

# The Sugar Haciendas of Morelos

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Santa Ana Hacienda. Chapel.

What is now the state of Morelos was once almost completely included in the Marquisate of the Valley of Oaxaca, awarded to Hernán Cortés by King Charles I of Spain (better known as Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire).

In his pursuit of wealth, Cortés tried different crops and finally—probably based on what he had seen in the Antilles—decided to establish a large plantation and sugar mills on his lands.

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For the rest of his life, he retained the monopoly on this crop, which then passed on to his son Martín, the second marquis. His grandchildren preferred to rent out the land, and so many different factories were established, giving rise to a great sugar-producing center that lasted until the twentieth century.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Cortés introduced sugar cane cultivation to the mainland of the Western Hemisphere when he founded Morelos' first sugar plantation in Tlaltenango and gave his steward, Bernaldino del



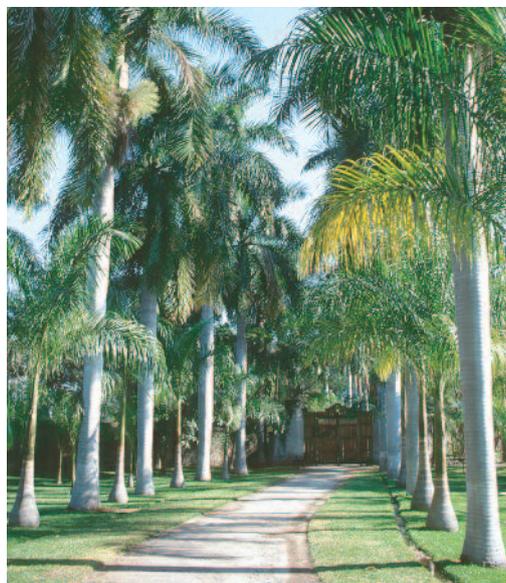
Photos by Daniel Munguia

San José de Vista Hermosa Hacienda, Tequesquitengo. Aqueduct.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Cortés introduced sugar cane cultivation to the mainland of the Western Hemisphere when he founded Morelos' first sugar plantation in Tlaltenango.



Santa Cruz Vista Alegre Hacienda, Mazatepec. The "big house".



Entrance to San Gabriel de las Palmas Hacienda, Amacuzac.

Castillo, permission to establish another at Amalco. A third plantation in Axomulco, owned by Antonio Serrano de Cardona, was their keen competitor. The three were pioneer sugar haciendas in the state.

The royal concession of the marquisate to Cortés slowed the development of other sugar complexes in the area, and it was not until the end of the century that royal grants were given in Oaxtepec and Casasano, which lay in the royal lands of Plan de Amilpas in the Cuautla-Huautla River Basin. When Don Pedro Cortés

y Ramírez de Arellano, the fourth marquis and the conquistador's grandson, came into his title and inheritance, he decided to free up control and earn some easy money giving out grants at every turn. This made for a proliferation of small and large plantations that took advantage of the growing demand—and therefore the hike in prices—to set up numerous factories.

For 300 years, the procedure dubbed “direct heat” was used to refine the sugar, and this determined the typical architecture of the main houses of Morelos' sugar haciendas.

Practically all the ex-haciendas still have the “big house,” the boss' residence. These buildings were usually large enough to house several families at a time.



Santa Cruz Vista Alegre. Its chapel and smokestack are worth seeing.



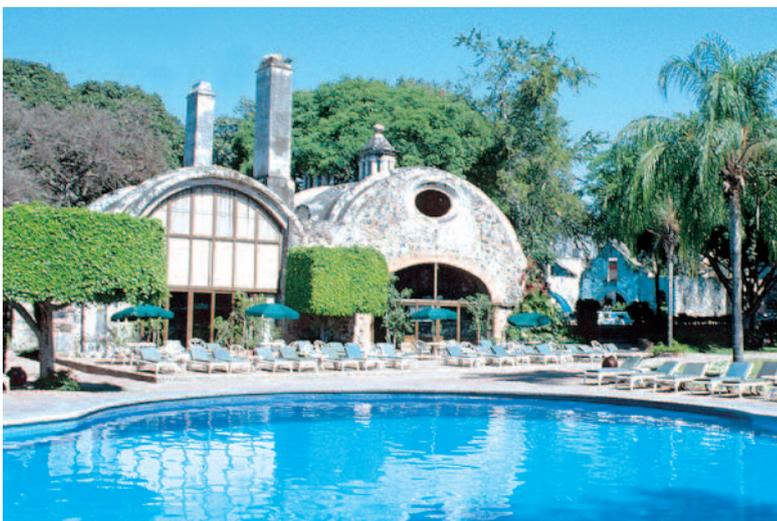
San José de Vista Hermosa. Founded in 1529 by Hemán Cortés.



Santa Ana Hacienda. Its beautiful church still offers religious services.



During Colonial times San Gabriel de las Palmas was first a Franciscan monastery and then a sugar plantation.



Cocoyoc. The *trapiche* is now a discotheque.



