



TRUJILLO VILLAS

España

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Extremadura, where Spain's conquistadors called home

Many New World explorers came from the Extremadura region in the western part of the country, and some of them returned home with indigenous brides in tow.

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Paul was standing outside, visibly excited. He pointed to a plaque on the wall. It announced that the 16th century building was constructed by Juan de Toledo Montezuma (a descendant of Juan Cano de Saavedra and Isabel de Montezuma, daughter of the emperor) and Doña Mariana de Carvajal y Toledo. They were married and lived in the palace.

So, it seemed that Princess Isabel Montezuma and conquistador Juan Cano had a son, but many questions remained. Was it a love match? The conquistador was sacking the empire, so how did they meet? Was this passion or political pressure? Their son married Doña Mariana -- thus blending Aztec and Spanish bloodlines, and the two constructed a costly palace in Cáceres. What mother-in-law (Isabella) wouldn't want to come for a visit?

By happenstance, I ran into the British woman again and told her what we had discovered. She smiles and said, "If you're interested in conquistadors and their women, you have to go to Trujillo, about 28 miles east of Cáceres. Its nickname is 'Cradle of the Conquistadors.' "

So we set out for the cradle, which has rocked for more than 2,500 years and was a hilltop fortress in the Middle Ages. In the center of the vast main square, called the Plaza Mayor, is a huge equestrian statue of Francisco Pizarro, Trujillo's most famous, or infamous, son. With about 200 soldiers, he captured Atahualpa, the Inca ruler of what is now Peru, and had Atahualpa killed. Pizarro, in turn, was killed by his Spanish enemies.

While visiting Pizarro's hometown, I learned that his birth was not recorded, but it's estimated that he came into this world between 1471 and 1478. Local legends claim he was either abandoned as an infant on the steps of a Trujillo church or raised with swine and

suckled by a pig. Historians claim that, local color aside, Francisco's father was a military man and his mother was probably a servant. They never wed.

Whatever his origins, Pizarro probably worked as a swineherd, and escaped the grinding poverty of Extremadura by joining the army and nursing dreams of becoming fabulously wealthy. Francisco had a gaggle of sisters and brothers, some of whom were involved in the conquest of Peru.

In the warren of today's gorgeously preserved medieval streets beyond the main plaza, rats, trash and open sewers greeted Pizarro every day of his young life. I stood in front of the stone house where he was born; a coat of arms with two pigs is carved over the door.

Pizarro was not the only conquistador to hail from Trujillo. The town also claims Francisco de Orellana, the first explorer of the Amazon, and Diego García de Paredes, who was known as the Samson of Extremadura because he took on whole armies with his mighty sword. The graceful, multistoried stone Palacio de la Conquista on the Plaza Mayor, with its escutcheons, balconies and interior walkways, was built by half-brother Hernando Pizarro. A brochure provided by the local tourism office claims he married Francisco's half-Inca daughter and settled here.

I loved visiting the old castle, churches and palaces in Trujillo and wandering the cobblestone streets, but I was happy to sit down for a sumptuous family-style lunch at La Troya restaurant on the Plaza Mayor to contemplate why we had never learned about the conquistadors' romantic connections.