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Mexico's Freedom Trail



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The spires of La Parroquia and a refreshment stop in San Miguel. [More Photos »](#)

By JONATHAN KANDELL

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MY earliest political memory is of an elementary-school trip five decades ago to the Angel of Independence, the golden winged statue atop a soaring marble column in the heart of Mexico City, where my parents had recently moved from New York. Though I can't remember the exact year of the outing, it was certainly on Sept. 16, the day Mexico celebrates the beginning of its long War of Independence (1810-21) from three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.

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The remains of the original patriots — most notably, Miguel Hidalgo and Ignacio de Allende — were interred at the base of the monument. And I recall the thrill of hearing a politician scream out the Grito de la Independencia, the cry allegedly uttered by Father Hidalgo on Sept. 16, 1810: "Down with bad government and death to the gachupines!" — a pejorative term for colonial-era Spaniards.

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Mexico

Today, as it wrestles with economic troubles and drug wars, Mexico is also commemorating its bicentennial with architectural restorations, concerts, literary events and gala festivals, the bulk of which will take place in September in the formerly silver-rich state of Guanajuato, a three-to-four-hour drive northwest of Mexico City.

It was here, in the communities of Guanajuato, Dolores Hidalgo and San Miguel de Allende — the latter two adding the names of their local heroes after independence — that the revolt against Spain first erupted. Today, irrevocably linked by history and geography, but wholly distinct in character, the three towns remain tourist oases from the dreadful drug-related violence erupting elsewhere in the country. And — thanks to bicentennial fever — they are now linked, along with a dozen others, by the Ruta de la Independencia, broadened and newly paved, making travel among them easier than it's ever been.

In June, guided by historical accounts and childhood nostalgia, I spent a week traveling this zigzagging course, which traces the several hundred miles taken by Hidalgo's largely impoverished insurgents and Captain Allende's more upper-class militia during the ebb and flow of their uprising against the gachupines.

My first stop was Dolores, which, as the place where Hidalgo first called for revolt, is known as the cradle of independence. Even today, his presence permeates the town, from the thriving ceramics industry that he championed to the ubiquitous statues and plaques commemorating his leading role in the independence movement.

Dolores, an insular and provincial town of 55,000 inhabitants, with streets laid out in a simple grid, is not as popular a destination as [San Miguel](#) or Guanajuato. Except for shops selling azulejos (decorative tiles) and Talavera (brightly colored pottery), its commercial activity revolves around whitewashed one-floor establishments selling screws, bolts and replacement parts for antiquated household goods and farm machinery.

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Dominating the architectural landscape is the yellow and pink, richly Baroque-style parish church where Hidalgo, a priest, preached the gospel and insurgency. Known as the Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, the church looms over a large bronze statue of Hidalgo on the broad, tree-shadowed main plaza that evokes memories of Mexican towns in the 1950s. A municipal band struck up a waltz in a stone-and-metal gazebo. Two elderly men stood on a straw mat in bare socks, while a cobbler repaired their shoes. Vendors peddled balloons and wheeled toys. On the edges of the plaza, children and parents cooled off with paper cups of Dolores's traditional shaved ice in flavors like avocado, chili, tequila, beer and cactus leaf, along with lemon and orange for more conventional palates.

I was tempted by the nearby food stands offering charcoal-grilled cobs of corn slathered with red chili paste and shredded local cheese, but instead held out for Dolores's finest culinary outpost, Carnitas Vicente, a simple, clean restaurant facing a traffic-choked avenue about four blocks northeast of the plaza. The carnitas, minced roasted pork wrapped in handmade tortillas and topped with spicy sauce and fresh guacamole, are so enticing that aficionados travel miles to eat them. A dozen truckers lined up at the counter, instructing the chef on what pig parts they favored, while local couples, students from the nearby university and young families occupied the tables.

