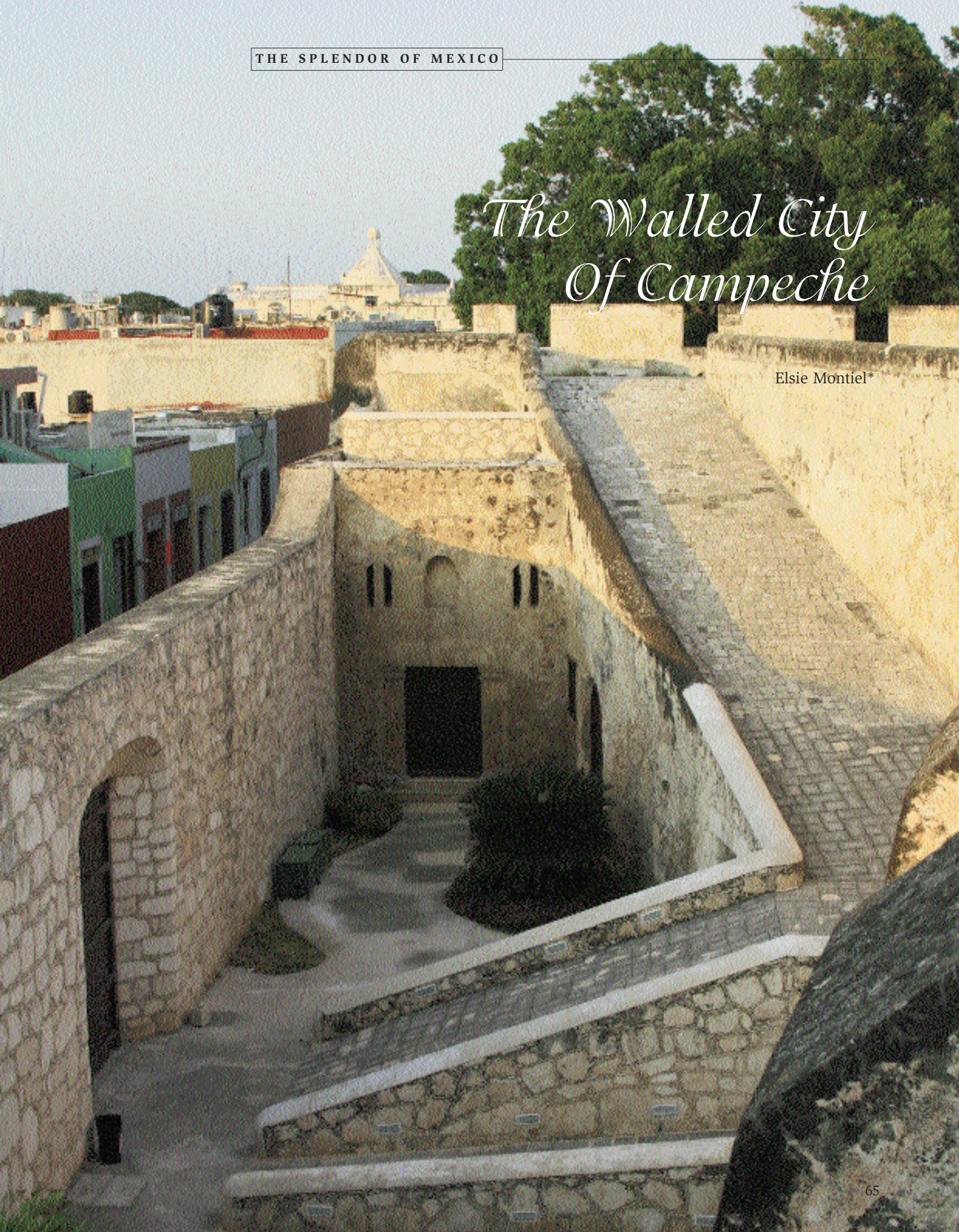


*The Walled City
Of Campeche*

Elsie Montiel*





Chapel next to Campeche's cathedral.

Before the Spanish arrived, Campeche was a Mayan settlement by the sea. The region was dominated by the powerful cacique Ah Kin Pech, who witnessed the arrival of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, the first explorer to leave the island of Cuba to travel the coasts of Mexico at the behest of Don Diego Velázquez in 1517.

