

SOUL OF MEXICO TOURS

Introducing La Ruta Don Vasco – A brief History

La Ruta Don Vasco traverses a region of Michoacan's highlands famed for indigenous Purepecha towns and villages that were deeply influenced by the first Bishop of Michoacan, Don Vasco de Quiroga of Spain.

Following the ruthless rule of Nuno Beltran de Guzman, who was later shackled and exiled to Spain in 1537 following charges of treason and war crimes against local indigenous populations, Quiroga took an interest in restoring order among indigenous populations in the state of Michoacan, where unrest and rebellions persisted. He was appointed first Bishop of Michoacan in 1536.

As a lawyer and judge who had studied canon law and theology, Quiroga had become deeply inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in 1516. He had founded the town of Santa Fe while in Mexico City, which was his first attempt at building what he called a *Pueblo Hospital*, employing strategies outlined in More's fictional and satirical novel. Upon arriving in Michoacan, Quiroga founded Santa Fe de Laguna as a Pueblo Hospital town, and then set about congregating indigenous populations in various towns using this concept. In order to convince the locals to trust him and come out of hiding, Quiroga utilized his knowledge of the local culture. One such example was his recognition that the Purepecha peoples were proficient metal workers, having even inlaid copper with precious metals such as gold. He convinced the locals to join him in the town of Santa Clara del Cobre, a town that remains very famous in Mexico for the skilled maestro's who fashion copper into jewellery, pens, cooking pots and kettles, ornate vases, sinks and even bathtubs. Quiroga promised the people exclusive rights to the *caso*, which is a copper pot used for cooking *carnitas* (pork) and *chicharonnes* (pig skins). The town of Santa Clara del Cobre remains one of the most visited of villages along La Ruta Don Vasco, and one whose doorways glimmer with the warm hue of shiny copper wares, attracting art collectors from all over the world.

The Pueblo Hospital model allowed Quiroga the ability to easily convert large populations at once, for everyone was congregated in one community. By adopting certain local beliefs and rituals into his Catholic teachings, there remains certain aspects of indigenous spiritualism among the local Purepecha's here today. Since the 1960's,

there have also been repatriation efforts among indigenous communities to bring back some of their ancient customs, such as the revitalization of the fire ball game. During Dia de Muertos, one might catch a glimpse of this seemingly dangerous game, which involves a burning ball being struck by clubs that resemble hockey sticks. Of course, Dia de Muertos itself is an important example of an indigenous observance that became fused with Catholicism. Among the Christian crosses and biblical quotes, during Muertos the graveyards are an homage to Purepecha traditions, including the pre-Hispanic altars, marigold arches and pathways, and food offerings carefully prepared for the spirits of the deceased.

Today, Pueblo Hospital is mostly a quiet affair in the villages of La Ruta Don Vasco. In Santa Clara del Cobre, 52 families are appointed to the Pueblo Hospital system at the beginning of each year. For one week, each family volunteers their time to work on church restorations and cooking food for a community meal, one of which is held weekly. The villagers bring each family gifts and money, to cover their loss of income for this week. It is said the villagers are very generous, as everyone knows it will be their turn at some point. If you would like to observe the beauty of Pueblo Hospital, the best village to visit is Santa Fe de Laguna. Here, the locals invite visitors to participate to this day – and this remains quite special, considering Santa Fe de Laguna is not only the first Pueblo Hospital Quiroga founded in the Lake Patzcuaro region, it is also where some of his personal belongings remain under lock and key. The villagers here are very proud of their history, and consider Quiroga a venerated saint. If you would like to observe Pueblo Hospital during your explorations of this region, please contact us for more information before choosing your dates.

Popular belief is that Quiroga died at the age of 95, but historians now believe he was 86. Vasco de Quiroga is still fondly called *Tata Quiroga* (Father Quiroga) by many locals, and he is interred in the Basilica in Patzcuaro.

Your journey through La Ruta Don Vasco will introduce you to many different handicrafts, with specific association to the towns where they are crafted. You will visit the copper town of Santa Clara del Cobre, visit a pottery studio and market full of textiles in Tzintzuntzan, the Catrina town of Capula, which was formerly famed for terracotta cooking wares covered with dot-flower designs. You will visit a mask maker in Tocuaro, and sample Mezcal in Opongio. We strive to introduce our guests to many aspects of the local culture during this tour, including the ancient Purepcha capital of Tzintzuntzan, and a boat ride to Isla de Janitzio.