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My own tour began at Hidalgo's mustard-and-ocher-walled residence on Calle Morelos, a block south of the main plaza. Built in 1779, the house was damaged and looted during the independence wars, and decreed a museum in 1863. On display are independence-era documents and religious articles said to have belonged to Hidalgo. Visitors can also look out at an interior patio off the living room, where Hidalgo staged European music recitals and native dances to which upper-class whites, middle-class mestizos and humble Indian artisans — men and women — were invited. In other rooms, he held smaller, clandestine meetings to discuss books and political tracts banned by the Spanish authorities.

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to climb its triple towers and ring the bells to gather a greater crowd. Once assembled, Hidalgo urged them, too, to join his rebellion, promising an end to taxes, plus modest rewards — a peso daily for those who came on horseback and half that for those on foot.

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RETURNING to the plaza, I headed a block west to the former prison, now the Museo de la Independencia Nacional, where the Hidalgo saga comes to life most vividly. At the entrance of the single-story, dark-yellow building I lined up behind 100 or so blue-uniformed schoolchildren about the same age I was on my own independence outing. “Are you ready to go to jail?” asked their teacher-guide.

Inside, in a dark room on the right, we were greeted by life-size polyurethane effigies of Hidalgo proselytizing to two slightly bewildered prisoners. The scene recounts a key incident that began the independence revolt on that September morning 200 years ago: Hidalgo visited the Dolores prison, where he was father-confessor to the convicts, and persuaded the 80 prisoners to rebel against the jailers and heed his call for a colonial uprising.

From the former jail, I followed the school tour to the parish church on the plaza, the next stop in Hidalgo's revolt. There, the priest rallied his band of freed convicts

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The church, completed in 1778, is considered one of finest examples of colonial architecture in Mexico. Next to its stone portal richly carved with saintly reliefs, an electronic clock counts off the days, hours, minutes and seconds until the 200th anniversary of Hidalgo's cry for independence on the very spot.

With his army of ragged parishioners wielding machetes and spears, Hidalgo then headed — on foot — 12 miles southeast to one of the colony's largest pilgrimage sites, the cavernous church known as the Santuario de Atotonilco. I traveled the route by bus, surveying the semi-arid countryside that in some respects remains unchanged since Hidalgo's time. With the June rains, the craggy, crenellated mountains sprouted green tufts. On fields bordered by cactus and aloe, campesinos gripped plows pulled by oxen or horses. Cows grazed in a dry riverbed as vultures circled above.

Founded in 1750 atop thermal springs used by Chichimecas, Otomís and other tribes for their religious rituals, in Hidalgo's time the Atotonilco sanctuary drew multitudes of Indians and mestizos, who proved ripe recruits for his crusade.

Today, pilgrims still pour into Atotonilco, a village of only about 600 permanent inhabitants, dominated by its enormous sanctuary. Built in the colonial Baroque style with a blue-tiled dome rising behind high walls, it was named a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2008. The day I arrived it was crowded with several hundred pilgrims of all social classes, all men; next week would be reserved for women. In the nave of the sanctuary, they gazed up at murals and frescoes depicting the life of Christ and walked past an alcove with a particularly bloody wooden sculpture of the flayed Jesus. The more severe penitents wore crowns of thorns and flagellated themselves with leather thongs.

More than satiated with religious art and fervor, I boarded another bus for the five-mile ride south from Atotonilco to San Miguel de Allende, which I used as a base for my visit to other points in the state of Guanajuato. San Miguel, with about 60,000 inhabitants, is a richer, more attractive town than Dolores. In a valley bounded by mountains and a lake-size reservoir, it also draws some 10,000 more or less permanent American, Canadian and European residents, who spend several months a year or enjoy full-time retirement here.

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In the hot afternoon I followed the lead of the townspeople, who walked on the shaded side of the cobblestone streets, avoiding the brilliant sun that illuminated the intense blues, purples, golds, greens and reds of the low-slung tile-roof houses and boutique hotels. By sunset, much of the town seemed to congregate around El Jardín, the small, leafy main square, anchored on its south by [La Parroquia](#), the pink Gothic-style parish church that is San Miguel's most famous landmark. Young students hunched over laptops, tourists relaxed on benches and Mexican farmers with straw sombreros and silver-studded belts tried to make themselves heard above the riotous din of a thousand songbirds.