Santa Cruz Vista Alegre produced large amounts of sugar even during the Revolution (1912-1913).

The *batey* was a large patio where the cane was received and stored before going into the *trapiche* or mill. Here the juice—or *guarapo*—was extracted from the cane in the grinding machine, usually with three rollers—the *trapiche*, strictly speaking—powered first by animals and later by a hydraulic wheel. A press was sometimes placed near this building or inside it to extract even more juice from the cane.

Almost all the sugar plantations that used hydraulic power to move the grinder built aqueducts—veritable works of art—that carried the water over exquisite arches. In addition to driving the mill, the water was used to irrigate the fields and service different parts of the main buildings.

The “direct heat” was applied in the boiler house to large copper vats called *tachos* or *tachas* (which should not be confused with later steam boilers). In defecation tanks the sugar juice was treated with lime, evaporated and filtered to separate out scum and sediment and make what was called the *melado*, the liquid ready to be crystallized into sugar. Workers who became highly skilled in handling the product were known as “masters” or “sugar *maeses*” and held a privileged position at the mills. At one end of the same building was the cooling and drying area. Surrounding and underneath the building was a system of canals or conduits through which the water for washing, the residuals and foam (called *cachazas*) and the sugar juice itself ran.

Next to the boiler room was the *hornalla*, a space usually covered with a barrel vault where the remains of the sugar cane was stored after being sun-dried in its special patio. The fiber was used as fuel for the direct heat process which was applied through ingenious conduits to the bottom of the boilers or vats in the next room. The smoke escaped through one or several *chacua-cos* or chimneys built directly over each burner.

Also next to the boiler room were the tanks, sunken deposits for washing and preparing the clay funnels needed in the boiler room.

The funnels were left in the *purgar*, a long room with little or no ventilation, inside large

earthen jars that gathered the syrup that could not be crystallized, which was poured out and stored in sunken tanks. To purge the juice and whiten the sugar, the purest possible clay was used. Given the conditions required, they used the basement of the main house itself, as well as those of other buildings.

The cheapest possible agent, the sun, was used to dry the sugar loaves and whole patios were used for that purpose. Later it became common to use rooftops. Sophisticated systems of moveable shingled roofs were even designed to protect the sugar at night or on rainy days. Remains of some of these roofs still exist.

Other buildings were needed to conclude the process (sending the paper-wrapped sugar, packed in leather sacks, or the syrup in clay jugs on mules to their destination), as well as for the company's general operations: storerooms, warehouses, a carpenter's workshop, a blacksmith's shop and a potter's shed, used to replace the clay funnels, jugs and items needed for maintenance like shingles, pots, balusters, etc. In some places we can still see the corrals for mules, bullocks and horses, as well as the *trojes* or granaries whose weekly rations of corn supplemented workers' wages.

Practically all the ex-haciendas still have the "big house," the boss' residence, whether he was the owner, administrator or a renter. These buildings were usually large enough to house several families at a time, with room left over for visitors. The living quarters were normally on the second floor, with storage, the purging room or offices on the ground floor. Very often the houses boasted beautiful arches, reminiscent perhaps of the symbol of the power of the conquistador Cortés, his palace in Cuernavaca, in turn probably inspired by the Diego Colón's castle in Santo Domingo. They had interior patios, innumerable, spacious —if scantily furnished— rooms beautifully decorated in stone, mortar or wrought iron, and orchards that shaded the inhabitants from the harsh sun of this hot land, provided delicious fruit and offered the perfect place for romantic moonlight meetings.



San Gabriel de las Palmas. The company store attracted customers from far and wide.



Cortés' Hacienda was one of the wealthiest under the Viceroy.



Santa Ana, together with Santa Clara and San Ignacio, was one of the region's most important haciendas.



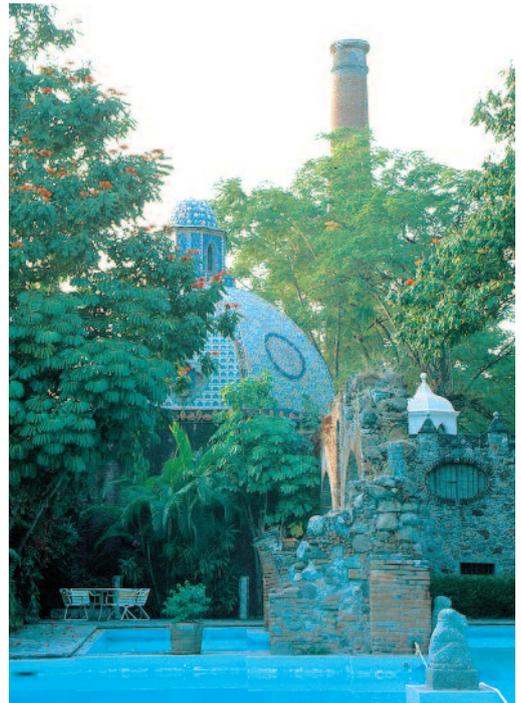
San Gabriel de las Palmas. Kitchen.



