

## TRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF *EL CAUDILLO*

### Hernán Cortés places in Spain, the West Indies and Mexico



In February 1519, Hernán Cortés de Monroy y Pizarro set sail from Cuba to Mexico, with 11 ships, 550 men, 16 horses, a small number of canons and numerous dogs, arquebuses and crossbows. Four months later, Cortés founded Villa Rica de la Veracruz, the first city with the first city council on the American continent. One of the most extreme events in world history, if not most cruel, was to unfold. The conquistadores set course for the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, where they were received by Montezuma II on November 8<sup>th</sup> 1519. The conquistadores would capture and kill the Aztec emperors, destroy the Aztec civilization and claim the empire for Spain.

Werner Hermans is tracing the footsteps of *El Caudillo*, from his birthplace Medellín, Extremadura to the Hospital de Jesús Nazareno in Mexico City, using Hugh Thomas's monumental work *Conquest; Montezuma, Cortés and the fall of Old Mexico* (1994). The route to Tenochtitlan crossed mountain passes, volcanoes and harsh salty deserts. Nowadays one also finds himself in the midst of the Veracruz seaport, abandoned ruins, near nuclear plants and in the suburban sprawl of the Distrito Federal. Although Hugh Thomas gives a very detailed account of the historic route, tangible memories are hard to find and being a controversial person in Mexican history, representations and monuments are few.

## SPAIN

- **Medellín** - *The birthplace of Hernán Cortés (1485). There's a stone monument marking the spot where the house in which he was born once stood. He was baptized in a church still standing, Iglesia de San Martín. The village is much the same as it was during the early life of Cortés. Also remaining is the Castle of Medellín, where Queen Isabella lived as a child. The main square bears an imposing statue of El Caudillo.*
- **Badajoz**
- **Trujillo**
- **Salamanca** - *At the age of twelve Cortés went to Salamanca where he lived (1496-1501) and attended university.*
- **Valencia** – *Cortés went to Valencia around 1502, with plans to take a ship to Naples. He never went to Italy.*
- **Valladolid**
- **Sevilla** - *Medieval Sevilla was the capital of the Crown of Castile. The 'Alcázar' was the Castilian royal residence; it must have been one of the places where Cortés met Charles V. All goods imported from the New World had to pass through the Casa de Contratación before being distributed throughout the rest of Spain. It maintained secret information on trade routes and new discoveries, licensed captains and administered commercial law.*
- **Sanlúcar de Barrameda** – *The point of departure for various conquistadors (e.g. Christopher Columbus's third voyage in 1498 and Magellan in 1519). Cortés embarked from Sanlúcar de Barrameda for the West Indies in the summer of 1506.*



- **Azúa de Compostela** - Azúa was an early Spanish village founded in 1504 by Velazquez. It was Cortés's main residence in Hispaniola and he lived and worked here as a notary for several years. The village was plundered by pirates, destroyed by earthquakes and rebuilt several kilometers to the north, where the village is now. In Pueblo Viejo some ruins of the early colonial settlement can be found.
- **Daiguao**

## CUBA

- **Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Baracoa** - Cortés joined Velazquez in his conquest of Cuba in 1511. Asunción de Baracoa was the first Spanish capital on Cuba and Cortés's first settlement on the island, he was a notary here and owned cattle.
- **Bocas de Bany** - Cortés almost drowned here, when his canoe capsized at night.
- **Cuvunacan** - After gold was found in a river at Cuvunacan, El Caudillo gained some wealth.
- **Santiago de Cuba** - The headquarters of Castilian government on Cuba was moved from Baracoa to Santiago. Cortés became secretary for Governor Velázquez and was appointed municipal magistrate (*alcalde*) of Santiago. Velázquez's house is still there; the ground floor was the commercial part of the house, where Velazquez maintained his offices and horse carriages were kept..
- **Bayamo**
- **Macaca** - probably the modern Pílon
- **Trinidad** - From Trinidad Cortés was active in purchasing (more) military stores and provisions and even ordered to seize a Spanish mercantile ship already on its way to Darien, all against the will of Velazquez, the Governor in Santiago. Landing near La Boca?
- **Sancti Spiritus**
- **Archipelago Los Jardines de la Reina** - The expedition got lost here.
- **San Cristobal de la Habana** - After the archipelago, Cortés landed at La Habana, a village loyal to Velazquez. It was on the shores of the Mayabeque river near its former outlet, 50 kilometres south of present day Havana.
- **Cabo Corrientes** - Before sailing to Yucatán, the expedition gathered just off Cuba's west coast near Cabo Corrientes in a port called Guaniguanico.

