

Puebla is still alive and cooking

A recent visit shows the city's wonders and delicacies are both intact after earthquake



A street performer plays music along Puebla's Alley of the Frogs, a street known for its colorful shops and restaurants.

PUEBLA, Mexico — Look west on a clear day from any hilltop in Puebla. In the suburb of Cholula, seven miles outside downtown, you'll spy an orange church and a snow-topped peak looming behind it.

This church is Nuestra Senora de los Remedios, built in the 1570s, damaged by a major earthquake, now whole and open again. The peak is the volcano Popocatepetl, alive and fuming.

That curiously symmetrical hill beneath the church? That's not a hill at all.

It's the Great Pyramid of Cholula, the largest known pyramid on Earth, begun before Christ, completed long before the Spanish arrived, now cloaked in vegetation.

Consider this easy-to-misread scene a fair warning: Puebla, about 85 miles southeast of Mexico City, is full of earthen surprises, architectural wonders and human resilience.

I know this from two visits. I spent five days here in July gathering information for a travel article that was to be published in the fall. Then came the magnitude-7.1 Mexican earthquake of Sept. 19, which killed about 220 people in Mexico City and 45 in the state of Puebla, most of them in small, outlying towns. I shelved the story.

But in the days and weeks after, it became clear that Puebla, whose downtown core includes more than 2,500 colonial buildings from the 16th to 18th centuries, had survived remarkably intact. I returned in February.

I found scaffolding on several buildings and heard from several vendors and hoteliers about the post-quake slump in visitation. A taxi driver showed me video on his phone of the Cholula church losing the tops of its two towers.

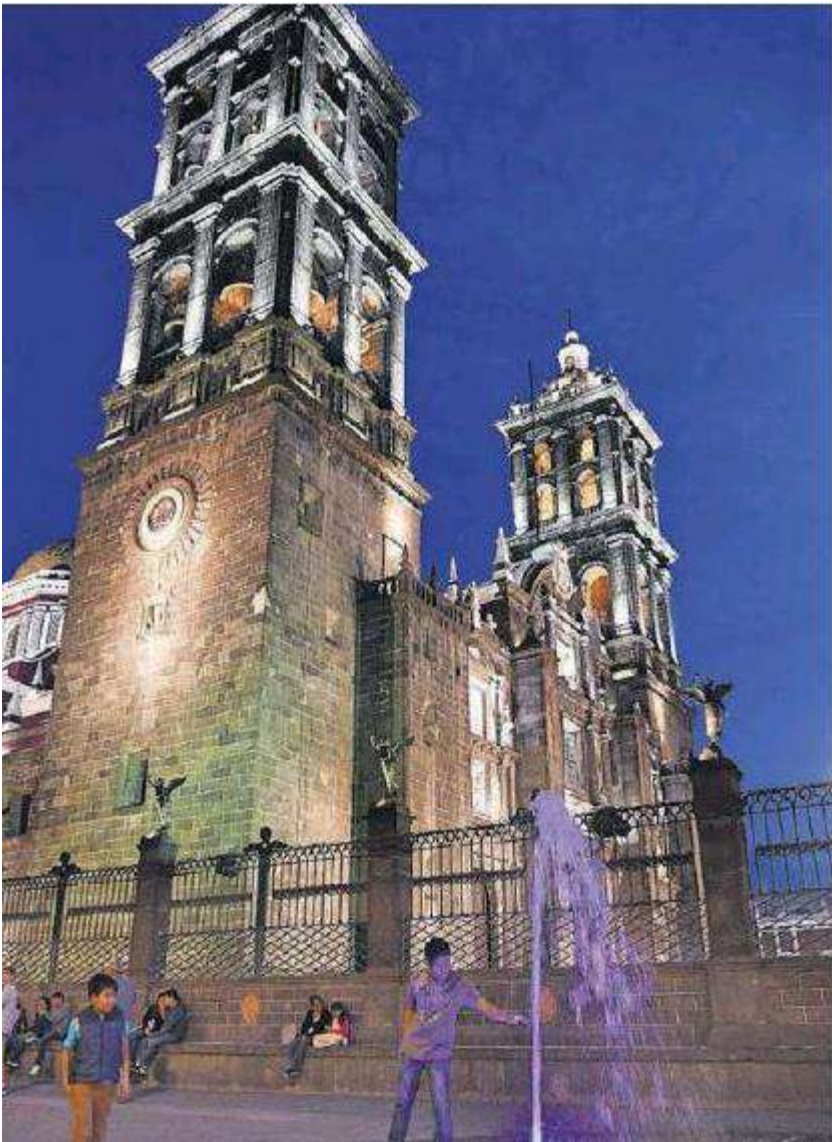
Five months after the temblor, just one visitor attraction remained shut because of quake damage — the 18th century Casa de Alfenique museum, closed indefinitely.

