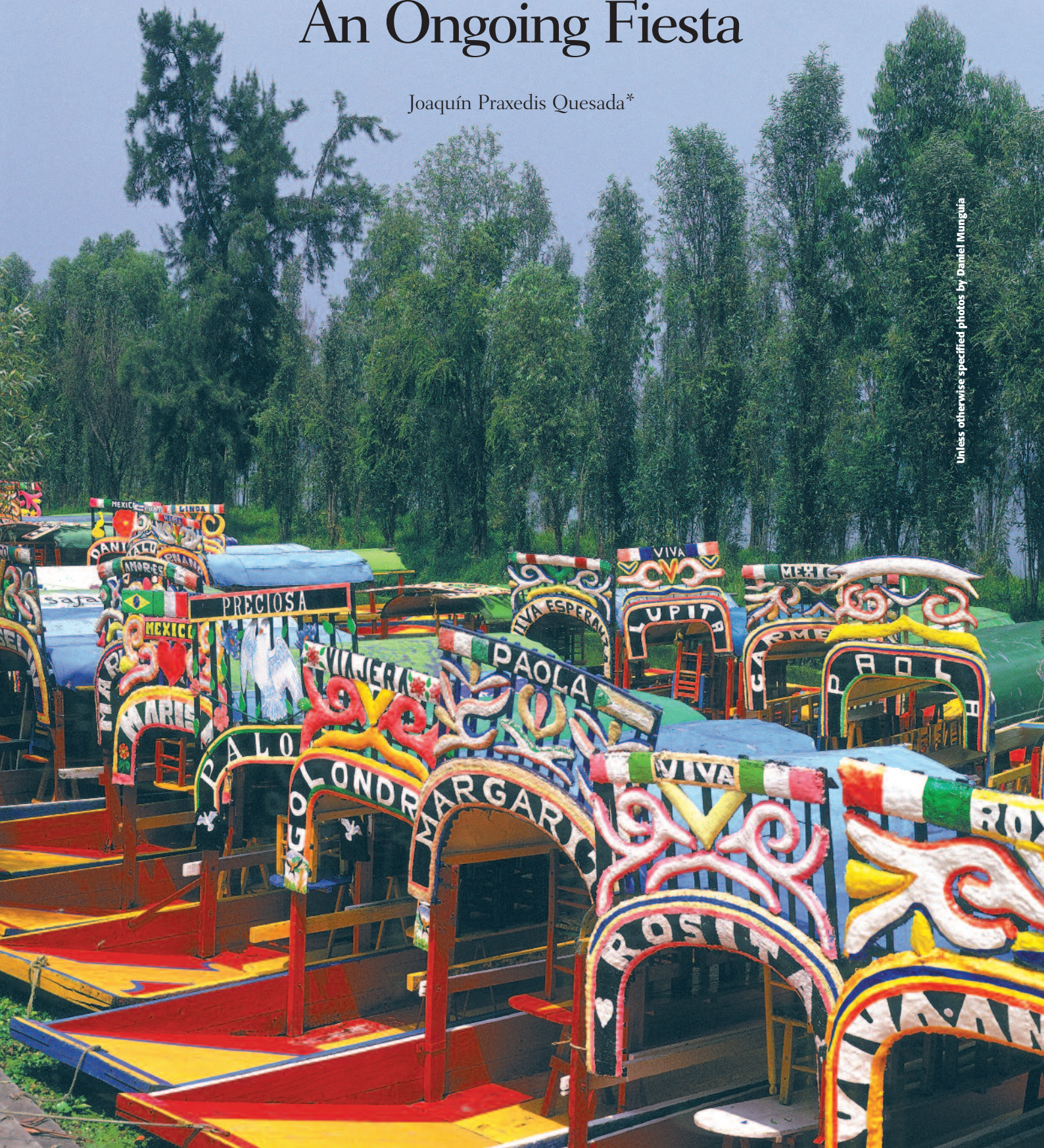


# Xochimilco An Ongoing Fiesta

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Unless otherwise specified photos by Daniel Munguía





Church bells peal and fireworks fill the night skies and our ears with their blasts. Our hearts and minds are preparing to see the materialization of the beliefs of a whole people appear around the next corner, carried by the faithful.

No one in the chaotic tumult of the procession seems surprised at the outpouring of colors, sounds and flowers. All our senses are poised to participate in a demonstration of popular religiosity. We are in Xochimilco, the land of flowers.