## MEXICO

### Quintana Roo

- **Cozumel** - At Cozumel the expedition saw the first Mayan pyramids. Here they also heard reports of two other white men living in Yucatán, who turned out to be the survivors of a Spanish shipwreck that had occurred in 1511. One of them, Gerónimo de Aguilar, joined the expedition. Because of his survival, Cortés now had a translator: Aguilar spoke fluent Yucatec Mayan.
- **Isla de Mujeres** - The expedition stopped at Isla de Mujeres to take on water and salt and wait for favourable winds to take them past Cabo Catoche.
- **Cabo Catoche**

### Campeche

- **Puerto Deseado** - Port used by the early expeditions on a narrow opening to the Laguna de Términos. It was in the position of what is now Boca Real. Here the ship was found that was missing due to bad weather on the first night the expedition left Cuba.

## Tabasco

- **Rio Usumacinta**
- **Rio Grijalva** - After exploring the mouth of Rio Usumacinta, the fleet arrived at Rio Grijalva March 1519. They explored the river in smaller boats, known as brigantines.
- **Potonchan** - Potonchan was an important Mayan commercial centre near the mouth of Rio Grijalva. The river changed course since the 16<sup>th</sup> century but the town must have been approximately where the town of Frontera is now. At Potonchan the conquistadores defeated a Mayan tribe. The indians brought gifts to El Caudillo, the most valuable of which was a Nahuatl slave woman named Malinali (known as La Malinche) who also spoke Chontal Mayan dialect. Now Cortés could speak Spanish to Aquilar, who in turn would speak to Malinali in Mayan, who could translate this in Nahuatl and speak to the Aztecs. Malinali was baptized Marina, learned Spanish, became Cortés's mistress and bore him his first son Martin, one of the first 'mestizos'.

Illustration 2. 'La Ruta Cortés' overland, between San Juan de Ulúa (Veracruz) and Tenochtitlan (Mexico City)



## Veracruz

- **Isla de Sacrificios** - Cortés's first landing after reaching the Veracruz coast he would later set foot on. The island was named after the remains of human sacrifice the expedition found here. The island is currently closed to the public.
- **San Juan de Ulúa** - Island of second landing and first contact with Montezuma's envoys. It became the main entry point for newcomers to Mexico. Nowadays, San Juan de Ulúa consists of a chapel and a fortress, surrounded by the port facilities of modern Veracruz.
- **Chalchicueyecan**
- **Cempoala** - Cempoala was Cortés's first ally against the Aztecs. Cortés returned here from Tenochtitlan in May 1520 to defeat a rival Spanish expedition under command of Pánfilo de Narváez that was sent to arrest him by the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez. Nowadays Cempoala is a well maintained archeological site. The conquistadores lodged in "Las Chimeneas" on their first visit. The Templo Mayor was Pánfilo de Narváez's headquarters.
- **Quiahuitztlán** - Closest indian town to Villa Rica de la Veracruz. At the Totonac town Quiahuitztlán Cortés told the emperor not to pay duties to Montezuma anymore. The Quiahuitztlán ruins can still be seen, superbly situated on a hill overlooking the coast.
- **Tizapancingo** - Hill town near Cempoala where Aztec tax-collectors kept garrison. Destroyed by conquistadores on request of the Cempoalan emperor.

- **Villa Rica de la Veracruz** - Cortés founded the first city with the first city council on the American continent. In 1519 the expedition built a (wooden) church, a town hall, the barracks, a slaughterhouse and a prison around a plaza, a sandy square facing the sea, where stocks were placed. Cortés is said to have dug the foundations of a fortress of stone himself. Cortés scuttled most of his ships here before advancing to Tenochtitlan, thus ceasing a rise in mutiny of several his own men disagreeing with his plans and planning to go back to Cuba. Later, all the treasure obtained (featherwork, gold, cotton and precious stones) were gathered at the plaza to be redistributed. Nowadays there are traces of a fort and a church.
- **La Antigua Veracruz** – In La Antigua ruins of a (second?) Castillian settlement can be found, dating from after the conquest of Tenochtitlan. In 1523 a customhouse, now overgrown and commonly called Casa Cortés, and Edificio del Cabild (ayuntamiento) were built. La Antigua is not mentioned by Hugh Thomas.
- **Jalapa** - Xallapan
- **Coatepec**
- **Xicochimalco** - This indian fortress town was built higher up from the current village. Ruins?
- **Ixguacan** – Village in the elevated area between the volcanoes Cofre de Perote (4282m) and Pico de Orizaba (Citlaltepēt, 5636m).
- **Pass of Nombre Dios** - The expedition climbed along the edge of Perote over a pass they gave the name Nombre de Dios. The path is traceable nowadays but not much travelled. It's a cold and misty journey and several of the Cuban Indian servants died of cold. Descending the pass, the expedition saw a barren plain dominated by a salt lake and they decided to travel round it to the north.
- **Altatonga**
- **Xalacingo**
- **Ahuilizapan (Orizaba)** - In 1520, Diego Velazquez sent Pánfilo de Narváez to Mexico with a large expedition of ships and Spanish troops, with instructions to bring Cortés back, dead or alive. Cortés got back to Cempoala from Tenochtitlan (at that time still not conquered) not via Cofre de Perote but by the favourite route of the Aztecs. The route went via **Tanpaniguita** and **Ahuilizapan**.

