

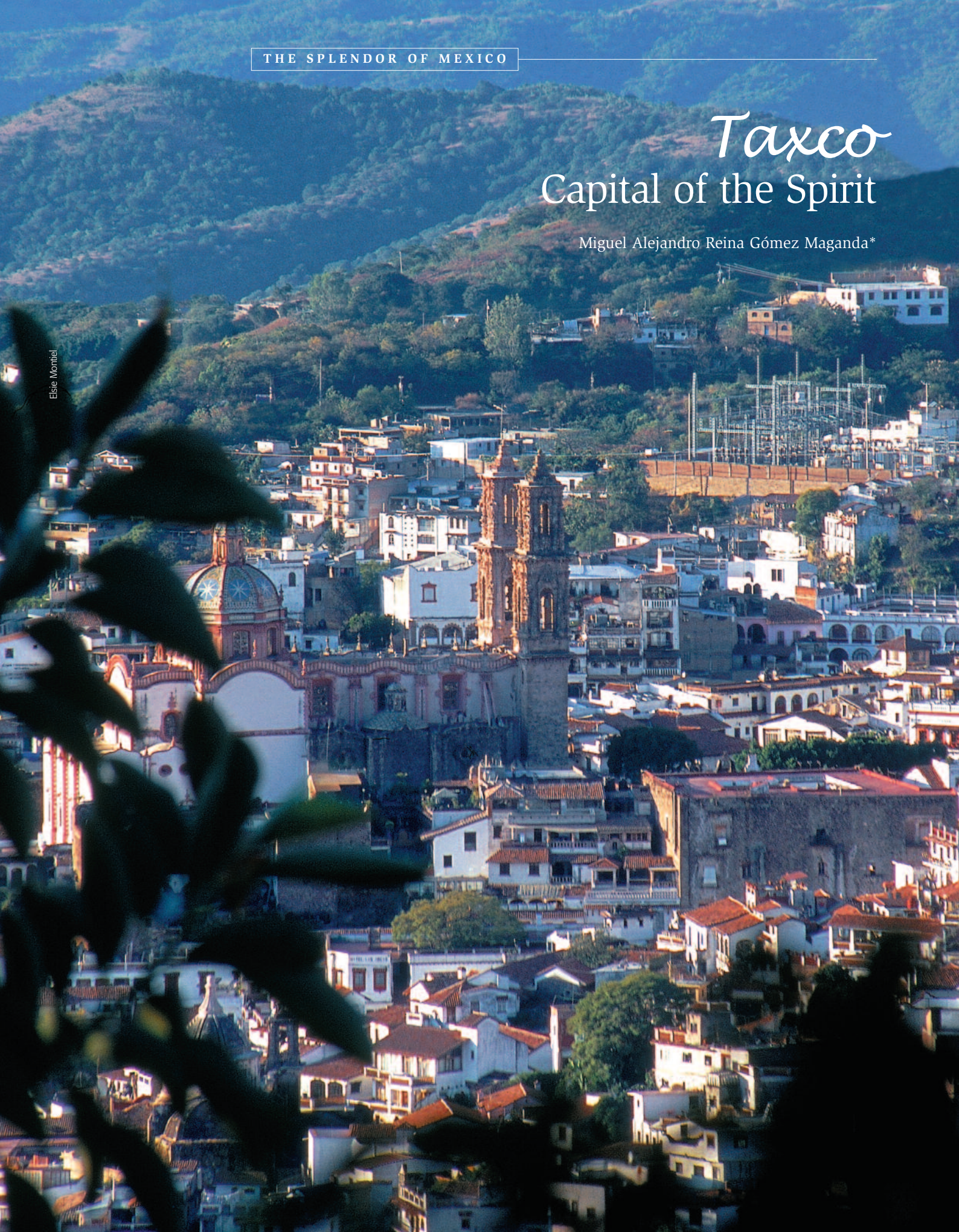
THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

Taxco

Capital of the Spirit

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Walking down the cobbled colonial streets, you feel that you lose yourself little by little along that fine line between reality and fantasy. The white facades of the red-tiled houses climb perfectly synchronized up the green “Atachi” Hill (meaning “Lord of the Waters” in Nahuatl), creating a dream city, perpetually protected by seven hills, like seven Aztec warriors guarding their damsel. One of these hills is split in two by a waterfall, a silver serpentine, like the silver that fills the bowels of Taxco. A beloved city that allows itself to be loved even more in memory: truly the capital of the spirit. A labyrinth between the mountains that invites you to lose yourself in it to possess it.