Many see Xochimilco as an emblem of Mex-

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ican-ness, like talking about *charros*, those horsemen with wide-brimmed hats, mariachis or the Zócalo, the symbol of Mexico and everything Mexican. When we say its name, it brings to mind its typical *trajinera* barges, flowers, floating gardens, canals and Sunday family outings. But underneath all this is a community with an age-old history giving sustenance and strength to a profoundly religious people.

Xochimilco celebrates 421 fiestas every year, most of them religious. Its 126 square kilometers encompass 17 neighborhoods, 14 small towns and 30 communities, each with a Catholic patron saint.



The Niñoopa.

Among the most celebrated religious images in Xochimilco is the Niñoopa, an image of the Baby Jesus, that visits a different home every day.



Every year Xochimilco picks “The Most Beautiful Flower of the Ejido,” an homage to mestizo beauty and its wide variety of flowers.



During the colonial period, the Franciscan friars were given the Xochimilco area to evangelize, and they used a wide variety of methods to convert the indigenous population. They managed it, but not without the natives introducing some of their own contributions into the new beliefs. These contributions —not always very obvious— survive in today’s religious festivities so closely intertwined with the Catholic faith.

Trade fairs are also celebrated in the area, but linked to the liturgical calendar. One example is the traditional fiesta “The Most Beautiful Flower of the Ejido,” celebrated every year just before Holy Week. At this fair, a young woman

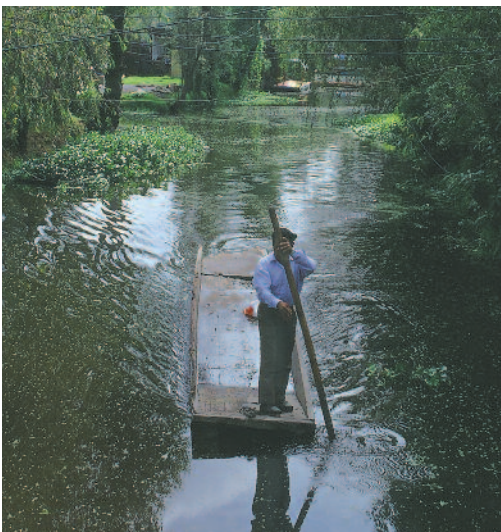
is picked to represent peasant women for the next year; the fiesta is set up to praise mestizo beauty with marked indigenous features. This fiesta exemplifies the transition of a religious celebration Dolores Friday (or “Painful Friday”) into a secular fiesta.

Among the trade festivities are also “The *Alegría* and Olive Tree Fair” and “The Ice Cream Fair,” celebrated in February and Holy Week respectively, both in the town of Santiago Tulyehualco. In the first, a great variety of dishes made with amaranth (*huatli* in Nahuatl) are exhibited. Amaranth is best known in Mexico combined with honey to make the traditional

Applications to be *mayordomo* or head steward for the Niñoa have to be submitted 30 years in advance; it is already booked from now until 2035.



Portals like this indicate that the Niñoa lives on this street.



Xochimilco brings to mind its typical *trajinera* barges, floating gardens, canals and Sunday family outings.





The people of Xochimilco make pilgrimages carrying the images of their faith. Most of the neighborhoods participate, for example, in this pilgrimage in honor of Our Lord of Chalma.



sweet called an *alegría*, or “joy.” This seed has an extremely high protein count and survived the centuries despite a campaign by the Catholic missionaries during the colonial period to eradicate it because of its association with pre-Hispanic religious rites.

But the festivities to celebrate patron saints’ days are the essence of the fiesta tradition in Xochimilco. One example is the day of Saint Santiago, or Saint James, since Xochimilco boasts two towns and part of a neighborhood under the patronage of this warrior saint. So, Santiago Tulyehualco, Santiago Tepalcatlalpan and Santiago Chililico all have fiestas on July 25. August 10 is Saint Lorenzo’s day, so San Lorenzo Atemoaya and the San Lorenzo Neighborhood celebrate that day. One of the most spectacular festivities, marked by a great number of dances and fireworks, is the one celebrated in San Gregorio Atlapulco on March 13.

The cross is the most important symbol of the Christian faith in Xochimilco. On May 3, the day of the Holy Cross, practically all the towns, neighborhoods and streets display crosses. The fiesta begins with the preparations themselves: the day before, the altars are cleaned, crosses repainted and flowers arranged. Everything around the cross is decorated. Everyone crosses him- or herself before the symbol that the



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The Dolorosa de Xaltocan Virgin’s festival in February lasts 15 days.

rest of the year is not even noticed. On the evening of May 3, tamales are distributed, prepared in advance by the *mayordomía*, or council of stewards or sponsors who organize the fiesta, and the night ends with a community dance. The towns of Santa Cruz Acapulxca and Santa Cruz Xochitepec and Santa Cruz Chavarrieta, part of the town of San Mateo Xalpa, also celebrate their patron saints’ day on May 3. There is even an image of Christ on the cross known as Our Lord of the Little Cross, or Señor Santa Crucita, which has its own chapel in its own



Communal activities continue in places like this public laundry, free to anyone who does not have running water.