## Puebla

- **Tezuitlan**
- **Tlatlauquitepec** - After leaving Tlatlauquitepec, the expedition turned south along a ridge and another high pass, the **Pass of La Leña**.
- **Zautla**

## Tlaxcala

- **Iztaquimaxtitlan** - Aztec garrison town
- **Atotonilco** - A few miles south of Iztaquimaxtitlan there was a stone wall. This fortification ran for several miles, between two mountain tops. The spot where the expedition encountered it was probably at or near Atotonilco. Ruins?
- **Tzompachtepetil**
- **Tecoac**
- **Tzompantzinco**
- **Tizatlan** – Tizatlan was probably the most important Tlaxcalan city. The Tlaxcalans fought the conquistadores at first, but later became their most important allies against the Aztecs. Nowadays there's a small archeological site.
- **La Malinche** - Tlaxcala is on the slopes of the inactive volcano Matlalcueyatl (4503m). The Spanish changed its name to Malinche, after Malinalli, the Nahuatl translator and Cortés's mistress.

## Puebla

- **Cholula** - Cortés traveled here at Montezuma's request but the Aztecs set an ambush. The Tlaxcalan allies tipped off Cortés and the Spanish struck first. Within one day, 6000 Cholulans were killed and the Tlaxcalans looted the city. Several churches were ordered to be built here.
- **Huexotzinco** - This town decided to ally itself with the Spanish against the Aztecs in 1520.
- **Calpan**
- **Paso de Cortés** - Pass between the volcanoes Iztaccíhuatl (5286m) and Popocatepetl (5452m). El Caudillo chose the difficult path between the volcanoes to approach Tenochtitlan, as it was the one least likely to be expected by the Aztecs. Moreover, Popo was very active at the time and in November the pass was cold and misty. Nowadays it's the site of a monument with a relief of Cortés. Approaching from Cholula, it's still for much of the way merely a dirt track.
- **Huehuecalco** - From Huehuecalco the Castilians saw the valley of Mexico for the first time, as the top of the sierra had good weather that day. They saw a blue lake, many villages, green cultivated fields of maize and beans and Tenochtitlan in the distance.
- **Amecameca**

## Mexico D.F.

- **Chalco** - In Chalca territory the Castilians were met by one of the delegations from Montezuma. It was led by an Aztec nobleman who was instructed by Montezuma to dress as the emperor and to pretend to be him. Chalco, with Xochimilco was the richest agricultural area of the valley of Mexico, based on a most unusual feature, the so called floating gardens or "chinampas". Chinampas were intensely cultivated artificial islands built of mud. Nowadays, the valley is covered by the suburban sprawl of Mexico City but remnants of the chinampas can still be seen at Xochimilco, 18 kilometres south of downtown.
- **Ayotzingo**
- **Mixquic**
- **Xochimilco** - See Chalco
- **Iztapalapa** - At the beginning of the causeway leading to Iztapalapa Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma II met for the first time (See Iglesia y Hospital de Jesús Nazareno).
- **Mexicaltzingo**
- **Tenochtitlan** - Cortés enters Tenochtitlan on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1519 for the first time. The Aztecs surrendered on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1521, after a siege of eight months and ravaged by the effects of smallpox brought by the Europeans. After Aztec structures were destroyed, Cortés built the Palacio Nacional with a large courtyard where visitors were entertained with Mexico's first bull fights. Diego Rivera's murals inside the palace depict Cortés and his conquest; Ruins of Templo Mayor; etc.
- Following the death of the Aztec king Montezuma on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1520, Hernán Cortés and his army fought their way out of the Mexican capital at Tenochtitlan. Many conquistadores and Indian allies died and treasure was lost in the escape from Tenochtitlan. This night is known as Noche Triste. The route to Tlaxcala was **Popotla, Tacuba, Los Remedias, Calacoyacan, Atizapan, Teocahueyacan, Tepotzotlan, Citlaaltepec, Otumba, Apan, Hueyotlipan, Huiloapan**. At Otumba there was another battle in which the Aztecs were defeated, before finally reaching Tlaxcala.
- **Acatzingo**
- **Tepeaca/Segura de la Frontera** - The Castilians and their Tlaxcalan allies attacked and ravaged this hilltop fortress town in August 1520. In the centre of the fortress a new town was founded, which became the new army headquarters. In Segura de la frontera, Cortés plotted the siege of Tenochtitlan and the eventual destruction of the Aztec Empire in 1521. Cortés's second letter to Charles V was written here. The modern town of Tepeaca was relocated to the foot of its hill in 1543. Ruins?

