

Jalpan de Serra and the Franciscan chapels of Mexico

The mission church in Jalpan's center, today known as the **Santiago Apóstol Church**, is an excellent place to begin touring. Built between 1751 and 1758 by the indefatigable Fray Junípero Serra, this was the first of the Sierra Gorda missions. Take some time to examine the details of its earthy façade. The first section features sculptures of saints Francis and Dominic and the Franciscan coats of arms, while the doorframe is decorated with images of St. Peter and St. Paul. The lower portion has emblems of two-headed eagles said to represent the House of Habsburg but that are clearly of Mexican origin, since the eagle is devouring a serpent. The most striking features of the second body are the sculptures of the Spanish virgin, Our Lady of the Pilar, and Mexico's Our Lady of Guadalupe and the window framed by magnificent curtains carved out of stone. The entire façade is a symphony in stone and well worth the trip from even the remotest corner of the country

Next to the church is the **Main Park**, which is surrounded by historic buildings. During the Reform War, the famous liberal general Mariano Escobedo was held prisoner in the post office, which is why this building, formerly part of the church complex, is now referred to as the **Mariano Escobedo Prison**. Close by, housed in a well-preserved 16th-century building, is the **Sierra Gorda History Museum**, where you can learn more about the history and natural wealth of the region from the museum's collection of photographs, diagrams, archaeological artifacts and everyday objects.

Some two kilometers south of downtown is **Jalpan Dam**, included on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance in 2004 for being a natural habitat for countless plant and animal species, especially birds. Boats and kayaks are available to rent, but to enjoy local nature, you can walk another kilometer along the bank of the Jalpan River until you come to **Puente de Dios**, a cave that melds effortlessly with the river landscape

Jalpan's culinary treasures are as diverse as the natural wonders in the Sierra Gorda, running the gamut from desert delicacies like cactus pads and prickly pears to exotic Huasteca delights such as acamayás (a species of freshwater prawn) and zacahuiles (huge tamales).

Visitors speak highly of the cecina serrana (dried, salted meat sometimes marinated in orange juice) and the fabulous atole de teja, a thick, hot drink made from ground sunflower seeds, although others prefer the guayabilla variety containing a local fruit. Remember to leave room for some traditional candies made of local ingredients like guava, sugarcane, squash seeds and corn and that come in every shape and form. Choose from pepitoria, melado de jugo de caña, charamusca, pacholes... We suggest you ask around, because the tastiest goodies are not always easy to find.

Both Jalpan and Tancoyol have several handicraft stores with items fashioned out of palm, pine fibers or needles, embroidery, wood and leather, in addition, of course, to a lot of interesting pottery. In many places, you'll find tasty fruit preserves, from guava paste to fruit jams and wines, mountain blossom honey and delicious coffee, often even organic

Less than an hour from Jalpan are other missions by Fray Junípero Serra. Eastbound, on the highway to Ciudad Valles are Tilaco, Tancoyol and Landa, and northwest, on the road to Río Verde, is Concá. If you're the adventurous sort, check out the ruins of the Bucareli mission, heading south on the highway to San Juan del Río.

Other natural sites that are easy to get to include El Salto, a waterfall south of Jalpan near the town of San Pedro Escanela and the Chuveje Waterfall some 20 kilometers southbound on Highway 120 (to San Juan del Río).

Continuing south is Pinal de Amoles, another picturesque mountain town, famous for its thick fog and breathtaking scenery, like the Puerta del Cielo, a mountain port surrounded by a sea of cloud, and the Cuatro Palos overlook.

Northwest of Jalpan is Sótano El Barro, an impressive chasm inhabited by wild macaws that measures 600 meters in diameter and is 410 meters deep.

Sierra Gorda's Franciscan Churches

The five Sierra Gorda missions bear witness to the cultural encounter of the European missions with the nomadic populations of central Mexico, remaining a significant testimony to this second phase of evangelization in North America. The most thorough evangelizing work carried out by the Franciscan Order in America is reflected in the architectural and artistic achievement in these missions. They exhibit an important interchange of values in the process of evangelization of central and northern Mexico and the western United States, and demonstrate the cultural coexistence between two different groups with their environment.

The property consists of five Franciscan missions dating from the 1750s and 1760s. They are located in the mountainous Sierra Gorda region in central Mexico, where evangelization took place much later than elsewhere. Of the five missions, Santiago de Jalpan (the earliest, built 1751-58) and Nuestra Señora de la Luz de Tancoyol are located in the municipality of Jalpan de Sierra, Santa Maria del Agua de Landa and San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco are in the municipality of Landa de Matamoros, and the mission of San Miguel Concá is in the municipality of Arroyo Seco.

