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Tecolutla: Mexico's Gulf Coast Acapulco?

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ABSTRACT

Tecolutla is a small beach resort along the Gulf of Mexico in Veracruz state, Mexico. At one time a small fishing outpost, it developed into a beach resort in the 1940s as a result of the popularization of sunbathing and infrastructural development facilitated by two Mexican presidents. As the closest beach to Mexico City, Tecolutla briefly rivaled Acapulco as the most popular beach destination in the country. But Tecolutla slowly lost out to its Pacific Coast rival, which had better weather, better access (after 1956), political favoritism (mostly by Miguel Alemán Valdés, native Veracruzano and president of Mexico 1946–1952), and international cachet in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Tecolutla never became the envisioned “Gulf Coast Acapulco,” it has steadily grown over the years thanks to better highway access, diversification of attractions, and lower prices. There are still obstacles that prevent it from evolving beyond its current status as a domestic destination resort.

Keywords: *Tecolutla, seaside resort, tourism development, Mexico*

Introduction

IF ONE WERE ASKED to name the top beach resorts in Mexico, perhaps the names Cancun, Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, Cabo San Lucas (Los Cabos), Puerto Escondido, Ixtapa/Zihuantenejo, Manzanillo, Huatulco, Cozumel, Mazatlán, or even San Felipe would come to mind. But the small Gulf Coast resort of Tecolutla, in the state of Veracruz, which bills itself as the closest beach to Mexico City, was slated to become Mexico's “Acapulco East” in the 1940s (Meyer-Arendt 1990b) (Figure 1). This occurred because of both the increased popularity of beach recreation (internationally as well as domestically) and also infrastructural development facilitated by various post-Revolution presidencies, including that of Manuel Ávila Camacho. Miguel Alemán Valdés, former president as well as Veracruz native and ex-state governor, is often credited with fomenting tourism and infrastructural development in Mexico (Brandenburg 1964; Cline 1962) or at least being a major player (Berger 2006), but his role in the development of Tecolutla was minimal. Unlike at Acapulco, the tourism boom never came to Tecolutla,

Figure 1.—Eastern Mexico (pre-autopista).

perhaps because of Alemán's interest in the Pacific Coast. Today Tecoluta remains a minor beach resort, albeit one seasonally popular with the middle class of Mexico City.

Origins of Beach Recreation in Veracruz State

Travel from the Mexican interior highlands to Veracruz—to take in the sea air and to celebrate Carnival—was promoted as early as 1900 by the Inter-oceanic and Mexican Railroads (Wood 1910). Previously, in summer the Veracruz elite tended to recreate in the cooler, disease-free, 1,000-meter-elevation “hill stations” of the Sierra Madre Oriental, including the state capital of Xalapa (Jalapa) as well as nearby Xico, both still popular destinations today. The port city of Veracruz, the gateway to Mexico for international visitors arriving by ship until the early twentieth century, had several hotels to serve the transient passengers, few of whom had much good to say about the city (Arreola 1980). Cholera and yellow fever outbreaks occurred regularly, including as late as 1902–03, and only after the U.S. invasion of 1914 was the city thoroughly cleaned up and major mosquito-breeding grounds

eliminated (Wood 2010). Domestic tourism to Veracruz increased after this urban makeover, and during the 1920s several more urban hotels were built to accommodate the increasing numbers of visitors (Wood 2010). The sea air and local beaches attracted tourists, but many Veracruzanos preferred to recreate at Mocambo Beach (Playa Mocambo), five or so miles south of town.

Beach recreation in Veracruz state received a major stimulus during the Roaring Twenties (in Mexico, the post-Revolution 1920s), when the new fad of sun tanning renewed interest in seaside tourism worldwide. Interest in beach vacations increased among the Mexico City elite, and conditions for coastal tourism development were ripe in a new post-revolution Mexico. In 1927, the old wagon road to Acapulco was graded and the first tourism boom in that historic port city began, despite up to twenty-four hours' travel time from Mexico City (Cerruti 1964). Within a few years, Acapulco was a popular resort for both Mexicans and Americans, with over ten thousand visitors arriving for *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) and Christmas vacation (Sackett 2010).