The agricultural tradition based on the *chinampa* is the source of an important part of the economic resources for the town's celebrations.



The celebration of patron saints' days are the essence of Xochimilco's fiestas.

neighborhood. Curiously enough, this Christ's day is celebrated in July.

Marianism is represented by the faith in Our Lady of Dolores, the Dolorosa de Xaltocan. This image unites almost all the towns and neighborhoods in the area through flowers and song, respect and fear. During her 15-day-long festival in February, each of the 17 neighborhoods and some towns, organized in innumerable *mayordomías*, daily visit the sanctuary of Xaltocan. Tradition says that the Dolorosa is a "bad" virgin who punishes anyone who does

not do his/her duty with fire, but knows how to amply reward those who put their faith in her with favors.

The people of Xochimilco make pilgrimages walking behind the images of their faith. The best example is the annual seven-day pilgrimage, organized by the *mayordomías*, that several towns make to the sanctuary of the Christ of Chalma. San Gregorio Atlapulco and Santa Cruz Acalpixca both make this pilgrimage in May. Xochimilco and its neighborhoods do it in August, beginning their walk the 24th to celebrate Chalma's fiesta on the 28th, when they make all kinds of floral arrangements, portals and fireworks as offerings, beginning their return —also on foot— the next day. The *mayordomía* begins its preparations a week beforehand, concluding at the "meeting," the reception of the pilgrims who are awaited with food, music and fireworks, as well as religious services.

November 1 and 2 are also fiesta days. Preparations begin the last week of October for the reception of the departed faithful, both adults and children. Dishes of *mole* sauce, tamales and "bread of the dead," fruit and flowers are an integral part of the offerings made. The market becomes a mosaic of colors and aromas, and, in the evening of November 1, people visit the graveyards to celebrate the *alumbrada*, or illumi-





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The vigorous indigenous character of Xochimilco is part of an age-old legacy reinterpreted by today's inhabitants.

nation, from sunset until the next morning. All through the night the graveyards are like beacons, with thousands of candles shining on the tombs of loved ones. What in the eyes of a stranger might seem macabre or sad becomes a fiesta day for Xochimilco residents; whole families gather together and spend time with people they do not see the rest of the year. That night everyone there shares blankets, food and drink.

But among all these religious images is one that attracts all the fervor and devotion of a people. His name is Niño. An image of the Baby Jesus, the sculpture dates from the sixteenth century and belongs literally to the people of Xochimilco. It has never been esconced inside a church or been in the charge of an ecclesiastic authority. It is worshipped through its *mayordomías*, which are transferred every February 2 in a celebration in a sixteenth-century church dedicated to the patron saint of Xochimilco, Saint Bernard of Siena, before the entire community. The *mayordomo*, or head steward, is responsible for the worship of the image, of taking care of its belongings and managing its appointments, which are always booked far in advance. He also offers the Baby a home in which it can be visited, a domestic sanctuary always open to pilgrims, visitors or anyone needing solace. Applications to be *mayordomo* must be submitted 30 years in advance; today, the list of applicants already includes every year from now until 2035.

The festive cycle of the Niño begins on the day the *mayordomo* changes and lasts all year. Every day the Baby visits a different home where a fiesta is held, thus guaranteeing 328 parties a year, each organized by a family that has requested the privilege as thanks for some favor received, to follow family tradition or simply because they love him very much.

However, the biggest, most spectacular festivities held for this image are in December. Each of the nine *posadas*, or days preceding Christmas to commemorate Mary's and Joseph's sojourn to Bethlehem, are celebrated in a different house. Each host is designated up to seven years in advance by the *mayordomo*.

All this makes Xochimilco unique. Its vigorous indigenous character is part of an age-old legacy, joined to the Catholic religion and reinterpreted by today's inhabitants who turn the fiesta into an encounter with their own convictions, giving cohesion to the whole community. The agricultural tradition based on the *chinampa* floating gardens is the source of an important part of the economic resources needed for these constant celebrations. Thanks to that production and the town's urban layout, Xochimilco was named a World Heritage Treasure in 1987. However, the intangible wealth of its fiestas should also be mentioned as one of things that makes it a treasure. ■■■