The Franciscan missions were complex organizational units run by friars aiming at evangelizing, congregating and teaching indigenous people. Each mission had

to erect the church, find the natives, subdue them, and then group them in huts around the church. The missionaries had to learn the native language, supply the population with food, teach them how to behave, and only then evangelize them.

All five missions share similar elements in relation to their environment, the town and the religious buildings. The environment offers splendid mountain views; the strategic locations of the missions determined the layout and development of the native settlement around. Today, these are traditional rural settlements. The architecture of the missions is designed following a general pattern, although there are individual differences. Their features are reminiscent of 16th-century convents, and generally include an atrium, a sacramental doorway, an open chapel, processional chapels and a cloister. Some features are also taken from Mexican Baroque art of the 17th and 18th centuries, evidenced in the cross-shaped ground plan of the church, the carved and stuccoed facade, and the use of lime plaster in the interior.

These features are most characteristic of Jalpan, Landa and Tancoyol, while Tilaco and Conca have more individual designs - for example there are no chapels. The buildings are made from local stone, and have plaster rendering. The orientation of the complex differs in each case; the main facade is oriented to the west only in Tilaco, while Jalpan faces east, Tancoyol south, and Conca and Landa south-east. Considering that the congregation generally gathered outside, the main elevation of the church is opulently decorated with winding plants and flowers, fantastic architectural elements, angels, figures of Virgin and saints, including St Francis. While the general layout of the complex reflects the Franciscan model, the spirit and forms of decoration refer to local traditions and local products as gifts to God. Artistically the whole has a particular air of innocence and naivety.

Strategically, the images were 'ideographic', enforcing the didactic scope of the mission. The facade has usually three horizontal and three vertical sections, forming framed fields; in Tancoyol, there are five horizontal sections. The dominating colour is ochre. In contrast, the interior is now much less pretentious; it has simple plaster rendering, and the altarpiece has straightforward architectural forms. A cupola crowns the transept crossing. Seen from the front, a tall bell tower is attached on the left side of the church. The lower part of the tower is plain on a square plan; the upper part is richly ornate with architectural elements. The residential part, on the right side of the church, has an arched entrance and in some cases there is a cloister passage around the court. Otherwise it is relatively simple without decoration.

Source: UNESCO/CLT/WHC

Historical Description

The northern region of Sierra Gorda, where the missions are placed, is part of the mountainous central Mexico. In ancient times, the native inhabitants used to be involved in mining and trade, living in small settlements scattered over the lower parts of the mountains. Sierra Gorda was a natural barrier between the agricultural, sedentary people and the nomadic, hunter-gatherer tribes of the north. At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, the people were mainly living on agriculture. The Huastec lived in large feudal estates and were skilled in cotton spinning. The Jonace lived in caves and attacked estates. The Pame was a large group who grew corn and lived in grass or palm-leaf houses; they were docile and collaborative with the friars.

In the 17th century, due to political interests and silver mining, armed conflicts were often provoked, involving the Spaniards and groups of native people. This resulted in the destruction of many of the early missions. In the 17th century, the Franciscans made attempts to penetrate further into the country, but were not able to establish permanent presence. In the 18th century, they obtained a new authorization, resulting in the decision, in 1744, to establish five missions (Jalpan, Conca, Tancoyol, Landa and Tilaco). Due to continuing conflicts in the region, the first years were difficult, delaying the construction of the actual mission complexes until 1750-51, under the leadership of Friar Junípero Sierra.

The construction phase took some two decades combined with the active evangelization work by the Franciscan friars. By the end of the period, in 1770, the mission was accomplished. The political situation had changed, and the missions were secularized. Due to rebellions and armed conflicts in the 19th century, the missions suffered and eg the gilded altarpieces were destroyed. Towards the end of the century, the churches faced further problems and some images that were replaced, eg in the central part of the front of Jalpan. In the 20th century, the population decreased, and some missions were abandoned at times; others had alterations, such as the atriums of Landa (1966) and Jalpan (1964). Nevertheless, they have continued as religious entities, dominating the settlements which grew around them as well as being a reference for the region. From the publication on the Baroque in the Sierra Gorda region, by Monique Gustin in 1969, a new interest was revived to safeguard these baroque masterpieces, leading to restoration during the 1990s.

The driving force in this phase of evangelization was Junípero Serra (1713-1784), a Spanish Franciscan priest whose missionary work in North America earned him the title of Apostle of California (he was beatified by the Pope in 1988). He was instrumental in the establishment of the Sierra Gorda missions, where he served from 1750 to 1758, moving then to south-central Mexico (1758-1767). When Spain began its occupation of Alta California (present-day California), Serra joined the expedition, and in 1769 he founded Mission San Diego, the first in California. Altogether 21 missions were founded by him and his successors in California, where they became the strongest factors in the development of the region.