Aftermath:

- **Coyoacan** - Cortés base after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. The Casa de Cortés, on plaza Hidalgo, was the headquarters of the Marquesado del valle de Oaxaca, the Cortés family's lands. It is said that in this house the Spanish tortured (foot-burning) the defeated Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc to make him reveal the whereabouts of treasure.
- **Xicoténcatl** - A monument, known as "Monumento al Mestizaje" by Julián Martínez was commissioned to be put in the Zocalo of Coyoacan, near the place of his country house, but it had to be removed to a little known park, the Jardín Xicoténcatl, Barrio de San Diego Churubusco. The statue depicts Cortés, Malinali and their son Martín.
- **San Esteban del Puerto/Pánuco** - Place where Cortés defeated the native Huastecs in 1523 and prevailed over rebellious Huastecs and Spanish rivals.
- **Santa María Zoquiapan**
- **San Juan Moyotla**
- **San Sebastian Atzacualco**
- **San Pablo Cuepopan**
- **Ecatepec**
- **La Rambla near Aqualco** - Santa Ana in the river Ayagualulco east of Coatzacoalcos. Cortés Spanish wife arrived here unannounced.
- **Tlaltenango** - Cortés founded Iglesia de San Jose. First sugar mill?
- **Cuilapan** - In 1529, Cortés was granted the title "Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca" by the Castilian Crown. The marquisate stretched from Mexico City to Oaxaca. Cortés was unable to extend his domain into the present day city of Oaxaca but the nearby town of Cuilapan became a Spanish "cabecera" (seat) and one of his favorite outposts. Sections remain of an imposing early colonial structure facing the main plaza. Still known locally as the Casa de Cortés, it is reliably believed to be an authentic residence of the conquistador. Among the carvings there's a plaque thought to represent the aristocratic coat of arms granted to Cortés by Charles V. In the centre escutcheon the two-headed imperial eagle of the Hapsburgs and the royal lion on the left are quartered with a relief of Tenochtitlan, and three crowns representing the Aztec kings Montezuma, Cuauhtemoc and Cuitlahuac. The chained heads of captives surrounding the inner shield are thought to symbolize the vanquished native lords of the lakeside cities around Tenochtitlan (Source: Richard D. Perry, *Exploring colonial Oaxaca*, 2006).



- **Cuauhnáhuac/Cuernavaca** – Cuernavaca was Cortés's main residence after the conquest until his second and final return to Spain in 1540. His *palacio*, built on the base of a destroyed pyramid, is still there. The pyramid's stones were also used in the cathedral de la Asunción built by Cortés to double as a fortress, with cannons mounted above the buttresses. There is a statue by Sebastián Aparicio in Cuernavaca in former hotel "El casino de la selva". Cortés is barely recognizable, so it sparked little interest. The hotel was closed to make a commercial centre, and the statue was put out of public display.
- **Amatitlan**
- **Atlacomulco** - the Hacienda de San Antonio Atlacomulco was established by Cortés as one of the first sugar plantations in Mexico.
- **San Francisco in Texcoco** (remains 2)
- **San Francisco in Mexico City** (remains 3)
- **Iglesia y Hospital de Jesús Nazareno** – (remains 4) supposedly the spot where Cortés and Moctezuma II met for the first time, at the beginning of the causeway leading to Iztapalapa. Cortés ordered the hospital (still in operation) built to tend to soldiers wounded fighting with the Aztecs. His remains were placed here in 1774. There's a small bronze plaque with Cortés's coat of arms that indicates the tomb.