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Thanks to the deeper-pocketed foreigners, San Miguel abounds with delectable restaurants and crowded bars. I headed for the rooftop bar of Mama Mia, just a few feet west of the square, for an early evening tequila and sweeping views of La Parroquia's spires and the gold-and-blue dome of the Templo de las Monjas (the Church of the Nuns) three blocks west.

The next morning, ready to resume my bicentennial tour, I headed to the home of Hidalgo's co-conspirator-turned-rival, Ignacio de Allende. An officer in the royal army, Allende was a member of the elite Basque society of San Miguel, where his family was involved in mining, agriculture, commerce, politics and religious laymen's fraternities. He shared with Hidalgo an increasing dislike of incompetent, corrupt Spanish rule, and the two often met, clandestinely, in various Guanajuato communities in the months before the independence uprising. With Hidalgo's initial support, Allende was named commander of the anti-Spanish

forces. He proposed a militia led by Creoles — Spaniards born in the colony — like himself. But when the Spaniards learned of the independence conspiracy, Hidalgo decided to act first. Snatching military leadership from Allende, Hidalgo and his ragtag hordes quickly took charge of the rebellion. A note on the wall of the Allende house museum leaves little doubt about whom the local caretakers side with nowadays: "Allende became the main instigator of the 1810 insurrection."

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The graceful two-story Allende house, off the southwestern corner of El Jardín, was built in 1764 of limestone and brick with wrought-iron railings. The upper floor is occupied by reception halls, bedchambers and a private chapel. The formal drawing room, decorated with metal chandeliers and religious paintings of the era (though not part of the original household), was the likely meeting place of Allende and his conspirators.

The bitter rivalry between Allende and Hidalgo would reach a nadir in the town of Guanajuato, a 90-minute bus ride away and my final destination.

I have always found Guanajuato, now with a population of 71,000, to be the most mysterious of Mexico's colonial cities. Traffic is diverted through tunnels whose stone ramparts look medieval, while back at street level, stone footbridges and balconies create a European Renaissance aura. Steep, narrow, curving lanes lead to hidden squares with market stalls, oversize churches, quiet inns and unexpected museums – like the three-story house with a salmon-red facade at Positos No. 47, where the painter [Diego Rivera](#) was born in 1886. (I am partial to this museum because Rivera was our neighbor in Mexico City and had me sit as a child for a portrait shortly before he died in 1957.) Among the exhibits at the museum are Rivera portraits of his second wife, [Frida Kahlo](#), and of his longtime friend and collector Dolores Olmedo.

Guanajuato has long nurtured its cultural life, and its Festival Internacional Cervantino is one of Latin America's leading arts jubilees. At this year's festival (Oct. 13 to Nov. 7), performances by the American jazz trumpeter [Wynton Marsalis](#), a Taiwan contemporary dance group, the Scottish soprano Susan Hamilton and a Mexican folkloric ballet group are among the dozens of scheduled programs.

I dropped by the festival's main location, [Teatro Juárez](#), one of Mexico's most beautiful theaters. With a portico of Doric columns and an Art Nouveau foyer, it was meant to evoke the splendor of colonial Guanajuato when it was inaugurated in 1903. Located on a tree-shaded pocket square, it anchors a pedestrian enclave ideal for an outdoor coffee and a respite from Guanajuato's breath-snatching uphill walks.

I took a 15-minute taxi ride up to Guanajuato's other great architectural gem, the spectacular San Cayetano Church, built between 1765 and 1788 by the owner of the nearby [La Valenciana](#) silver mine. The church's exterior glows pink from the famed cantera rosa stone of Guanajuato. Inside, gold leaf covers richly carved swirls of wood.

On my descent back into town, I lunched at Las Mercedes. The sopa negra de huitlacoche (corn smut soup) and chamorro de cerdo (pig's shank in a black bean stew) confirmed the restaurant's reputation for imaginative contemporary riffs on traditional central Mexican dishes. From the wide window next to my table, there is a panoramic view of the city as it cascades down the mountain sides into a canyon.