I arrive at its center, the plaza framing the magnificence of the Santa Prisca Church, a baroque glory that will enchant the most pagan visitor. This feeling that grows with the aroma of bread and fresh vegetables coming from the market, with the refrain of its artisans’ voices offering their colorful products and with the warm, friendly smiles of the locals, produces an atmosphere that makes it impossible to do anything but let yourself go and enjoy the place.

A foreigner next to me asks a peasant the name of the city; the peasant answers sweetly, “It is colonial Taxco.”

Taxco de Alarcón is located in the central part of the state of Guerrero. Its name comes from the name of the ancient pre-Hispanic city Tlachco, meaning “place of the ball game” in Nahuatl. Tlachco was one of the many towns of the great Aztec empire. Its particularity was that, in contrast to the others, this town paid tribute to Moctezuma in gold and silver.

Until 1528, Taxco was nothing more than a mining camp. This changed in 1534 when the first veins of gold and silver were discovered and mined; by 1570, Taxco was the most important mining center in New Spain.

Climbing hills and digging tunnels, Real de Minas was in its heyday during the viceroyalty. By the end of the sixteenth century, the city’s original site, now known as “Old Taxco”, would move 10 kilometers to the south. There, the Spaniards set up residence and gave the place the name Real de Minas de Tetelcingo. The locals, for their part, continued to reside in Tlachcotecapan and Acayotla, today the San Miguel and Guadalupe neighborhoods.

They say that among the miners numbered black slaves who carried out one of the first rebellions against the exploitation they suffered during the colonial period. Many of the rebels fled to the coast, where their descendants live today.

The city of Taxco grew without any concerted urban planning. Winding up the hill, white-walled, clay-tiled houses, little cobbled streets with disquietingly undefined destinations and plazas adorned with multicolored flowers and vines sprang up, everything that would later turn Taxco into a World Heritage Treasure.

Throughout its history, Taxco has been visited by world-famous, historic figures and has even given birth to some of them. Perhaps the most important was renowned dramatist Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza, one of our literary treasures and, besides the great Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the only other person born in the Western Hemisphere to be part of the plethora of writers of the Golden Century of Spanish literature, along with giants like Miguel de Cervan-



Statue of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón outside the Spratling Museum.

* Script writer born in Guerrero.

Photos on this and the previous page by Elsie Montiel.

tes Saavedra, Tirso de Molina, Luis de Góngora y Argote and Francisco de Quevedo, among others.

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón saw the light of day for the first time in 1580. His legacy is not only his works of literary genius, but also his example of untiring, tenacious struggle, since his being born with a hunchback meant that human misery marginalized him and put obstacles in his path all his life.

In homage to this, since 1987, every year Taxco becomes the scene of the meeting of the sixteenth century and our time. Art of all kind throughout the city, and voices invoking

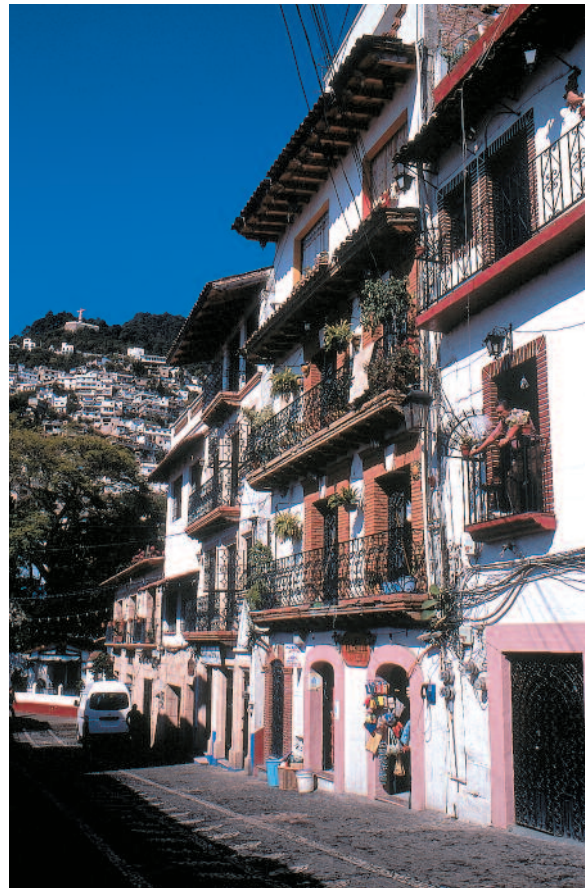
a single man, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, constitute the celebrated “Alarconian Days” created by Guerrero government decree.

