



Photos by Manuel Zavala

Twentieth-century *Acapulco*

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Situated on Mexico's Pacific Coast, Acapulco is synonymous with paradise; its bay has been the symbol of life in Eden for all who have trod its shores or swum in its waters. Its first inhabitants showed their enthusiasm for the site's beauty in the glyphs they carved into its rocks and caves; later that enthusiasm came through in the pre-Hispanic Yope buildings, in old engravings and lithographs from the colonial period and from after independence, and finally in twentieth-century art.

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, Acapulco was already becoming a wonderful vacation spot. That was why on November 11, 1927, President Plutarco Elías Calles ordered that the last large rock formation blocking the highway that would unite Mexico City with the port be dynamited. On that very day, the first 12 automobiles to travel the dirt road arrived in the port city, one of which carried the governor of Guerrero state. This would open up the beautiful bay to tourism to an extent previously undreamed of.

A landing strip was built in 1928 and the following year flights to Mexico City began. In



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1930, President Pascual Ortiz Rubio began the introduction of drinking water brought from the Santacruz springs. By 1931 the highway had been finished and a trickle of tourists began,

foreshadowing a successful future and spurring investments in hotels. The first hotels were built by visionaries who, although motivated by ambition, foresaw an Acapulco of economic greatness, glamour and formidable development. Thus, Carlos Barnard built the El Mirador Hotel in La Quebrada in 1933, with only 12 cottages located right on the cliffs. Then came the Papagayo, promoted by the former presidential candidate Juan Andrew Almazán (today there is an amusement park on this site), and then the Flamingos, the Del Monte, the Caleta Hotel, the Majestic and the Prado Américas, among others. Government infrastructure began to grow as the Federal Palace and other buildings were erected. Wealthy Mexicans and foreigners began to build summer homes along the beaches of the peninsula. The idea of a place worthy of being called an Eden began to grow in the mind of all Mexicans. It was not by chance that in 1941 the famous Mexican composer Agustín Lara, married to the radiant actress María Félix, composed the song *María Bonita* for her, recalling her beauty as well as that of Acapulco. The song, which has traveled around the world, begins with the words “Remember Acapulco, María Bonita, María of my soul...”

But it was not until the term of President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) that the city’s downtown streets were straightened and paved, the Coastal Road, the Great Tropical Way and the Los Amates International Airport were built, and the Caleta and Caletilla beaches were beautified. There, the powerful politician Maximino Ávila Camacho built a mansion for actress Sofía Álvarez that would become the site of spectacular parties with such famous guests as Dolores del Río, Merle Oberon, Johnny Weissmuller and other Hollywood stars. Today, that house on the hill that separates Caleta and Caletilla Beaches is home to an aquarium open to the general public.

One of the most impressive developments of the time was built during those years: Las Brisas, which included a hotel, villas and residences in a concept that surprised architects worldwide.

At that time, the Mexico City-Cuernavaca superhighway was being built and improvements were being made to the stretches of road between Cuernavaca and Iguala and, as far as possible, the much feared Zopilote (Buzzard) Canyon between Iguala and Chilpancingo, a part of the road that had to be travelled to get to Acapulco. Hotel capacity continued to grow in response to the increasing flow of tourists.

The city first drew international attention with the 1958 meeting of Presidents Adolfo López Mateos and Dwight D. Eisenhower. The following year it would host the First World Film Review at the San Diego Fort. The event aimed to position the port city in the international scene of the famous jet set; great film stars from Italy, the United States, Czechoslovakia, France, Sweden and the Soviet Union attended. In 1960, during a series of concerts in the port, the renowned Catalonian cellist Pablo Casals debuted his famous piece, *The Manger*. In the same year, the Second World Film Review was held with the attendance of great figures of the movie world like Brigitte Bardot, Elizabeth Taylor and others.

At that time, Acapulco competed in beauty and international events with the famous French Riviera, and for years the city was inappropriately named the “Mexican Riviera.”

In this period, internationally known celebrities built homes in Acapulco, among them, Merle Oberon, Johnny Weissmuller, Dolores del Río, Carlos Trouyet, Dolores Olmedo, Miguel Alemán, Paul Getty, William Hudson, Errol Flynn and Teddy Stauffer.

Lavish parties in their mansions made the front page of the society and entertainment sections of the newspapers and were the basis for gossip in political columns in national dailies and the occasional foreign paper. Visual artists were also among the luminaries; Diego Rivera painted his series of sunsets and the canvas *La Quebrada* while staying at Dolores Olmedo's house. Amidst the delights of extravagant glamour, flowing liquor, sumptuous banquets, business deals, political indiscretions and furtive love affairs, Acapulco grew in fame, tourist infrastruc-



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ture, capital and also serious urban development problems.

Inordinate growth between 1964 and 1970 brought terrible consequences for the city. Rings

of poor neighborhoods and irregular settlements sprang up, particularly in the Las Lajas area, producing clashes with local authorities headed up by the famous King Lopitos, with fatal consequences. The contrasts between the rich neighborhoods and the big hotels and the poor neighborhoods were truly drastic. It was then, in 1971, that the government began its Acapulco Plan to reorganize the city, alleviate poverty, develop new housing projects for the poor, improve tourist services and slow the deterioration of the water in the bay. A system to gather rainwater was established and another for providing drinking water to people living on the hills was set up. Streets in poor neighborhoods were paved, a drainage system was built in the

areas with the most difficulties, like Las Lajas, and land ownership was regulated throughout the city. Sports and health centers were built, as well as the Cultural and Conventions Center, which has hosted well-publicized national and international events for decades. Beach front property was set aside for public use, such as El Cocal, Tlacopanocha and Hornitos.

In the 1970s, Acapulco improved its tourist and urban services a great deal, but the evils of the growth in tourism increased. The proliferation of nightclubs, bars and discotheques fostered prostitution and an incipient drug trade. It seemed like the paradise was fading with economic growth, the blessings of tourism and the unfettered urban sprawl.

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Veladero Hill stone glyphs in Acapulco, Guerrero.

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By the 1980s, Acapulco was in the eye of the hurricane. On the one hand it was facing strong competition from other domestic tourist centers of comparable beauty like Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos and Ixtapa Zihuatanejo. On the other hand, the deterioration of the water in the bay was producing serious health problems, and Acapulco began to be synonymous with unlimited fun, which contradicted the fame, prestige and splendor won in previous decades.

Acapulco seemed to be in a dead-end street. However, authorities, investors, tourism service providers and inhabitants in general rose to the occasion and began efforts to improve the port and its services.

Today, after more than 10 years of improvements, Acapulco has a new face, with cleaner beaches, enhanced, refurbished tourist facilities, an austere but splendid infrastructure in cultural services and appropriate maintenance of the water and the environment in general.

With its natural beauty and appropriate services, Acapulco can continue to be that paradise that its first settlers experienced and dreamed of, that Eden where love, pleasure and the dreams of the legendary princes Quiahuitl and Acatl were born, who, according to Yope legend, gave their names to Acapulco, a place where visionary businessmen, artists and authorities have done great things. **MM**