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A touching story of the undying love of a brave warrior for a fair maiden is one of the legends told about the two snow-capped mountains that dominate the countryside for 100 miles around Mexico City.

Known as Popocatepetl (The Mountain That Smokes) and Ixtaccihuatl (The Sleeping Woman), they once were worshipped as deities. Today you can get a good view of the majestic peaks approaching the Mexican Capitol on an American Airlines Flagship. For closer inspection there are accessible roads.

The mountains, according to the legend, came into being during the Aztec regime. A powerful Emperor of that era had a daughter, Ixtaccihuatl, his only heir. When he became weak because of old age, his enemies began to wage war against his empire.

He called in the bravest young warriors of his tribe and offered his throne, plus his daughter in marriage, to the one who could vanquish his enemies. Among those volunteering to fight was Popocatepetl, the boldest of them all, who for years had been in love with the beautiful Princess.

The war was long, cruel and bloody, but Popocatepetl was triumphant in his quest. As he was about to return to claim his reward, his rivals sent back the false news that he had been killed in action. The Princess then fell victim of a strange illness, languished and died.

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On learning the tragedy, Popocatepetl became grief stricken. He did not wish to go on living, so he constructed a great pyramid upon which he laid his beloved Ixtaccihuatl.

Next to it he constructed another pyramid, where he took up a constant vigil holding a funeral torch to illuminate her eternal sleep. Snow covered the body of the Princess and that of the warrior, but failed to extinguish his torch, which continued lighted, warm and everlasting, like the love of Popocatepetl for Ixtaccihuatl.

The smoke originally came from a volcano located near the peak of Popocatepetl, which is more than 17,000 feet above sea level. The crater has erupted violently during the past 400 years, but has been inactive since 1921, when it exhaled smoke and gases for many weeks. Popocatepetl is approximately 2,000 feet higher than Ixtaccihuatl.

The town of Amecameca, approximately 30 miles from Mexico City, provides a good vantage point to view the sheer majesty of the two mountains. About 15 miles further, you come to a saddle between the two mountains, where there is a monument to Cortez, who passed that way en route to Mexico City from the gulf. His men allegedly climbed "Popo," as it is affectionately called, to obtain sulphur for the firearms, as their stocks were depleted by that time.

The road leads to a clearing called Tlamacas, about 13,000 feet above sea level, and almost to the snow line. From there it is a five-hour climb by mule and foot to the crater.