



Veracruz Portal of the Americas

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Only 400 kilometers from Mexico City is the coast where the Spanish conquistadors first stepped onto continental Latin America. Mexico's first great encounter with the West took place in Veracruz, where we can still see the splendor of the sun rising over the ocean.

It was not the exclusive privilege of Spaniards to bring a new language, different ways of understanding the universe and other customs to a land that had been occupied only by cultures as solid as the Mesoamericans. In the creation of what is today Mexico and particularly Veracruz, people from the four corners of the earth participated: more than half were Portuguese, and also among them were English, Scots, Italians, French and Greeks. There were Arabs, Andalusians, Lebanese, Jews from everywhere and others of unknown origin. The newly discovered riches required labor and, above all, specialized techniques contributed by different countries. From the beginning, Veracruz was a melting pot of races and diverse cultures.

Its well-defined regions all have their own identity, like the Huasteca or the Totonacapan, with ancient cultures and differentiated, particular roots, as characteristic as the vanilla from Papantla, the “smiling faces” —few cultures in the world have depicted the smile in as widespread a way as the Totonac culture from Papantla did with its clay figurines— or the rhythm of the *huapango*.

The city is built on the subsoil of its ancient history, the port from which the rich Gulf of Mexico culture continues to radiate. In the heart of the Sotavento Plain, amidst the natural exuberance of the coffee trees, surrounded by rivers and waterfalls, as though it were a part of the same telluric impulse, emerges the state's largest population center, spilling toward the periphery, toward the coasts and the

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mountains. Different products like sugar cane, mango, bananas, rice, coconuts, papayas and tobacco draw the state's multicolored map, with the port of Veracruz at its center.

Archaeological research indicates that between 1500 B.C. and A.D.100, one of the most advanced cultures of its time flowered in southern Veracruz. Some of the most spectacular ruins in this part of the world survive on the land of weeds and swamps, tropical forests, pests and fierce beasts, between the Papaloapan and Grijalva Rivers: the monumental Olmec heads, vestiges of a civilization considered the mother culture of Mesoamerica. Here also, archaeologists have discovered very early ceramics, testimony of a culture that predates the Christian era by more than 1,000 years. From the Pre-classical (1300-300 B.C.), we have important vestiges of a local culture that extended from the Orizaba region to the Tlacotalpan basin, known as the Remojada culture; its inhabitants had outstanding ability in making fired clay receptacles and figures, many of them decorated with black paint. Examples of this art are on display at the city of Xalapa's Anthropology Museum.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, a cultural change occurred due to the complex process of urbanization in the cities. From the Post-classical (A.D. 900-1521), archaeological sites like Cempoala and Quiahuiztlan in the environs of the port testify to the contact between Totonacs and Spaniards. The town of Castillo de Teayo, adjacent to Laguna Verde, known for its nuclear plant, is of particular interest: its central plaza boasts an extraordinary pyramid topped with a temple and the area's best collection of representative sculptures of the Aztec-Huastec civilization. And even though archaeological remains do not abound in Veracruz, famous, by contrast, for its medieval fortresses, the little museum in the Santiago Bulwark displays a valuable collection of gold Mixtec-style jewelry, testimony to the first shipments of precious metals that the Spaniards sent home after conquering Mexico.

The physiognomy of today's Veracruz —both port and state— has been determined by the activities that molded the recently discovered kingdom: fortifications built on sandy soil to protect against pirates and other attackers who preyed on the coasts; roads sprinkled with inns to give respite to military and commercial travelers and bridges over waterfalls and ravines with their legends of love or stained by bloodshed in the fight for an independent homeland. For example, the house that was temporarily President Juárez's seat of government still exists, now a public registry office. A look-out point for the sea, the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, with all the weight and solemnity of Spanish domination; limestone doorways that hold the sunlight or splinter it in intense polychromatic hues that envelop the foliage and cherubim of popular imagination. White seaside chapels that contrast with the libertarian and colorful mountain buildings that adorn the expression of local religious art and reaffirm the indigenous idiosyncrasy, so different from the wooden constructions that gave their name to the old Ciudad de Tablas, or the City of Boards, today Veracruz, and that still survive in the old La Huaca neighborhood right in the port's downtown area. History bestowed upon it the title of "Four Times Heroic," since it lived through invasions and wars that partially determined the life of the nation. But its importance lies above all in its being the port through which a large part of the country's commerce flows in the huge ships that come here from the world over, and are part of the city's emblematic landscape, just as much as the traditional sea wall walkway, the Parroquia Café or the Plaza de Armas, now known as the Zócalo Plaza, like in Mexico City.

Veracruz brings together the human elements expressed in music and dance with the old tradition of an ethnic mix: the stage of unending migrations, a place of encounters and one of the sites where popular culture is at its liveliest.

Just like 500 years ago, when the Gulf coasts opened up to welcome the medieval, conquistador, adventurers' world, Veracruz continues to receive everything and everyone with the characteristic generosity of its people. It is still a port and a door, a crossroads and entryway to the heart of Mexico. **MM**