



PUEBLA DE LOS ANGELES

To really know Puebla,
you would have to go back more than 460 years in its history
and unhurriedly observe the scenes, the men and the celestial beings
that made it exceptional from the day of its founding.
To admire its lay-out and architecture, you would have to walk through
street after street searching meticulously on all four points
of the compass for the immense possibilities of the different
architectural styles from both the colonial and *Porfirista* periods,
which in the hands of indigenous artisans took on their own character.
To savor the endless sweets and dishes invented centuries ago
in its convent kitchens, you would have to discover
the profoundly earthly inclinations underlying the austerity,
contemplation and mystique of women
who hoped for eternal salvation.

Founded in 1531, Puebla de los Angeles was a unique social experiment in the Spanish colonies: it was established in a place where there was no indigenous settlement with the aim of populating it with European-born Spaniards, artisans and farmers. The idea was to forego the *encomienda* system, that is, not give the new colonists the right to extract tribute from nor use indigenous labor, the source of many injustices and conflicts between Spaniards and the indigenous peoples in all of New Spain.

Although the *encomienda* system could not be completely eliminated, since the city itself had to be built with the aid and skills of indigenous laborers, Puebla did honor to the expectations of its founders. Intense agricultural and commercial activities, its strategic location on the Veracruz-Mexico City route, as well as the majesty of its buildings, soon turned it into the second most important city of the colonial period, surpassed only by Mexico City. It would maintain that place until well into the twentieth century.

The streets, plazas and buildings in Puebla's historic downtown area are a lesson in urban planning, as well as a concert of architectural styles and colors, a wealth of materials and imagination, used by both ecclesiastic and civic architects for four centuries. All this explains why it was declared a World Heritage Treasure in 1987.



The Dome of the Rosario Chapel. Totally covered in gold leaf, the chapel has been called "The Eighth Wonder of the World."

Its churches and former convents are witness to the efforts of Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Jesuit friars to realize the Christian ideal of displaying the majesty and blessings of God's kingdom on Earth. Buildings like the Cathedral, the Rosary Chapel, the San Francisco Church and the Santa Rosa Convent, among many others, have defied the passage of the centuries and retained their splendor to testify to it.

The convents, where austerity, isolation and penitence were prerequisites for eternal salvation, opened a window on Earthly concerns to become the headquarters of culinary creativity. Sophisticated dishes and sweets of all kinds were fashioned in their kitchens to please distinguished visitors. Their recipes went beyond their thick walls to become a vital part of Puebla's cultural heritage.

Together with other craft and agricultural techniques brought from the Iberian Peninsula, Talavera pottery came to Puebla in the middle of the sixteenth century and soon acquired permanent resident status. It covered facades, fountains, patios, kitchens and domes in perfect harmony with the architecture, scenery and other decorations until it turned the entire city into a continuous medley of colors.

It is said that the site for founding Puebla was chosen by the angels themselves and that they were charged with watching over it. It is also said that these same celestial beings drew the first outlines of the city and put a four-ton church bell in the tower of its majestic cathedral; that they were in the convent kitchens inspiring the creation of strange dishes like *mole*. Whether we believe in their intervention or not, clearly, in this city of miracles, the idea is by no means unreasonable. ■■■

Text: *Elsie Montiel*
Photography: *Dante Barrera*



Multi-colored fountains grace Puebla's patios.