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It was the same view glimpsed by Hidalgo and his unruly army, now probably 20,000 strong, as they approached Guanajuato on Sept. 28, 1810. The city was difficult to defend and had only a small militia garrison. Rather than flee, the colonial elite chose to cloister itself in the hulking, fortresslike public granary, the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, gambling that the rebels could be kept at bay until reinforcements arrived. Instead, a miner, nicknamed El Pípila, carrying a flagstone on his back as a shield, set fire to the Alhóndiga's huge wood doors, and the mob surged in.

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Among the hundreds of dead were friends and relatives of many upper-class co-conspirators, like Allende, who never forgave Hidalgo for allowing the massacre. Allende refused to fight alongside Hidalgo, and the two divided insurgent forces became easy prey for the royalist army. By mid-1811, both men had been captured, executed and their heads hung from the corners of the outer walls of the Guanajuato granary for a decade until Mexico finally gained independence in 1821. A century later the remains were transferred to Mexico City's newly erected Angel of Independence.

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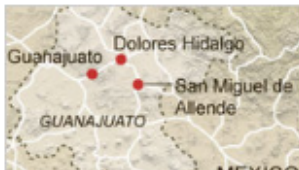
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Today, the Alhóndiga is a museum of Mexican history and art, with little reference to this murderous past. The massive stone outer walls still evoke a citadel, but once inside, the building reveals a neo-Classical beauty, with 40 Doric and Tuscan columns holding up two galleries that wrap around an inner patio of white-and-gray stone slabs. The art collection in the upper gallery reaches across two millennia, from early Indian civilization to the colonial period and up to the 20th century.

I ended my journey along the Ruta de la Independencia with a funicular ride from the town center up a hillside to the 30-foot-high statue of El Pípila, the miner who burned down the Alhóndiga's doors. The rolling urban landscape unfurled below, a tranquil tableau of church domes, tiled roofs and verdant squares.

And then I glanced at the unsettling inscription on the statue's base: "There will be other Alhóndigas to set on fire."

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

At Mexico City's international airport, there are luxury buses that depart frequently on the three-hour route to the city of Querétaro for 220 pesos (about \$18 at 12.4 pesos to the dollar). From the Querétaro bus terminal take a taxi for San Miguel de Allende, a one-hour drive for 300 pesos. Better yet, have your hotel in San Miguel de Allende arrange to have a car service meet you at the airport for \$65 to \$75 (hotels often cite prices in dollars) for one or two people.

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LODGING

If you make San Miguel de Allende your base, stay at one of the small, intimate, well-appointed B&Bs that convey the town's colonial charm. Two of the best, in easy walking distance of the town center, are **Casa Luna** (Quebrada 117; 210-200-8758 from the United States; casaluna.com), with rooms from \$140, and **Susurro** (Recreo 78; 310-943-7163 from the United States; susurro.com.mx), with rooms from \$155. Both places will help make arrangements for comfortable, inexpensive buses to Dolores and Guanajuato, or suggest a car service with an English-speaking driver-guide.

In Guanajuato, the centrally located yet secluded **Alma del Sol** (Calle del Sol 3; 52-473-733-5423; info@casaspirit.com) is a B&B of

similar quality, with rooms at \$145.

DINING

In San Miguel, good, inexpensive Mexican food is available at **La Alborada** (Sollano 11; 52-415-154-9982), whose specialties are pozole and meat tostadas at a price that is unlikely to exceed 120 pesos a person; at **El Correo** (Correo 23; 52-415-152-4951), the enchiladas are first-rate and a meal for one with beer runs about 160 pesos. No reservations necessary at either restaurant.

In Dolores, **Carnitas Vicente** (Norte 65) serves three incomparable pork tacos and a beer for 60 pesos. No reservations necessary.

In Guanajuato, high above the city, **Las Mercedes** (Calle de Arriba 6, San Javier; 52-473-733-9059) serves innovative Mexican cuisine for about 300 pesos a person, including a beer or soft drink.

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