Because of better connections to the Gulf Coast, including road as well as rail, the Mexico City entrepreneur Manuel Suárez y Suárez selected a low hill above the locally popular Playa Mocambo to construct the sprawling Hotel Mocambo in 1932 (Franco Aranda 2010). Suárez had immigrated from Spain in 1910 to join his older brother in the seed and grain business in Mexico City, but he soon joined Pancho Villa's famed Northern Division during the Mexican Revolution. Following the Revolution, Suárez expanded the family business ventures and also maintained good relations with various presidents of Mexico. During the presidency of Plutarco Elias Calles, in 1930 Suárez built the Casino de la Selva in Cuernavaca, among the first gambling establishments in Mexico, and the accompanying hotel was built soon thereafter (Franco Aranda 2010); the entire complex was razed in 2001 to make room for the Cuernavaca Costco, according to the Wikipedia entry on Manuel Suárez y Suárez. In 1932, Suárez (along with other Spanish-born investors) constructed the art deco-style Hotel Mocambo as a "twin" to his Casino de la Selva (Figure 2). The Mocambo was meant to offer a Gulf Coast entertainment alternative to Acapulco—luxury lodging, fine dining, and dancing in addition to the sun, sand, and sea experience—especially for the wealthier classes of Mexico City, Puebla, and (of course) Veracruz. No evidence for casino gambling at the Mocambo has been found, and, in any case, casino gambling was outlawed in Mexico in 1935 during the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency (Schantz 2010).

Figure 2.—Postcard of the Hotel Mocambo, near Veracruz, circa 1950.

Although the Mocambo (and Veracruz) never become the destination resort that Suárez had envisioned (another Acapulco, perhaps?), international visitors to the port city as well as the Veracruz elite frequented the Mocambo until about 1970 (Franco Aranda 2010). Since that time, the beaches south of Veracruz have encouraged both coastal tourism development (i.e., newer properties competing against the iconic Macombo) as well as urban expansion of upscale Veracruz residential areas (both single-family homes and condominiums) southward to the former fishing village of Boca del Rio. Once isolated, the Hotel Mocambo (renovated and still a high-end hotel today) sits near the convention center and the city's main shopping mall. In 2011, one wing of the historic hotel was demolished to make room for condominium towers (<http://aguapasada.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/fotos-antiguas-del-hotel-mocambo-veracruz/>) (this website is also a source for nice postcards and photos of the old Hotel Mocambo).

Development of Tecolutla as a Tourist Destination

Tecolutla, Veracruz, was a tiny fishing port at the mouth of the Rio Tecolutla, not easily accessible until the early 1940s when the road across the altiplano (highland plateau) and through the Sierra Madre Oriental was

paved to provide easier access from Mexico City to the newly nationalized oil-industry centers of Tampico and Poza Rica. With a connecting spur from this road to Papantla and Gutierrez Zamora, Tecolutla suddenly became the closest beach to Mexico City, only 326 km away, a mere six- or seven-hour drive (Figure 1).

Tecolutla has a long history as a fishing village. The toponym means "settlement where owls are found" in Nahuatl, and the settlement was in the realm of the Totonac civilization. The Totonacs, who occupied the coastal plain for perhaps six thousand years, maintained their capital in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental at El Tajín (Wilkerson 1980). Near the vanilla center of Papantla, El Tajín is today the best-known and most excavated archaeological site along the Mexican Gulf Coast, although a more recently uncovered site near El Pital may be an even more extensive urban complex (Wilford 1994). The Totonacs developed a sophisticated irrigation-based agricultural complex along the lower Rio Tecolutla between A.D. 300 and 1000, and seafood and salt were obtained from the Tecolutla area around the same time (Wilkerson 1980). Early Spanish accounts describe Tecolutla as supplying salt and fish to Papantla, and this role continued well into the post-colonial period (Ramirez 1981).

During the Mexican-American War, Tecolutla was opened as a secondary official commercial port due to the U.S. blockade of the city of Veracruz. A military post was set up, and commercial activity began, including a thriving contraband trade (Ramirez 1981). The fertile farmland of the Gulf coastal plain was settled by Italian and French immigrants in the 1850s, and in 1910 a short rail line was built from Gutierrez Zamora to Tecolutla to ship out cattle, vanilla, and citrus (Wilkerson 1980). In Tecolutla, the fishing and coconut industries expanded during this same period, and economic growth led to the first restaurant (La China) opening in 1915 (Meyer-Arendt 1987). The Gulf of Mexico jumbo shrimp boom of the 1930s led to the opening of the first hotel (the Hotel Roma on the central plaza, now a private residence), which catered to Cuban and other fisherman (de la Luna 1985, pers. comm.).

