

# Tlalpujahua

## A Corner of Michoacán

Visiting Tlalpujahua is like traveling in another time, moving to another rhythm and coming back with another way of looking at things. Originally a mining town, Tlalpujahua's architecture displays the different moments of splendor the riches of the earth has given it. History tells us of craft traditions kept alive, illustrious men and women, miracles and tragedies, all bridges to the past giving it a privileged position among the towns of Michoacán.

The name Tlalpujahua comes from the Mazahuatl words meaning "spongy land," or "place where there is ground



coal." Populated since pre-Hispanic times, the inhabitants did some mining before the conquest. But, it was with the arrival of the Spanish that full-blown mining operations began. Like in all the mining towns in Mexico, Tlalpujahua was built in the mountains. With no special plan, its cobblestone streets were lined by red-roofed buildings that lead willy-nilly up to the main parish house from where the horizon can be seen.

During the colonial period, great fortunes were made in mining and the town grew, both in size and in beauty. With abundance and the generosity of wealthy



Panoramic view of Tlalpujahua. The Our Lady of Carmen Church is at the top right.

Photos by Dante Barrera

miners came the construction of churches and public buildings. The San Francisco Convent, the Cofradía, the Church of Our Lord of the Mountain and the Parish House, among others, constructed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth cen-



Our Lady of Carmen Parish Church, named for the town's patron saint.

turies, testify to the religious spirit behind the town's development.

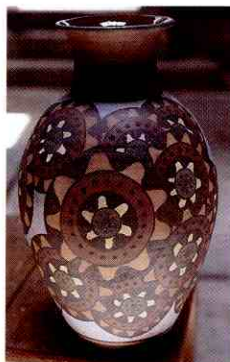
The war of independence momentarily put a stop to mining. The participation of the López Rayón brothers, natives of the town, with Miguel Hidalgo, would be a determining factor in the struggle, but the town suffered the consequences: it was razed several times. Today, the house of the López Rayón is a museum in their honor, complete with documents, maps, photographs, etchings and lithographs that take the visitor through local history.

Mining blossomed once more after 1822 with foreign and domestic investment. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Talpujahua went through what would be its last mining boom. The Dos Es-



**Above:** Feather art. Guillermo Olay's work is the pride of the town.

**Below:** Gustavo Bernal's clay work. A whole new way of looking at the world.



The bell tower of the old Our Lady of Carmen Church, left standing after the 1937 tragedy.

trellas mine, opened in 1899 and developed with French-English capital, would become the world's largest gold producer between 1908 and 1913. More than 5,000 miners worked its tunnels, and the town reaped the benefits of capital



Our Lady of Carmen at the main altar of the Talpujahua parish church.

investment and foreign technology: telegraph, telephone, electric lights and first-class schools.

The Dos Estrellas workers were among the most highly skilled technicians in the country. When mining activities fell off, many of them emigrated to Mexico City where their experience was crucial for starting up companies like La Compañía de Luz y Fuerza (electricity), Hornos de México (foundry) and Cobres de México (copper materials).

However, Talpujahua did not develop exclusively through mining. A celestial figure would watch over its inhabitants from its early history: Our Lady of Carmen, whose image is today in the Our Lady of Carmen Parish Church. She is attributed with many miracles and has

become a figure of solace and protection in moments of tragedy.

Her origins date back to the seventeenth century. Painted on an adobe wall with other images, she adorned a small chapel built next to a mining hacienda north of Tlalpujahuá. When the hacienda was demolished, the only things left standing were the walls of the chapel. While the other images were worn away by the wind and rain, it is said that the features of the virgin and the colors remained intact. Local inhabitants began to go to her at moments of sorrow or illness. Her presence would be a determining factor in overcoming the tragedy that befell the town in 1937.

For 15 years, the slag (called *lama* or *jale*) produced by the Dos Estrellas mine, with its traces of cyanide, was heaped in a glen 35 meters over the river that surrounds the town. The weight of the slag heap, the constant filtration of water and the heavy rain that fell through the night of May 27 finally caused an avalanche that would send the hill almost a kilometer downward. In less than 10 minutes it would plunge into the riverbed, completely cover two entire neighborhoods, burying houses, stores, animals and people under 30 meters of debris. Not a few people in the town remember that day.

One thing was clear amidst the desolation: the image of Our Lady of Carmen had survived. The slide crushed the nave of the Carmen neighborhood church and all that was left was the bell tower and her adobe wall. After cleaning up the mud and debris, the townspeople decided to take her up to the Tlalpujahuá Parish Church. They worked day and night,



Local architecture is typical of mining towns of the colonial period.



Part of the now-abandoned Dos Estrellas Mine offices.

pulling the more than six-ton block, protected by a wooden frame, up the steep streets.

Of all this history, the only things left are the mine's buildings, 1,000 kilometers of tunnels in the surrounding mountains and the townspeople's conviction that they should look to the future with the protection of their queen, Our Lady of Carmen.

Tlalpujahuá did not disappear with the death of mining. The great variety of crafts and arts practiced there, its industry and the countless fiestas and cultural activities organized year round testify to that.

The town offers the visitor a feast for the senses. Sauntering through its streets or its surrounding green mountains, walking through the ruins of the mine or looking at its colonial buildings would be enough. But there is much more.

High-temperature ceramics are fired here and exported to different countries of the world. Renowned craftsmen receive visitors, like master-potter Colín, whose work is distinguishable by its hand painting and special designs. Special surprises await the guests at young Gustavo Bernal Viera's workshop, where his clay work offers us a whole new way of looking at the world, perhaps handed down from his father, painter Gustavo Bernal Navarro.

In this same town live master craftsmen Gabriel Olay Olay and his son Guillermo Olay Barrientos, some of the only practitioners of feather art left, and among the best. Dating back to pre-Hispanic times, feather art creates beautiful paintings out of multi-colored bird feathers. Guillermo also creates paintings using thousands of tiny pieces of straw, only perceptible close up.

Carved wood, sculpted granite, silver-smithing, textiles, straw, lamps and other brass and iron objects are also part of Tlalpujahuá's craft production.

Outside the craft world but of interest to anyone who likes to decorate their Christmas tree with originality, is the Christmas tree ball factory that produces more than 300 different models and exports them to the whole world.

With little infrastructure for tourism, the town does offer visitors a few restaurants and hotels, like the Socobón restaurant, where patrons are waited on by the owner, and the Los Arcos Hotel, with a beautiful panoramic view of the town.

Only two hours from Mexico City by highway, Tlalpujahuá awaits anyone who wants to discover the other faces of Mexico. **MM**