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The City That Silver Built

By TONY COHAN

There is an enchantment to a city risen from ruin, and I suppose that's what keeps drawing me back to Guanajuato. These days, wandering its plazas and cafes, past flowers and fountains and strolling minstrels, I sometimes try to remember that not so many years ago, the main attraction in this mile-high city in central [Mexico](#) was a display of desiccated mummies.

These sad specimens — preserved through a mineral peculiarity in the earth and disinterred because nobody had paid their grave fees — spoke of the listlessness and defeat that had settled upon this once-grand provincial capital, where for two centuries close to 40 percent of the world's silver was mined.

“Everyone agrees that the city has seen better days,” wrote a native son, Jorge Ibarguengoitia, in his 1974 novel, “Estas Ruinas que Ves” (“These Ruins That You See”). From practically every house, “you can see in the distance the ruins: inundated mines, great abandoned haciendas, destroyed churches, ghost pueblos.” Gone were the glory years when Guanajuato's counts and countesses, endowed with near-unimaginable wealth, built homes of breathtaking opulence as well as an opera house decorated in part by the scenographer of the Opéra Comique in [Paris](#). The city had become, like the capitals of antiquity visited by European travelers in the 18th century, a graveyard of ruined splendors, cats and garbage, reduced to marketing its dead.

Not anymore. If the mummies, still lying in state in their little museum on the edge of town, have yet to sit up and start speaking, the rest of this highland oasis, a five hour drive northwest of [Mexico City](#), has come back to life with a vengeance. On Avenida Juárez, the main drag, government officials now bark into cellphones, orchestrating Guanajuato's refurbishment. (Since being designated a [Unesco](#) World Heritage Site in 1988, the city has attracted a stream of public and private funding for restoration.) Along its serpentine lanes and in its little plazas, residents and a growing contingent of tourists crowd new cafes and restaurants. Students from the 30,000-strong university mingle in the centro's bars at night. And for three weeks every October, the International Cervantino Festival, Latin America's biggest arts festival, turns the entire city into a living theater. (This year, more than 2,000 artists from 29 countries will participate.)

The new vitality animating Guanajuato reflects a gradual convergence of various interests in rebuilding the city, including local government and civic leaders, a new generation of professors and administrators committed to raising the level of the university, and a mix of old Guanajuato families and educated newcomers from Mexico City and beyond who are bringing haciendas and old buildings back to life as hotels, restaurants and museums. Thanks to a three-year, \$55 million initiative begun in 2004, key monuments like the Teatro Juárez have been restored, buildings everywhere are being repaired and repainted, and five new tunnels are under way to link diverse parts of the city.

Although the melancholy that once imbued the city has lifted, its traditional character is still on display: Indian women sit on their blankets selling cactuses, squash blossoms and fresh blue corn tortillas in front of the vast Art Nouveau edifice of the Mercado Hidalgo. Keening ranchera laments waft from the old cantinas. And the mighty La Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato, in the center of town, overflows on Saturdays with weddings, confirmations and baptisms.

Julie Foley came here a decade ago from Mesa, Ariz., to study Spanish and stayed to open the popular Bar Ocho with her Norwegian roommate. Since then, she's partnered with Michael Severens, a cellist, in the stylish Café-Resto-Bar Zilch. Severens, a Bennington and CalArts alumnus who arrived six years ago, can be heard there most Sunday nights playing J.S. Bach's solo Suites for Cello. One recent evening I sat talking with them over a cappuccino frio at the Zilch. Outside, around the lovely fluted fountain, street singers in full Renaissance garb lingered among the flower vendors, sipping atole, a hot corn drink, from paper cups before beginning their nightly rounds. A bearded man in a tuxedo carrying a tuba carved a swath through an armada of pigeons. Students lounged on green metal benches, eating pizza slices and chatting.

I asked Foley if she thought that Guanajuato's quirky cosmopolitanism would give way to an invasion of American retirees, as has happened in nearby San Miguel de Allende.

"I doubt it," she said. "It's difficult for older people to get around here. You can't speak English the same way. People in Guanajuato won't put up with that. Younger, more adventurous people are coming who want to partake of the culture." Severens added: "Sometimes there are too many things to do in one night. This is new."