Accessibility to Tecolutla was difficult until the 1940s. In 1924, a graded road connected Tecolutla with Papantla (the vanilla capital of Mexico) and points north, including the oil boomtown of Poza Rica. To the south, transport was limited to coastal steamer, which sailed to Nautla and up the Rio Nautla to Martinez de la Torre. In the mid-1940s a coastal highway to the south replaced the steamship, and, with the new paved highway from Poza Rica to Mexico City, Tecolutla became an important ferry crossing

across the Rio Tecolutla on the new coastal highway network (Meyer-Arendt 1987). Much of this infrastructural development is popularly attributed to efforts by Miguel Alemán Valdés (Veracruz native, governor of Veracruz 1936–39, Secretary of Interior 1940–45, and president 1946–52) to modernize Mexico and foster tourism development. However, more deserving of credit is Mexican president Mañuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46), who had interest in linking the largely forested and undeveloped coastal plain with his highland hometown of Teziutlán, Puebla. While the president's older brother, Maximino Ávila Camacho, served as head of the Secretariat of Communications and Transport, he authorized the construction of roads to and along the Veracruz coast, where he also purchased several ranches (Wilkerson 2012, pers. comm.).

While the coastal road was under construction, there was a casual meeting at what was soon to become the Tecolutla River ferry crossing with Carlos Prieto, an active Monterey- and Mexico City-based businessman/investor/financier of national prominence. Allegedly his airplane was forced to make an emergency landing at Tecolutla, and Prieto was impressed with what he saw there. Don Carlos agreed to build a major beach hotel along the scale and style of the Hotel Mocambo near Veracruz, to turn Tecolutla into a major beach destination like Acapulco, if the federal government promised to complete its network of highway and route the coastal road through Tecolutla and not the shorter route through Gutierrez Zamora. The highways were completed, as was Prieto's seventy-two-room Hotel Tecolutla. However, the lavish hotel, designed by a Spanish architect in the Art Deco style, was not completed for two years, well into the Alemán presidency (Wilkerson 2012, pers. comm.).

With the new road from Mexico City (via Tulancingo and Poza Rica) reducing travel time to six or seven hours (many hours less than travel time to Acapulco in the late 1940s), speculators eyed Tecolutla as a potential "Acapulco East." Aside from Carlos Prieto, private investors acquired beach property in Tecolutla, and two additional, but smaller, Art Deco-style hotels—the fifty-two-room Hotel Marsol and the twenty-four-room Hotel Playa—broke ground in the late 1940s (Figure 3). The investors in these two hotels were mostly local, although the initial money for one may have originally come from Poza Rica sources (Wilkerson 2012, pers. comm.). What role in this development activity Miguel Alemán played is not known, but some of the investors, including Prieto, allegedly knew him well. And as a Veracruz native, Alemán was widely thought by many local residents to be

Figure 3.—Tecolutla in 1948. Hotels Playa and Marsol (right) in foreground, along the beachfront. Hotel Tecolutla (not shown) is just left of the range of the photo. The wide road leading to the Rio Tecolutla ferry crossing is the main coastal highway.

very interested in developing a Gulf Coast version of Acapulco (as I heard repeatedly during fieldwork in the area in the mid-1980s).

A Short-Lived Heyday of Tecolutla as an “Acapulco East”

The three Art Deco beach hotels opened in 1948, as did several restaurants. North of town, a subdivision (*fraccionamiento*) was platted in 1950, in large part within an existing coconut plantation (*cocal*). The oldest air photos of Tecolutla (from 1951) show a dozen or vacation homes, in town and in the new subdivision, some beachfront and some in the shade of the coconut trees (Compañía Aerofoto Mexicano 1951) (Figure 4). Data for tourism are virtually absent for this early period, but in addition to a smattering of destination tourists (mostly from Mexico City), through-travelers became familiarized with Tecolutla as they waited for the ferry. Many decided to stay an extra day or two, and tourism business districts evolved at the ferry landing, along the coastal highway, and in the downtown area. An economic boomlet took place in the mid-to late 1950s when Pemex (Petróleos Mexicanos) opened the Hidalgo oil field near Tecolutla (Wilkerson 2012, pers. comm.). The opulent Hotel Tecolutla was truly a grand hotel at that time

Figure 4.—Tecolutla in 1951. Along the beach are the Hotel Tecolutla (left) and Hotels Playa and Marsol (center). The ferry crossing the Rio Tecolutla is seen at upper left. North is to the right on this photo. (Compañía Aerofoto Mexicano, 1951)

(and still is today, some would argue) (Figure 5). In the late 1950s, a minor Brigitte Bardot film was shot on location in Tecolutla (Meyer-Arendt 1990b).

South of Tecolutla, the main highway hugged the coast as far as Nautla. The tiny fishing outposts and *ejidos* along this stretch benefited from the early tourism boom. This stretch of coast, soon labeled the Costa Esmeralda (Emerald Coast), was filled in with small hotels, restaurants, camping facilities, and small *balnearios* (bathing resorts). The little village of Casitas, in the Rio Nautla estuary, became popular for bathing in warm, shallow waters sheltered from the strong wave action in the Gulf of Mexico (Meyer-Arendt 1990a).