#### Other

- Not mentioned in this list are Cortés's expeditions to Honduras, Baja California and Algiers. Cortés discovered and named California in 1536. Three years later Francisco de Ulloa in 1539 discovered the Gulf of California and named it **Sea of Cortés**. In Honduras, Hernán Cortés founded the town of La Natividad in 1524. Later, it was renamed Puerto Caballos and in 1869 the town changed its name to **Puerto Cortés**.
- In 1794, when Cortés's bones were moved to the Hospital de Jesús Nazareno, Manuel Tolsá made a statue and a mausoleum. In 1823, after the independence of México, the mausoleum was removed, and the statue and the coat of arms were sent to Palermo, Italy, to be protected by the Duke of Terranova. The bones were secretly left behind hidden somewhere in the Jesús Nazareno complex, only to be found in 1947. Nowadays there's a copy of the bust in the Hospital de Jesús Nazareno; the original one can be found in **Napoli**, in the Villa Pignatelli.
- A long list of goods obtained by the Spanish expeditions was sent to Europe. Among them was a featherwork headdress, which is now on display in the Museum of Ethnology in **Vienna**. It consists of over 450 tail feathers of the resplendent quetzal, as well as of other tropical birds. Legends link this featherwork to Montezuma II. According to these, Cortés sent this 'gift' to his sovereign Charles I of Spain, who passed it on to relatives in Austria, around 1524. None of these statements can be proven. The featherwork has long been a source of dispute between Austria and Mexico, as no similar pieces remain in Mexico.

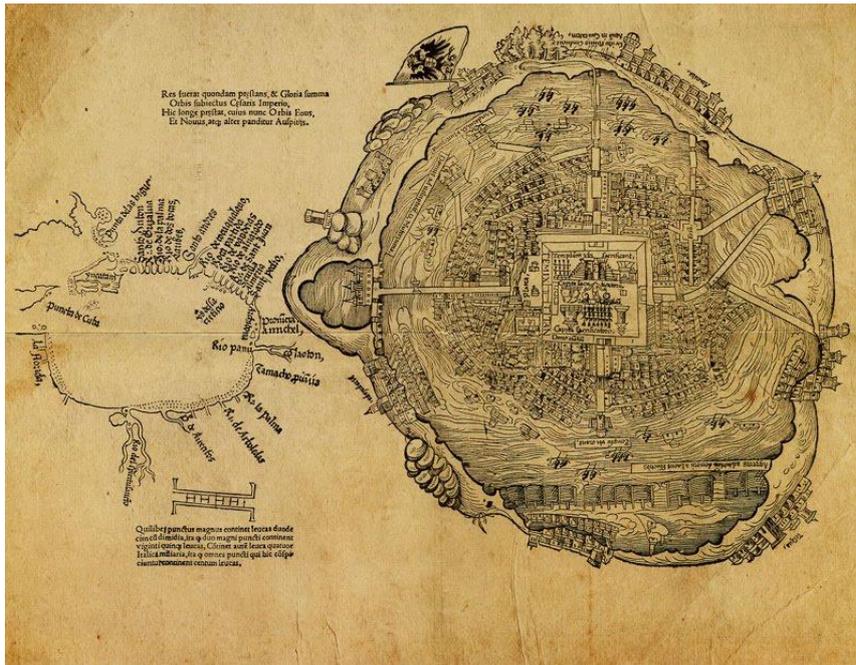


Illustration 4. This map of Tenochtitlan was published in Nurnberg in 1524 to illustrate the second letter Cortés sent to Charles V. The letter, written in Tepeaca, appeared under the title 'Praelara Ferdinandi de Nova Maris Oceani Hispania Narratio'. The map is woodcut and made by an anonymous European engraver. Many details may have been drawn from the accounts of Cortés and his native informants, the architecture and overall design follow the conventions of European city plans of the same age.



Illustration 5. The 'Relación Geográfica' map of Cempoala, 1580. Cempoala was the expeditions first ally against the Aztecs. Cortés returned here from Tenochtitlan in May 1520 to defeat the rival Spanish expedition sent to arrest him by the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez. Cempoala nowadays is a relatively unknown but well maintained archeological site where many ruins related to the early years of conquest can be seen. This map is the result of a survey, commissioned by king Philip II, asking for local maps and descriptions of places. Many maps, like this one, were painted by indigenous artists. A large glyph depicts the indigenous place name of Cempoala; to the left is the local Franciscan monastery. The landscape is thickly sown with indigenous toponyms and images of native leaders. (source: B.E. Mundy, *The mapping of New Spain; indigenous cartography and the maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, 1996)