Meanwhile, the list of what endures in Puebla is long and wonderful enough that it might astonish a newcomer.

Here's some of what I found, beginning with recent additions and rediscoveries.

Open for business

At the base of the Great Pyramid, the Regional Museum of Cholula opened in 2017 to highlight the area's pre-Hispanic cultures in buildings that used to be a psychiatric hospital. A block away, a tourist train (also opened in 2017) offers service to downtown Puebla for about \$4 each way.



In early 2016, the International Museum of the Baroque opened in the Puebla suburb of Angelopolis; its displays, monitors and projections are housed in a startling building by Japanese architect Toyo Ito. This museum is as minimalist as its contents are elaborate.

The Cableway of Puebla aerial tram opened in 2016 at the city's convention hall, two miles northwest of the city center. Pay about \$4 for a round trip, and from aloft, you'll see that an entire neighborhood's roofs and walls have been painted in blue and white patterns as though they were a vast piece of talavera pottery.

In the central Barrio del Alto, a luxurious Rosewood Hotel opened in early 2017 in a rehabilitated compound of historic buildings. Another luxury lodging, Hotel Cartesiano, opened in late 2017 near Callejon de los Sapos. Also, there are the tunnels. On my first visit, guide Daniel Lima led me to some stairs labeled Pasaje 5 de Mayo and told me how, when he was a kid, "our grandparents told us legends about tunnels under the city" — legends that turned out to be true.

Archaeologists discovered these tunnels in about 2012. Researchers found a series of underground passages, dating back at least 150 years, beneath

some of the city's busiest blocks.

For now, just a few segments, dubbed Los Secretos de Puebla, have been shored up and opened to the public. (And yes, they survived the quake just fine.) Locals and tourists like me strolled through for about \$1.50. Colored lights played on the stone walls, and the P.A. system issued a spooky soundtrack of galloping hooves and war cries, evoking the battle of 1862 when Mexican forces in Puebla won a crucial but temporary victory against the French. To see a little of the city's semi-rural outskirts — and a pair of remarkable colonial churches — combine a day trip to Cholula with a stop at the Church of Santa Maria Tonantzintla, about six miles southwest of Cholula, where you can see lavish details on the interior walls along with sculpted faces that resemble residents of the rustic town.

Then head a mile south to the Church of San Francisco de Acatepec, where you'll find a red-tile-and-talavera facade that mesmerizes with its riotous colors, geometric patterns and mismatched towers. During my February visit, both churches were open while quake repairs were underway.

Mole and more

I ate well — no surprise in a city that calls itself “the kitchen of Mexico.” The stylish Casareyna in Puebla’s Barrio San Francisco served my favorite mole over chicken. (And there’s a chic little Casareyna hotel upstairs.)

At El Mural de los Poblanos, one of the busiest restaurants in the central historic district, a kind waiter talked me into my first chiles en nogada — stuffed poblano chiles in walnut cream sauce dotted with pomegranate seeds. Thumbs up.

At Antigua Taqueria la Oriental, a fixture on the zocalo, or main plaza, since the 1930s, I grabbed a hearty taco arabe (marinated pork wrapped in pita bread instead of a corn tortilla) for about \$1.25.

From street vendor Faustina Juarez, I bought a \$1 quesadilla with mushrooms that brought me deep happiness. At the Parian Market, Anayeli Garcia sold me a \$2 bag of roasted grasshoppers (chapulines) and immediately crossed herself.

“My first sale of the day,” she said in Spanish.

In seven days of meals during two visits, only one underwhelmed me — a bland chicken mole at Nevados, overlooking the zocalo.

I should mention that throughout these meanderings, I felt as safe as I do in Burbank or Glendale, Calif. The Puebla area has seen conflict as government forces confront pipeline-tapping fuel thieves, but it has been largely free of drug-related crime. The U.S. State Department, which uses a 1-4 scale in assessing risks to travelers abroad (4 being the most dangerous), gives the state of Puebla a 2 (“exercise increased caution”).

Another nice thing: I never ran out of discoveries. At the Museo Amparo, I looked at pre-Hispanic sculptures. At the Biblioteca Palafoxiana, which UNESCO says may have been the first public library in the Americas, founded in 1646, I lingered under the arched ceilings, wondering how to say “Hogwartsian” in Spanish.

And at La Pasita in Barrio de los Sapos, the oldest and tiniest cantina in town, I downed a shot of local raisin liqueur. The shot cost about \$1.50. It was sweet and served by an elderly bartender with the mien of a homicide detective. Whatever changes come next for Puebla, this guy will be ready to carry on.



Left: A performer takes a break during a dance presentation. **Right:** Puebla, about 85 miles southeast of Mexico City, has a downtown that includes more than 2,500 colonial buildings and countless characters and vendors.