As Guanajuato learns to mine its own grandeur — a process that necessarily entails fixing outdated plumbing, burying electrical wires and cleaning up reeking rivers — many citizens, who must daily dodge steam hammers and duck under scaffolding, wonder at times where it's all headed. Large civic posters reminding them that it's "Vale la Pena" ("Worth the Pain") don't

always console. At the Bossa Nova Café on pretty Plaza de San Fernando, where couples whisper over coffee and crepes, Patricia Velásquez Jiménez, a co-owner and one of a number of educated émigrés from Mexico City who have relocated here, told me of a recent mayoral candidate who proposed tearing up the graceful cobbled surface that defines the plaza floor and replacing it with adoquin, the paving stones being adopted elsewhere in the city.

“I asked him if he knew that part of the plaza was designed by one of Guanajuato’s most important artists, José Chávez Morado,” she said. (Chávez Morado’s turreted studio-home in the Pastita neighborhood is now a museum and performance space.) “He hadn’t a clue.”

With its twisting streets, dizzying vistas and cool stone labyrinth of subterranean tunnels, soaring Baroque churches and colonial palaces, the city still plays to the romantic temperament. Following the worn pastel walls that lead to the house where the gargantuan artist Diego Rivera was born (now a museum and cultural center); getting lost among the steep, seductive little lanes called callejones; gazing up at the multihued cubist dwellings clinging impossibly to the hillsides; peering down abandoned mine shafts and wells — all incite a kind of dream state in which the past overwhelms the present. These crumbling traces, the evidence of time’s attrition, have always made Guanajuato seem to me a place that Lord Byron or Rainer Maria Rilke might have chosen to elegeize.

Maybe because of this, Guanajuatenses, as people here are known, take their patrimony seriously, and they surrender it reluctantly. Plaques and statues everywhere commemorate fallen leaders of the revolution, floods, revolts, cultural figures, the 1803 visit of the renowned German traveler and polymath Alexander von Humboldt, the Cervantino Festival and its patron saint, Don Quixote. Indeed, it’s hard to find a street or plazuela (“little plaza”) that doesn’t have a legend attached to it. (A popular local book, “Leyendas de Guanajuato,” recounts 42 of them.) Dimly lighted dry-goods shops along the winding old streets remain stubbornly rooted in another era. Water drips from tunnel roofs, broken cobblestones put even the hardiest shoes to the test, and nowhere is there a neon sign or a traffic light.

In fact there is hardly room for cars to move through the downtown at all. Guanajuato remains resolutely a walkers’ city, with not a straight street to be found, and most are impassable by car. One little lane behind the Plaza de San Fernando, Puente del Campanero, is so narrow that a barrel-shaped indentation had to be hewn out of a wall to allow burros to pass, while another, Callejón del Beso, as its name indicates, allows lovers to kiss across balconies.

Woven into a steep river valley among arroyos and canyons, the city follows a line of descent from the dammed river at its head, pausing at the shaded Jardín Unión, where men in suits sit beneath trimmed plane trees reading newspapers and having their shoes shined. On the steps

of the Teatro Juárez opposite, students and travelers cluster in the morning sun.

This little jeweled fin de siècle opera house, with its wide steps, beefy columns and statues of the theatrical muses atop, was inaugurated by the dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1903. It briefly played host to the great international opera stars of its day until the 1910 revolution, when it fell on hard times, even becoming a movie house for a while after World War II. Now restored, it serves as the locus of the Cervantino Festival and a concert hall year-round.

The Hidalgo Tunnel running beneath the theater, in use by cars and pedestrians today, was built to channel the city's main riverbed and then expanded after a succession of floods in the 19th century to allow more water to pass. To do this, the entire city floor and everything on it — streets, churches, convents, houses — had to be raised 20 feet. A glass display in the ground alongside the Templo de [San Diego](#) reveals this miracle of retrofitting. The remains of an old convent lurk down there beneath street level, sacrificed to the construction of the theater next door.

Behind the Teatro Juárez, a sheer hillside rises to a massive pink stone statue of a man holding a torch. Resembling some combination of Prometheus and the Michelin Man, it commemorates a local liberator, nicknamed Pípila, who set fire to the Alhóndiga granary gates on Sept. 28, 1810, allowing the rebel Miguel Hidalgo's troops to win the first battle of the independence movement against [Spain](#). An ascent up several oxygen-robbing callejones brings you to Pípila's huge pink feet — and a magnificent view of the maze from which you've just been ejected. Everything seen from within now spreads below: theaters, churches, plazas, domes, spires and, rising above it all, the immense bulwark of the mines, whose glittering bounty built this city.

