

## Same war, different views

Two Richmond, Va., museums devoted to the Civil War offer contrasting views of America's deadliest conflict

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Spiraling stairways that lead nowhere and fanciful flower-shaped towers stand as silent sentinels at the entry of Las Pozas.



Sir Edward James' concrete flowers and mosaic domes appear throughout Las Pozas, his fantasy-filled garden at Xilitla in San Luis Potosí.

# Jungle wonderland

Surrealist's dream becomes legend in Mexican sculpture garden

**X**ILITLA, Mexico — Standing under a gigantic blue mushroom, I peer back through the man-sized orb of the Queen's Ring; past the mosaic serpents that balance on their tails, standing guard over this place; past the swirl of Salvador Dali's mustache; and past the spiraling stairways stark against the sunny sky — I confess I feel a bit like Alice. And I haven't even tasted the mushroom.

Deep within the tropical Huastec jungle, surrounded by waterfalls, springs and natural aquamarine pools, a surrealist's dream greets the eye: staircases that lead to nowhere; two-story orchids atop fanciful columns; Snow White's mirror and Jonah's whale; a bamboo palace and a footstool for a giant.

Seventy years ago, Sir Edward James, a disenchanted heir of British nobility, was on a road trip through rural Mexico when he heard about a place where orchids grew wild in the

forest. He took a road trip through the backcountry of these lush highlands and fell in love with them. He stopped near the village of Xilitla to bathe in a clear blue pool at the foot of a crashing waterfall, as the story goes, and when he stepped out on the banks, a thousand monarch butterflies alighted on his naked body. Overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment, he took it as a sign from God that he was to stay here and create something magnificent.

Las Pozas, as he named this moss-covered concrete fantasy rising from the jungle, became his life's work, and changed the character of this remote corner of Mexico's Sierra Madre forever: Xilitla (pronounced He-LEET-la) would have likely continued as a tiny, picturesque but unremarkable mountain village like any of the others in these parts had it not been for the presence of James, the eccentric Englishman who took up residence here in the

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A pair of brightly painted mushrooms tower overhead along a walkway.



'Ecotourists' disembark and gather on a rock to enjoy the magnificence of Tamul, a 300-foot waterfall on the Tampoán River.

# Wandering the Huasteca

A little-known gem awaits lovers of nature and indigenous culture

**L**A MORENA, Mexico — Afloat in a rickety oversized wooden canoe, rowing upstream on the Tampoán River, I rounded a corner and caught my breath.

Gushing out of the fern-covered hillside on the right was a series of crystalline waterfalls; on the left, a towering limestone cliff. The river bounced and rippled below us as we rowed onward, past the Cueva de las Aguas, a cavern where stalactites ornament the ceiling over the heads of merrily splashing swimmers. Past another towering set of cliffs, past the flash of a bright, yellow-breasted meadowlark and a grazing herd of cattle; through a lush green forest we rowed onward, finally rounding a curve where our prize emerged in view.

This is Tamul, or Place of the Thundering Noise, where a towering waterfall cascades more than 300 feet from misty heights surrounded in greenery. It took us four hours to get here, over impossibly cratered dirt roads and against a strong current, but as I sat on the rock in the middle of Río Tampoán and listened to the crashing waters, I knew I had made the right choice. This is Huasteca country at its best.

The Huasteca (pronounced wa-ste-ka) region of Mexico, just a day's drive south of the Texas border, is named for the proud and colorful Huastec people who still retain many of their traditional ways. The Huasteca spans the remote mountainous interior of four Mexican states: San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Hidalgo and Tamaulipas. It was the Huasteca Potosina (of San Luis Potosí) that I'd heard so much about from my Mexican friends, so it was here that we had decided to explore.



The Huastec jungle is home to a vast number of species, many of which are found nowhere else.

The offerings for nature-lovers and cultural travelers in these parts are beyond abundant. Rappelling, rafting, caving and bird-watching are first-rate. Waterfalls and springs, archaeological sites and natural wonders are everywhere. Quaint colonial-style villages dot the countryside, where the indigenous inhabitants can still be seen in their native dress. And since we're in coffee-growing country, it's easy to catch a quick tour of a coffee cooperative and see how America's favorite beverage is made.

Oddly, the vast majority of the tourists we encountered here were Mexican or European. Only once, in our hotel in Ciudad Valles, did I come across a group of American tourists, leading me to conclude that this region is a relatively undiscovered gem. English-speaking tour guides and service employees are a little harder to find, which makes advance planning and a handy phrase book necessary for non-Spanish speaking travel-

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## Huasteca on video

Join Travel Editor Tracy Barnett and videographer/photographer Altug Icilensu in a multimedia journey through the Huasteca. Visit three audio-video slideshows full of surprises. **Keyword:** Travel



Monolith 32, a carved stele discovered recently at Tamtoc, features three women and is believed to be a lunar calendar.

## TAMTOC

An ancient city in the Huastec jungle is raising big questions in archaeological circles — and it's just beginning to reveal its secrets about a sophisticated culture where the women ruled alongside the men. 5L



Surprising works of whimsy fill El Castillo.

## EL CASTILLO

For visitors to Las Pozas, there's no better place to stay than the former home of its creator, El Castillo. 4L



Traditional temezcal purification ceremonies are conducted in the sweat lodge at Taninul.

## TANINUL

This former hacienda was a playground for the rich in its heyday. Now it's a departure point for adventure in the Huasteca Potosina, with high-end spa services, regional cuisine and rural relaxation in reach for those on a budget. 5L