



## Exploring Colonial Mexico©

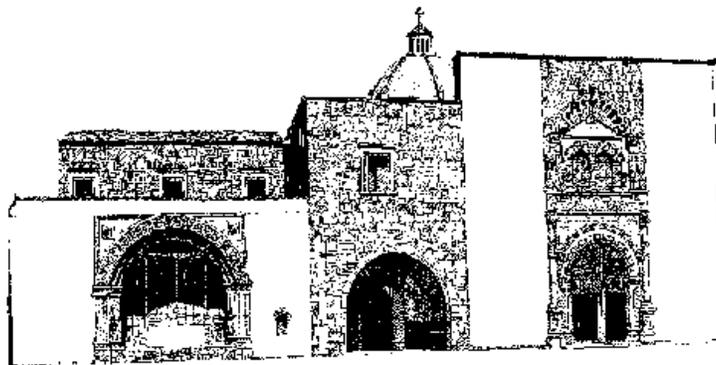
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### **AROUND LAKE PATZCUARO ...**

Following up on our description of the [colonial city of Pátzcuaro](#), we return to explore some of the picturesque indigenous villages and their colonial monuments that lie along the shores and close to Lake Pátzcuaro.



### **Tzintzuntzan**

Among the best known of the lakeside towns is the ancient Tarascan capital of Tzintzuntzan, up on the eastern shore. Tzintzuntzan is noted for its unusual key-shaped pyramids, known as *yácatas*, at least one of which was sacred to the Tarascan hummingbird deity, the sound of whose rhythmic wingbeats gave the town its sonorous name.

Briefly the capital of colonial Michoacán, Tzintzuntzan was also the site of the first Franciscan mission to be founded in the region. Fronted by a park-like atrium of venerable olive trees, reputedly planted in the 1530s by Bishop Vasco de Quiroga, the main monastery still stands, built of red and black volcanic blocks and distinguished by its carved 16th century doorways and windows.

The bold, Plateresque church front is designed in a style derived from Spanish antecedents but imbued with a powerful local flavor. Shells, rosettes and "candelabra" columns frame the openings, dramatically crowned by a broad scalloped canopy which spans the choir window. Shell reliefs and winged angel's heads crowd the great coffered archway of the adjacent open chapel, from which the friars preached to the Indians in the years of "spiritual conquest".

The simple cloister beside the church transports the visitor back in time. Numerous centuries-old artifacts can be found along its arcades, including intricate Moorish ceilings, large colonial canvases, fragmentary frescoes and a renowned painted relief of the Entombment of Christ mounted in one corner.

Across the atrium from the monastery is the grand baroque church of the Virgin of Solitude, beside which stands the old hospital chapel. Originally founded by Bishop Quiroga, the open, arcaded chapel front is also encrusted with shell reliefs, and bears traces of old frescoes along with the date 1619.

Every February, Our Lord of Redemption, a lifesize early colonial *santo* molded from lightweight cornpith, leaves his chapel inside the main church to preside over the colorful celebrations of his feast day, which culminate in the traditional Tarascan "Dance of the Old Men".



*Dancers from Jarácuaro performing the Dance of the Old Men.*  
(drawing by Mark Eager from [Western Mexico: A Travellers Treasury](#) by Tony Burton, by permission)

## The Western Shore

Rustic villages crowd the western shore of Lake Pátzcuaro, each with its own Spanish colonial monument to attract the traveler.

### Jarácuaro

In ancient times, the windswept summit of the former island of **Jarácuaro** was a shrine to the Tarascan moon goddess Xaratanga. Today, the old mission of San Pedro stands on the site. The church facade is encrusted with ancient stone reliefs and statues, while spectacular, icon-like figures of Peter and Paul flank the doorway. Inside, beneath an old wood-beamed ceiling rests the stunning Black Christ of Jarácuaro, an ultra-realistic wooden crucifix carved with corrugated ribs, bulging veins and a scarred head bearing an agonized expression.



A little way along, in the little roadside village of **Uricho**, another folk Plateresque facade graces the church, whose interior is covered by a star-spangled Moorish ceiling with an elegant gilded altarpiece at the east end.

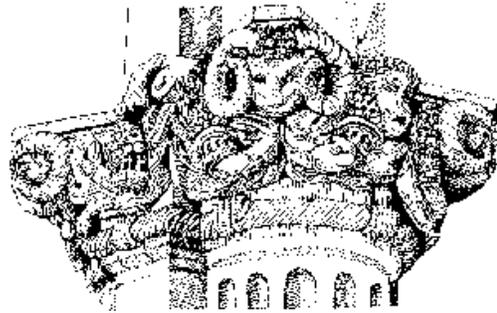
### Erongarícuaro

The star attraction of the western shore is the market town of Erongarícuaro, noted for its picturesque arcaded plaza and the old Franciscan monastery already mentioned elsewhere on this website.

The church lies a few steps from the square, down a cedar-lined avenue. Another broad stone porch, again profusely studded with large shell reliefs and featuring the double choir window typical of the region, frames the entrance. Similiar in style to Tzintzuntzan across the lake, the facade is believed to have been sculpted by the same stonecarvers.

Inside the church, a decorative, wooden ceiling draws the eye towards the altar, above which hangs another naturalistic crucifix, known locally as 'El Señor de la Misericordia'.

A triple arcade frames the monastery entrance beside the church, where intricately carved "rams-head" capitals head the fluted columns. Recessed behind the center arch is the broad paneled Plateresque archway of the old open chapel. Along its frieze, medallions of the Sacred Heart alternate with the crossed keys of St. Peter.



Cut blocks of dark, reddish basalt, similiar to those of the porch and sanctuary arch of the church, outline the stocky arcades of the cloister. Archaic doorways with pointed, flattened arches open into the surrounding conventual rooms. At the rear, an arcaded *mirador* commands a panoramic view across the monastery gardens to the misty islands and shimmering waters of the Lake Pátzcuaro beyond.

Visitors who continue along the western shore en route to the busy crafts village of **Quiroga** on the north side of the lake, will pass several indigenous villages. Perhaps the most interesting of these is **Puácaro**, whose narrow streets lead to a typical early Michoacán mission. The scalloped Moorish doorway, freestanding tower, and colonnaded priest's quarters with rustic overhanging eaves face a lakeside plaza with a breathtaking vista across the lake.

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*For more information on colonial Michoacán and Lake Pátzcuaro consult our [archive](#) and our comprehensive guidebook to West Mexico: [Blue Lakes & Silver Cities](#).*

*We welcome your comments.*

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