The age of splendor of the Mayan civilization in the region had ended centuries before. Many of its powerful cities like Calakmul, Becán and Edzná had been abandoned and were silently being overrun by nature. That is why, when they began their war of conquest, the Spaniards had to first subdue the powerful empires of the Mexicas and the Tarascans in the central highlands and the west. After Tenochtitlan was vanquished and the lord of the Tarascans beaten back, the Spaniards began incursions in different



View of the main plaza with the cathedral in the background.



Detail of the "Holy Burial" depicting the passion of Christ.

parts of what is now Mexico. The Yucatán Peninsula turned out to be particularly difficult to subdue and colonize. Campeche was the jumping-off point for colonizing expeditions to the peninsula and would be formally founded in 1540 with the name Villa de San Francisco de Campeche by "Handsome" Francisco de Montejo, the son of the conquistador Francisco de Montejo.

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Campeche was already playing an important role in the colony's economy as the first port on the peninsula. From there, an endless number

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Unless otherwise specified, photos by Elsie Montiel.

of natural riches were brought from all over the conquered land: wood, rice, the famous “ink wood”, salt from the coast, sugar, cotton broadcloth, honey and wax. “Ink wood” was very sought after in Europe for dyeing cloth. The ships embarked for Veracruz and from there continued to Seville once a year, loaded with products from all over Spain’s colonies.

This abundance attracted pirate greed. The Spanish fleets and colonial ports were constantly threatened with attack. Some of the pirates were backed by rival European kingdoms that wanted to destabilize the Spanish crown. The port of Campeche was no exception: Francis Drake, John Hawkins, Lauren “Lorencillo” Graff, Kornelius “Pegleg” Jols, Diego “The Mulato”, Jacob Jackson, Henry Morgan, Bartolomé “The Portuguese”, Lewis Scott and Rock Brasiliano all made an appearance.



Only 500 meters of the wall surrounding the city survive.

Fighting was continuous for a large part of the seventeenth century. Two of the best remembered battles took place in 1678, when Scott sacked the city for three days after being well received by residents who thought he had brought soldiers to protect them, and in 1685, when another pirate, Gramont, and several hundred men laid waste to the city for more than two months, looting the surrounding areas. Finally, the crown recognized the need to invest in defending the site.

It is said that the plan to fortify and completely wall up the port dates from 1686. Military engineer Marín de la Torre’s proposal was to enclose Campeche within a large irregular, six-sided polygon, with eight bastions joined by a two-meter-thick, eight-meter-high wall built with quarried rock and *sascab*.¹ Communication with the



Interior of House 6 Cultural Center.



The entrance to the Xmuch-Haltún Botanical Garden.

exterior would be limited to four gates: the San Román, Guadalupe, Sea and Land Gates. The first two no longer exist. Work was concluded on the fortifications in the early eighteenth century, but by that time pirate attacks had almost ceased. The wall around the city was 2,560 meters long and the defense system was completed by two forts built on nearby hills.

Today, 500 meters of the wall, seven bastions, two gates and the two forts (the San Miguel and the San Pedro Forts) survive, all put to good use as museums, a botanical garden and exceptional look-out points from which visitors can see the sea or the city. Walking along the remains of the wall makes you imagine the dangers and uncertainties Campechanos used to face.

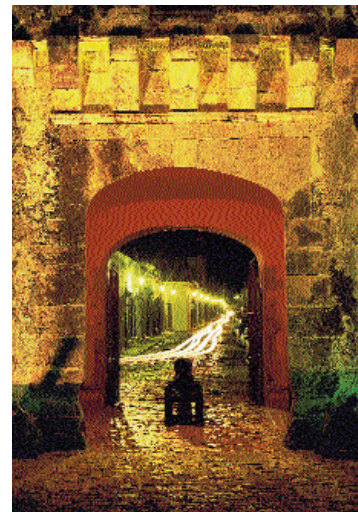
The Land Gate was the main entrance to the city and continues to be one of its symbols. It still has its turrets, its casemates and its warehouses, as well as its defenses made up of a triangular wall and a four-meter wide and three-meter-deep moat. It is said that the doors opened at 6 a.m. and closed at 6 p.m. Anyone who did not enter in time had to seek refuge in the surrounding areas until the next day.