In spite of the flurry of development activity in the late 1940s and 1950s, Tecolutla's boom as a seaside resort was not sustained for several reasons. First, the Gulf Coast climate is not as warm, sunny, and predictable as Mexico's Pacific Coast. Summers are hot, humid, and subject to tropical storms and hurricanes. Winters receive Arctic cold fronts (*nortes*), which blast southward along flat terrain from Canada to Veracruz, with no mountains nor water to temper their chilling impacts. Second, in spite of heavy advertising in Mexico City (the Hotel Tecolutla claims to be "*la playa de la capital*"), the number of destination tourists remained low. The premature overbuilding of Tecolutla became apparent as investors sold out their shares.

Figure 5.—Tecolutla in 1985. The grand Hotel Tecolutla in right foreground. Photo by author.

Third, the subdivision developer died, thus ending a phase of active promotion of beach properties. Fourth, a devaluation of the *peso* in 1952 led to an economic slump that severely affected domestic tourism (this pattern was to repeat itself several times). Fifth, and most importantly, the steady rise of tourism in Acapulco (despite terrible overland connections) culminated with a new highway being built in the mid-1950s.

Although Miguel Alemán is credited by many with giving a boost to tourism in Tecolutla and the Costa Esmeralda, it was to Acapulco that he turned his attention as president (Sackett 2002). Beachfront property in Acapulco was expropriated for infrastructural development (somewhat of a model for the later FONATUR projects such as Cancun), and the highway from Mexico City was improved and paved in 1956 (Sackett 2010). With the Hollywood jet set arriving by airplane, and with Mexico City only five or six hours away by car, Acapulco entered its golden age. Miguel Alemán maintained a residence in Acapulco after his presidency. Many Veracruzanos felt that Alemán abandoned his native state by the time his term as president ended in 1952, and that, with the right support, Tecolutla could have become another Acapulco (this I also heard repeatedly in field interviews).

Maturation of Tecolutla as a Domestic Seaside Resort

Although the initially anticipated tourism boom at Tecolutla never materialized, the resort capacity was soon reached as the number of through-travelers and Mexico City tourists steadily increased. The extension of the coastal highway south all the way to Veracruz (city) in the early 1960s increased the coastal traffic; new connections with Matamoros stimulated North American overland tourism; and the Tecolutla ferry crossing ensured steady business for the resort. Word spread about the fine beaches and excellent seafood, and gradually the numbers of highland tourists (mostly *chilangos*, from Mexico City) increased as well. By the mid-1960s, it was apparent that the ferry was not sufficient to handle the increased coastal traffic, and the previously studied bridge site at Gutierrez Zamora was again proposed as the new river crossing. Tecolutla tourism interests were against a new bridge and feared that the resort would again decline to an end-of-the-road backwater. Allegedly, bribes were paid to slow the construction and opening of the new bridge. However, when an overloaded ferry sank in 1970, the Gutierrez Zamora bridge became a high priority and opened soon thereafter (Wilkerson 1985, pers. comm.).

In spite of the loss of the Tecolutla ferry, the 1970s and 1980s experienced steady growth in tourism, as seen by increasing numbers of small hotels and vacation homes, including in the beach subdivision, where development had been at a standstill during the 1950s and 1960s. By the early 1980s, the town's population reached five thousand, there were fifty restaurants, the number of hotel rooms approached five hundred, and perhaps an additional five thousand beds were available in unregistered *pensiones* and private residences (Meyer-Arendt 1987). At peak vacation periods such as Holy Week and Christmas, tourists numbered in the many tens of thousands (up to fifty thousand, by some unofficial estimates), most of whom slept in tents on or near the beach. Most domestic tourism in Tecolutla, as elsewhere in Mexico and throughout Latin America, was (and still is) family tourism. Families, often extended, would go to the beach to get away from school or work but have quality time together (see Passariello 1983). The rise in tourism at Tecolutla may be attributed to: (1) economic improvement among Mexico City's growing middle class, particularly skilled blue-collar workers; (2) disenchantment with Acapulco's high prices, caused, in part, by the stronger role of international tourism in that resort city; and (3) steadily increasing interest in the less-publicized Gulf Coast, where inexpensive lodging and food (including excellent seafood) and the Totonac ruins at El

Tajín were major attractions. It is also possible that the rise of drug-fueled violence in Acapulco has caused some families to decide to vacation along the sleepier but safer Emerald Coast, including Tecolutla.

