

Mexico—The Essentials



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THE PORFIRIAN CAPITAL

Porfirio Díaz, when he took the presidency in 1876, recast Mexico City as a showcase. He and Antonio Escandón, a railway promoter and financier, recognized that Paris as rebuilt by Baron Haussmann following the whims of Napoleon III had set the standard for urban progress. Haussmann for 15 years demolished and rebuilt the old medieval city and added new parks and boulevards. Maximilian and Carlota had adopted the new Paris as their model, and Díaz and Escandón decided to continue a Mexican version of Haussmann's city. They added to Paseo de la Reforma a ceremonial boulevard by lining it with civic monuments and statues of heroes. New trees and gardens in the French or Italian style emulated Parisian charms. Vacant land on both sides of the extended boulevard allowed for the construction of new, elegant neighborhoods beyond the old colonial center, much like Paris's West End. The officials celebrated Chapultepec Park, with its tranquil forest, bridle paths, and contoured lake for boating. The commitment to beautification extended to the Zócalo, which was transformed into a botanical oasis with trees, plants, flowers, and park benches.

Electricity arrived in 1882 and by 1900 served some 30,000 houses. Electric trams belonging to the Compañía de Ferrocarriles del Distrito Federal in 1896 began providing service to the new suburbs. Two years later, with new English ownership and a new name, Tranvías Eléctricos de México, the streetcars ended the era of horse-drawn trams and established the 26-mile Guadalupe-San Angel line. These two outlying villages on opposite sides of town became part of the city proper. Automobiles introduced in 1903 introduced another stage in transportation.

struction of new districts such as Roma and Condesa added new neighborhoods to the capital with distinctive communities. Guadalupe, with the shrine to the Virgin, was a pilgrimage town, San Angel remained a weekend retreat, Roma became the expression of bourgeois lifestyle, and Condesa, with its racecourse, quickly became a wealthy suburb of large estates. The collection of unique barrios expanded with the growth of the capital.

Díaz used the city as a set to impress foreign businessmen and prominent women visitors. He received important guests such as railroad magnate Collis Huntington in Chapultepec Castle, his official residence situated atop the elegant park. For lunch or dinner, they could eat at the residence or at one of three fine restaurants: the exquisitely appointed Elysian Tivoli on the Paseo de la Reforma with its own private garden and an attached casino, or the Maison Dorée and Fonda de Recamier, each with a French chef, waiters attired as in Paris, and superb French wine lists. Moreover, elite families employed French chefs as well whom they lent for meals offered on special occasions to foreign guests; it became a sign of superior graciousness. When Ignacio de la Torre y Mier finally enticed the celebrated French chef Sylvain Daumont to perform in his personal kitchen, securing an invitation to dine became an elite gastronomical objective. President Díaz borrowed Chef Daumont frequently to impress major foreign visitors.

Besides dining, the capital's elite adopted the sport of kings using the new constructed oval racetrack modeled after that of Chantilly on the outskirts of Paris. The aristocratic Jockey Club gathered economic and political leaders and prominent foreigners, such as one of its cofounders, Englishman Richard Honey, to play at the gaming tables, demonstrate their wealth and sophistication amid an elegant décor, and to establish useful friendships.