The San Juan Bastion was the main defense for the Land Gate. It has been restored in the seventeenth-century style, including its kitchen, armory, a storeroom with dungeon and the captain's quarters. Like the other bastions, it is topped by a watch tower, turrets, cannon portholes and a bell tower to warn the population in case of a pirate attack. The Santiago Bastion, the last to be built, now holds the exquisite Xmuch-Haltún Botanical Garden, which boasts more than 150 species of local flora. Outstanding among them is the *palo de tinte*, or "ink wood," the *jipi-japa* palm, beautiful orchids and the nenuphars or lotus plants. The ground floor of the Santa Rosa Bastion has a well and two vaults for storing gunpowder and food. One of the three bastions on the coast side, the San Carlos Bastion, whose purpose was to safeguard the Sea Gate, today holds the City Museum. The Bastion of Our Lady of Solitude, the largest, is the Museum of Mayan Archaeology, with its valuable original stelas.

Once the pirate threat had passed, the San Pedro Bastion was used as a jail for the accused awaiting trial by the Holy Inquisition in Spain. Over the entrance door is the Vatican coat of arms: the papal tiara and Saint Peter's crossed keys.



The San Román Church, home to the black ebony Christ.



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The Land Gate, one of the city's symbols.



Resting from the day's labor.



The San José el Alto Fort, also a museum.



The entrance to the San José el Alto Fort.



The modern sea wall is a perfect place to watch the sunset.

The San Miguel and San José el Alto Forts guarded Campeche from two hills near the town; their lookouts were to raise the alarm if a pirate attack began. The San Miguel Fort today holds the Museum of Mayan Culture and boasts valuable archaeological pieces. The San José Fort, now a museum, is smaller, but similar architecturally and is excellently positioned.

The colonial period left a greater heritage than military architecture. Campeche, whose population prospered in trade, agriculture and cattle ranching, was given the status of a city in 1777. By that time it already had lordly civic and religious buildings; these were later added to in the nineteenth century without losing a sense of harmony.

The city, then, entered the twentieth century with one of the country's most admired, aesthetically pleasing historic downtown areas. Its cobblestone streets, flanked by one- and two-story houses, painted in warm colors and enhanced by an uninterrupted succession of wrought-iron balconies, can be walked along without assaulting the eye with the juxtaposition of historical buildings and modern horrors that development has imposed on other colonial cities of Mexico.

The restoration of 1,600 facades and monuments in both the Historic Downtown area and other neighborhoods accentuated the beauty of the city as a whole. The facades' clean lines go beautifully with the spotlessness of the streets and the light city traffic.

Inside the area protected by the wall are buildings like the early-eighteenth-century cathedral with its bell-like towers. Inside the cathedral is the Jesus of Nazarene Chapel-Museum (1540-1600) where mass was said before the cathedral was built. This chapel displays a seventeenth-century piece unique in Latin America, made

of cedar and mahogany embossed in silver, called the "Holy Burial," depicting the passion of Christ on the cross through several angels, situated around the supine body of Christ and holding symbols of the passion. The entire work weighs about 600 kilograms and is taken out once a year on Good Friday in a procession, carried on the shoulders of 40 men. This piece can only be seen in Campeche because the townspeople oppose it being loaned out to exhibit in other museums or venues in Mexico or abroad.

Other architecturally important constructions include the Carvajal Mansion, the House of the King's Lieutenant (today the Campeche Regional Museum), the Municipal Archives build-

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ing, the Tukulná Crafts House, the House 6 Cultural Center, the State Historical Archive, the Francisco de Paula Toro City Theater, the baroque former San José Church, the San Francisquito Church and the San Juan de Dios Church, with its interesting tile-covered doorway.

Outside the old city are other interesting sites like the San Francisco Church and Ex-Convent, founded in 1546. It is said that the first mass to be given in the hemisphere was held here in 1517. The San Román Church, built by indigenous workers in 1565, is home to the venerated black ebony Christ, patron saint of sailors and the source of many legends.

Modern Campeche is not to be scoffed at, either. Walking along the sea wall is the perfect way to watch the sunset, where modern walkways join fishing boats resting from the day's labor.

In December 1999, Campeche was added to the UNESCO list of World Heritage Treasures. Its merits are undeniable. It will take the visitor only a few hours to discover them, but it is much more difficult to describe their grace and beauty with something other than hackneyed adjectives. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *Sascab* is a mineral described as “decomposed limestone,” “breccia” and “the lime gravel mixture the Maya used as mortar.” It has been used as a building and paving material in Mesoamerica since antiquity.



The facades' clean lines go beautifully with the spotless streets.