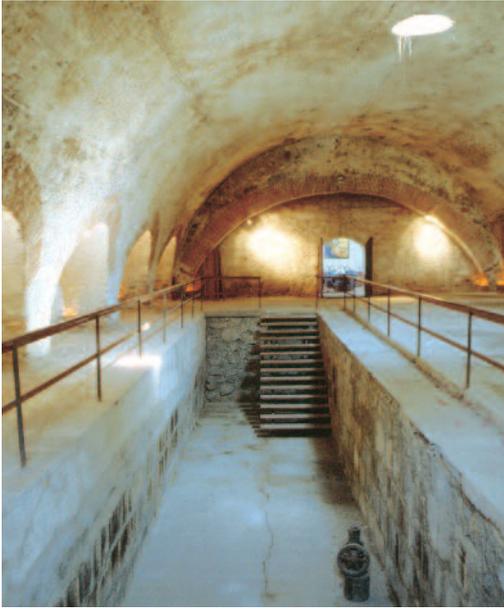
San Salvador Hacienda. Facade.

The chapel was an essential. Sometimes it was part of the main house itself, but usually it was an independent, occasionally exaggeratedly large, structure. It served the needs of both workers and owners, who sometimes had a private entrance that came directly from the “big house.” Today, these buildings are evidence of the magnificence of some of the haciendas: in some cases their rich decoration has survived, and often they have been converted into the church of the towns that sprang up around the central buildings of the haciendas. These ancient walls have seen many a fiesta, baptism and wedding in their time.

The hacienda’s central buildings were surrounded by walls that served both to delimit their area and for defense. Some have embrasures (those vertical slits that allow the inhabitants to aim a rifle from behind the walls in relative safety) in strategic places. The main door is usually under an arch, with a belfry, a bell tower, a coat of arms or a cap, on which often a date or the hacienda’s name is carved. Each of these walls would have doors to the fields, pasture lands and the rest of the land around the main buildings, doors that would be much simpler than the main entrance, through



San José de Vista Hermosa. Chapel and smokestack.



Santa Cruz Vista Alegre. Purging room.



San José de Vista Hermosa, destroyed by the Zapatistas during the Revolution, was restored in 1945 to become a hotel.



Santa Cruz Vista Alegre. Chapel.

which carts laden with sugar cane would be brought into the patio to be unloaded with a crane.

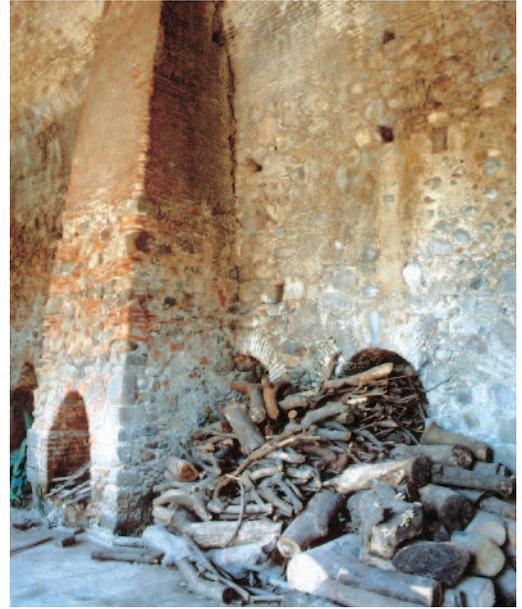
Each hacienda had its own *tienda de raya* or company store, usually next to the main door, sometimes with a porch of its own, sometimes as an adjunct of the warehouses or independent granaries. These stores often developed into veritable commercial emporia, famous for miles around, attracting customers from far away. The company store was very important in company-worker relations because a large part, if not all, wages were paid in kind.

When new production techniques were introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly the use of steam, new, many-storied buildings called “stoves” were built to facilitate the purging process, as well as rooms for the dynamos or electric generators and sometimes special rooms for the new steam boilers. Also required were buildings for making spirits and the imposing smokestacks that could then be built out of bricks reinforced with metal, or later on, out of concrete.

Since the haciendas did not exclusively process sugar cane, some of the remaining buildings were originally used to mill wheat or for the produc-



San Gabriel de las Palmas. Dining room.



San Miguel Cuahutitla. *Hornalla* storage area.



Cortés' Hacienda. Mill.



San Carlos Borromeo Hacienda. Smokestack.

tion and processing of indigo or coffee; some are grain silos or saw mills; and almost always there are the remains of alcohol factories.

With time, the main buildings of the haciendas changed, adapting to the needs of the new techniques. In some cases, the evolution they have experienced is clear to the eye. It is interesting to see, for example, in the mortar work used to increase the height of a free-standing

wall that all kinds of materials have been used, including sugar molds and jugs.

Today, the public can visit many of these old haciendas because they have been turned into hotels, resorts, rest homes, rice mills or warehouses. Others have been abandoned and await the hand of teams of restorers who could return them to their former grandeur and breathe new life into them again. **NM**