

Mexican town revolutionizes image

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DOLORES HIDALGO - For 194 years, this little town has been famous as ground zero for the Mexican War of Independence, the site of a rebellion that will be celebrated today by Mexicans from Chiapas to Chandler.

There's only one problem, according to residents and tourism officials: The town is famous only among Mexicans.

"This place has history! It should be like Washington!" said Ramón Mejía Ramirez, a retired potter, waving a hand around the town plaza. "But look, how many foreigners do you see here? None."

That's the dilemma of Dolores Hidalgo, one of Mexico's most important historic sites and one of its least known. Most Americans are more familiar with Cinco de Mayo, which commemorates a relatively inconsequential battle against the French, than the "Cry of Dolores," the Sept. 16, 1810, call to arms that ignited a revolution against Spanish rule.

Local and state governments are trying to change that. Inspired by the attention nearby towns are getting from Hollywood, they are marketing Dolores Hidalgo to foreign tourists and pouring \$350,000 into renovating the town center. They're taking tour operators on free trips to the town, attending tourism fairs in 18 foreign cities and producing a promotional CD-ROM in English and French. And there are plans to clean and relight the facade of Our Lady of Dolores, the church where the call to arms took place.

Still, only 5 percent of the town's 14,520 visitors have been foreigners this year, compared with 31 percent in San Miguel de Allende, 20 miles down the road, said Jorge Villaseñor, tourism policy coordinator for Guanajuato state.

The town entered the history books as the home of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a parish priest and social reformer.

In 1810, Hidalgo and a number of fellow patriots were plotting a rebellion against

Mexico's Spanish-born overlords in nearby Querétaro. When the plan was discovered by the authorities, the rebels decided to launch the uprising immediately from Dolores, as the town was known then.

Hidalgo rang the church bell at 5 a.m. to summon the townspeople, then delivered a rousing speech urging a revolution. His supporters freed the prisoners in the town jail, captured the local Spanish officials and marched off to San Miguel to begin an 11-year fight for independence.

Hidalgo's house is now a must-see for Mexican school groups. The church bell now hangs at the National Palace in Mexico City, and the Mexican president rings it every Independence Day.

Tourism officials say Dolores Hidalgo's bad luck is to be located between two beautiful colonial cities: San Miguel de Allende, a national monument and center for the arts that is now full of American retirees; and Guanajuato, a former silver-mining town that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Dolores Hidalgo's plaza seems humdrum by comparison.

"The town is a fundamental part of Mexican history, but I think the local people feel they're between two colossuses," said Desmond O'Shaughnessy, Guanajuato state director of tourism promotion.

The town of 46,000 people was especially hard hit by an economic slump and drop in tourism after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. In 2001, 2,847 foreigners visited the Museum of Independence, located in the former jail. In 2003, there were only 697.

The town also lacks a major hotel, meaning most tourists snap a few pictures, sample the town's famous ice cream, then leave.

Flipping through her guest book, innkeeper Ana María Arredondo Vázquez picked out the visitors from Arizona: "She stayed one day, he stayed one day. Most of them are young, and they don't stay long here. That's the problem."

Tourism officials are hoping Dolores Hidalgo will eventually benefit from a number of Hollywood movies filmed in the state. They estimate that *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* and *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* gave the area about \$5 million in free advertising. Three other movies are also in the works.

To make the town more inviting, the state restored and repainted the facades of 16 buildings around the plaza last year. There are plans to install new lights at the church, Tourism Director Angelica Avalos Salazar said.

Meanwhile, workers set up food stands in preparation for today's festivities.

Musicians practiced for a concert, marathon runners departed carrying "flames of freedom" bound for other cities, and workers prepared a stage for a performance of

traditional dances. On Tuesday, the town received a small delegation from Lexington, Mass., Dolores Hidalgo's sister city and the site of another famous revolution.

A member of the Lexington delegation, Bill Noz, said his city gets a healthy stream of foreign tourists because it is so close to Boston. He said Dolores Hidalgo could get a bigger crowd if it re-enacted the uprising, much as his town re-enacts the 1775 Battle of Lexington every April 19.

"This is a simple, single ceremony. But if you had a group of people dressed as peasants join up and march off, that might give it a different flavor," he said. "You have to commercialize things before they take off."

In a corner of the square, Gabriel Peña Samaripa greeted Mexican tourists and served up scoops of homemade ice cream flavored with limes, tequila and mango.

"We'll get a good crowd of Mexicans this week," he said. "But it would be nice to see more foreigners. They all go to Cancun and Acapulco; they don't care so much about us. But, hey, this is where Mexico started."