

NUESTRA SEÑORA LA VIRGEN DEL PILAR AND THE FORT
BY: ICELLE BORJA - DAILY ZAMBOANGA TIMES

The gray stonewalls of Fort Pilar are the only surviving physical manifestation of the founding and early history of the town of Zamboanga. The Fort is the oldest reminder of the Spanish presence. The historical antecedents of Fort Pilar are to be found in Spanish attempts to extend their military and missionary activities during the 16th century into the southernmost parts of the Philippines, as well as in Borneo. The building of the fort was a strategy and measure of defense against piratical attacks. Governor Juan Cerezo de Salamanca decided to establish a military base in Zamboanga. On April 16, 1635, the building of the Fort began under the supervision of Padre Melchor de Vera, a famous Jesuit missionary engineer. It was on June 23, 1635 that the cornerstones were officially laid marking a historical milestone in the founding of Zamboanga.



Concelebration of the Mass during the Hermosa Festival at the Shrine of Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza at the Fort

The Fort was known then as “Real Fuerza de San Jose”, from the date of the construction up to the year 1718; It went through some reconstruction and was renamed “Real Fuerza De Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza” maintaining this name up to the time when the Americans came in 1898; Simply it was called as Fort Pilar”

The Statue of Our Lady of the Pilar of Zaragoza, was embossed on the east wall of the stone fort in January 1734, was originally used as a frontispiece atop the main entrance was sealed, as mentioned in the account of the Spanish Jesuit, Father Creves, who visited Zamboanga that year.

The celebration of the Feast of the Nuestra Señora del Pilar ushered in one of the many highlights bringing together thousands of Zamboanguenos to celebrate life and unity and making the religious event as the culminating highlight for the weeklong festivities of arts, culture, and traditional reverence, the celebration of the Fiesta Pilar in Zamboanga City every October 12 is also being observed in the district of Santa Cruz, Manila and in Zaragoza, Spain where Our Lady Pilar is the Patroness. It is observed too, throughout Spain as “dia de la Hispanidad” or “dia de la Raza”, as a legal holiday in most Latin American countries, and the West Indies – where it is known as “Columbus Day” or “Discovery Day” for it was on October 12, 1492, that Christopher Columbus discovered America.

Many Zamboanguenos abroad unite and celebrate this day with religious fervor and reverence as they live in memory of their provenance; The many accounts of the miracles of the Lady of the Pilar as manifested in the Foiled attempt to attack the Fort by hundreds of Muslim raiders, the beautiful legend of the “Sentry and our Lady of the Pilar” is woven around an actual historical event that occurred on December 6, 1734, when the leader of the armed band from Tawi-Tawi landed at Zamboanga and tried to capture the Fort by surprise; the story of the Earthquake – tidal wave in 1897 and the killer quake – tidal waves of 1976 and the miraculous intercession of the Lady Pilar as the Protector and Patroness of Zamboanga. Thousands will find their way to pay homage to the Virgin, as they venerate her with ardent prayers, with candles and offerings of flowers making the shrine as the focal point of the festivities.



The Shrine of Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza at the Fort

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Today as we celebrate the Fiesta Pilar, many visitors will visit the Fort Pilar as the center for our religious traditions, and as a remnant of our colorful historical past and as an veritable landmark of our heritage, our passion and religion; as it is the evidence of European military engineering and architecture conceptualized and built as a defensive outpost to check Muslim raids and as a center for evangelization, and also it came to be the enclave of Spanish military naval stopover for further campaigns and provisions.

Today it is a historical landmark and a museum of Zamboanga’s diverse material culture that is on permanent exhibit and that includes the Subanen, Sama Badjao, Yakan tribes.

It is also the showcase of the retrieved artifacts of the shipwreck “Griffin” a trade ship owned by the British East India Company, which sank off the coast of Basilan in January 20, 1761 during a storm at sea.

On the left wing ground level is the experiential exhibit of the flora and fauna of western Mindanao and the marine exhibits.

The Fort Pilar has surpassed itself not only as a bastion and citadel for defensive warfare, but as a center for the arts, culture and traditions, but it is serves as a repository of the artifacts of the history and culture of western Mindanao. – Icelle Borja

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