Another name inseparable from the city is Don José de la Borda, who in 1716 took up residence in Taxco. Known as “The phoenix of the rich miners in the Americas,” he would foster mining in the region, simultaneously becoming the city’s main benefactor. His nickname referred to the many times he lost and remade his fortune, which he used to a great extent to erect buildings that ennoble his name. The main example of this is the magnificent Santa Prisca

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Church, an imposing presence on the city's main plaza, which is named for him in recognition of his legacy.

Work on this church, considered one of Mexico's most important examples of colonial architecture, began in February 1751 and culminated seven years later. It was consecrated to the Purísima Concepción, with Prisca and Sebastián, third-century Christian martyrs, as patron saints. The first mass was officiated by Father Manuel de la Borda, Don José's son. Santa Prisca is the result of joint work by geniuses of the viceroyalty: Cayetano de Sigüenza was the architect; the altar pieces, carved in pure gold leaf, were done by Vicente and Luis de Balbás; but perhaps the most widely recognized was Miguel Cabrera, an indigenous artist who did the paintings.

Cabrera is the only artist of the time who dared to challenge all the canons established by the church, painting portraits of a *Pregnant Mary*, *The Circumcision of Jesus* and *The Death of Mary*.

Considered by historian Elisa Vargas Lugo "the pearl of eighteenth-century baroque," Santa Prisca is one of those monuments that achieves such a symbiosis with the city that it would seem that the entire urban area had been erected just to surround it. The visitor cannot but raise his eyes and admire the marvelous facade, which on his first visit there Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges called "the most obvious symbol of perplexity."

One night in April 1803, the celebrated German traveler Baron Alexander von Humboldt arrived in the city; he classified Taxco's climate

as the best in the world. The house where he stayed bears his name to this day and is home to the Viceregal Art Museum, whose 14 rooms hold Mexico's most important pieces of sacred, viceregal art.

Another emblematic figure in Taxco's past was the American William Spratling, a visionary and great designer who fostered the genius of Taxco residents, today known as creators of unique pieces of fine metal work.

In 1931, he opened the first silver-working workshop called "Las Delicias." He developed a school of silver and goldsmiths and jewelers that has become world famous. In 1932, Spratling celebrated the first anniversary of his workshop and instituted "Silversmiths' Day." The event became so famous that in 1953, on the initiative of Guerrero state Governor Alejandro Gómez Maganda, Mexican President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines decreed the National Silver Fair and the International Silver Competition.

Every year, Taxco opens its doors to the world so people can admire its astonishing

pieces of silver combining the pre-Hispanic heritage with contemporary design. These activities are flanked by cultural and artistic events to delight visitors.

Among Taxco's other contributions to the world, we must mention the international symbol for Christmas, the poinsettia, native to the area and discovered by Fernando de Poinsett.

It is nighttime in Taxco. Seated on a balcony of one of the picturesque bars that look out onto the Borda Plaza, we can gaze at the imposing facade of Santa Prisca and admire the moon, so often described metaphorically as made of silver. Looking at it like this, it becomes clear that it must have been born here.

Looking at the sky, more beautiful than ever, full of stars; breathing in history and witnessing the gentle life of the city's inhabitants, words fail me to describe it. The only thing left to say is that no one should leave this Earth, no one should die without having seen Taxco de Alarcón, Guerrero. **MM**



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