Tecolutla Today

Although the development of Tecolutla as an “Acapulco East,” so eagerly anticipated in the mid- to late-1940s, did not take place because of a combination of physical (mostly climatic) and infrastructural limitations, the beach town (and the Costa Esmeralda in general) has developed into an important domestic tourism destination. The growth trends characteristic of Tecolutla in the 1970s and '80s have continued into the present. Although the permanent population has remained steady, the number of hotel rooms exceeds one thousand, and available beds exceed ten thousand (Meyer-Arendt 2005). On this author's first visit to Tecolutla, in 1971, all streets except the main road were of sand; today, most streets in the core of the town are paved. And since 2006 or so, there has been a flurry of construction activity (and corollary rise in real estate values), based upon a new tourism boom stimulated by improved highway access. Because of a global interest in nature tourism, or ecotourism, there has been renewed touristic interest in the riverfront (in addition to the beachfront) and the pristine mangrove wetlands across the river. In response, a riverfront *malecón* (promenade) was built and sprinkled with restaurants, and fisherman converted their *panguitas* (small *pangas*, or launches) to tour boats in order to ferry tourists into the estuarine wonders of nature (Figure 6).

The coastal highway network has seen some improvement over the ensuing years, with *autopista* construction pushing north from Veracruz and also connecting Tuxpan with Papantla. But the biggest project was the extension of a toll *autopista* from Mexico City to Poza Rica, a project that began in 2004. The challenge of building an interstate-quality highway down the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental slowed construction and delayed the opening until 2012. According to Google Maps, the distance to Tecolutla has been shortened to 322 km, and travel time reduced to four hours. Tourism development has continued, but a true (and still anticipated) economic boom has not occurred.

There have been, and still are, some obstacles to making Tecolutla a major beach resort. In 1999, a 10,000-year flood event on the Rio Tecolutla devastated the resort town, cutting two major channels through to the sea. Although 400 deaths were attributed to the flood, Tecolutla was evacuated

Figure 6.—The Rio Tecolutla malecón and tour boats, 2007. Riverfront restaurants in distance. Photo by author.

and no casualties recorded. In fact, the repair of the beach road actually dammed up the outlet of one of the breaches, hence creating a nice lake and raising real estate values! Small hurricanes have hit Tecolutla, most recently Hurricane Katia in 2017, and the shoreline has suffered from erosion as never before, almost cutting into the foundation of one of the newer beachfront hotels. There are also problems with sewage disposal (in spite of an existing treatment plant), garbage disposal, water supply, surface drainage, beach vendors, protection of nesting sea turtles, parking, lighting, and lack of zoning, *inter alia*. But these are all problems that, with proper political guidance and an infusion of funds, can be overcome.

According to a typology of seaside resorts, Tecolutla is a Stage 2 beach resort—a Domestic Destination Resort (Meyer-Arendt et al. 1992). To move to a Stage 3 resort requires the addition of substantial international tourists. Perhaps one or two hundred international tourists arrive in Tecolutla annually, and approximately a dozen North American expatriates live there permanently. But, in addition to the limitations listed in the previous

paragraph, it may be that some of the same factors that caused Tecolutla's initial boom to fizzle sixty-plus years ago preclude the onset of international tourism today. After all, when the 1968 Banco de Mexico study to determine the best site for a real "Acapulco East" (i.e., an East Coast counterpart to Acapulco) fed all the variables into a computer, the computer selected Cancun on the Caribbean coast and not a single site along Mexico's Gulf Coast (Collins 1979).

Conclusion

Tecolutla had hopes for becoming the Gulf Coast "Acapulco East" in the late 1940s. The time was ripe: beach recreation was growing in popularity, Mexico was in a post-World War II economic boom, infrastructural development was proceeding along the Veracruz coast, new roads made Tecolutla the closest beach resort to Mexico City, and development-oriented politicians (such as Alemán Valdés and Avila Camacho) occupied positions of power, including the presidency. Following a brief flurry of investments that led to hotel and restaurant construction and subdivision platting, it became obvious that a boom was premature. Less-than-perfect weather conditions and a shift in development interest by President Alemán to Acapulco caused the evolution of Tecolutla to become somewhat "frozen in time." Gradually, increases in domestic tourism filled Tecolutla to capacity during peak vacation periods, and slow-but-steady growth has taken place since the 1970s. A new highway from Mexico City, opened in 2012, is already stimulating a new mini-boom. If environmental and infrastructural constraints can be addressed and improved, Tecolutla may yet expand to its full potential, including attracting a significant number of international tourists.

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