Guanajuato achieved wealth soon after its founding in 1557 when silver was discovered. By the beginning of the 19th century, silver had turned a local miner, Obregon, and a merchant, Otero, into purportedly two of the richest men in the world. A single mine, La Valenciana, produced an estimated fifth of the silver circulating in the world for 250 years. Today, most of the original mines are closed — brought down by revolution, silicosis and the collapse of silver prices — and it produces more poignancy than awe to pick silver-specked shards from mounds of slate-colored tailings, peer nearly 2,000 feet down the vertiginous shafts, hear the lumbering whine of old winches and gaze up at the once-busy pyramid-shaped ovens.

On a plummeting hillside, San Cayetano Church looms dramatically, a hymn to Rococo excess. Its high-walled alter pieces, encrusted with gold leaf, echo visitors' footsteps and the chirpings of small black birds wheeling in the cathedral's towering cupola. Outside, vendors hawk geodes from the mines. Clouds speed over the surrounding hilltops marked by bare crosses.

Far below, at dusk, lights bloom in this city that silver blessed, then abandoned, as tides of wealth swept in, swept out: beautiful Guanajuato, site of masques and reveries, fictions and phantasms, whose people have raised it from the dead.

Essentials: Guanajuato, Mexico

GETTING THERE The closest airport is the León-Guanajuato International Airport (BJX); from there, either take a taxi or rent a car (15 minutes).

HOTELS Put up in the centro or a little farther out, a choice between immersion and silence. Casa Estrella de la Valenciana Inn with staggering views above the old Valenciana mine and church. Callejón Jalisco 10, Mineral de Valenciana; 866-983-8844; www.mexicaninns.com; doubles from \$170. El Mesón de los Poetas Romantic spot; each room is named after a famous poet. Positos 35; 011-52-473-732-6657; mexonline.com/poetas.htm; doubles from \$140. Hotel Posada Santa Fé Classic 1862 colonial building with outdoor restaurant, on the Jardín Unión. 011-52-473-732-0084; www.posadasantafe.com; doubles from \$87.

RESTAURANTS, CAFES AND BARS Belying its old rap as a city of indifferent restaurants, Guanajuato now has plenty of good food and drink. Bar Ocho Convivial hangout with outdoor patio. Constancia 8; 011-52-473-732-7179. Bossa Nova Crepes, coffee and more on a pretty plaza. Plaza San Fernando 46; 011-52-473-732-9930; entrees \$3-\$6. Café Carcamanes Stylish cafe on a tiny square behind the Baratillo. Plazuela Carcamanes 8; 011-52-473-732-5172. Café-Resto-Bar Zilch Cool venue with music most nights. Plaza Baratillo 16; 011-52-473-734-0755. Casa Luz Unique restaurant tucked into an old stone wall in a tunnel. Calle Belauzáran; 011-52-473-732-3837; entrees \$8-\$15.

El Abue A new favorite for Mexican and Continental dishes, in the centro; fresh bread and pasta made daily. Calle San José 14; 011-52-473-732-6242; entrees \$6-\$11. Hacienda de Marfil (Chez Nicole) Excellent entrees and desserts among hanging gardens and stone walls. Arcos de Guadalupe, Marfil; 011-52-473-733-1148; entrees \$8-\$15. La Dama de las Camelias Colorful after-hours bar with Cuban music. Sopeña 32; 011-52-473-732-7587.

SHOPS Shopping in Guanajuato is all about handmade arts, from museum-quality work at stores along Calle Positos to simple folk toys upstairs at the Mercado Hidalgo. Alfararía Gorky González Studio/ showroom of the celebrated ceramist. Ex Huerta de Montenegro, Colonia Pastita; 011-52-473-731-0389. El Viejo Zaguán High-quality crafts, as well as CD's, books and a cafe. Positos 64; 011-52-473-732-3971. Ojo de Venado Exquisite artesanía next to the Valenciana church. Plaza Valenciana; 011 52 473 734 1435.

SIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES “Eyewitness Travel: Mexico” (DK Publishing, \$25) and “Lonely Planet Mexico” (Lonely Planet, \$27) provide an excellent overview of Guanajuato’s attractions. Festival Internacional Cervantino This annual festival of art, music, opera, dance and theater will be held this year from Oct. 4-22. Tickets can be purchased online; for more information (in Spanish), go to www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx.

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