





Meandering in Mexico

Take silky soft beaches and handsome colonial towns, add surreal fiestas, a lively heritage and generous helpings of chilli-spiked food, and you start to conjure up the magic of Mexico. It's guaranteed to tantalise your senses, says **HEIDI FULLER-LOVE** ▸



My first encounter with Mexican culture came five years ago, when I stepped from my airport taxi into an undulating sea of revellers clutching sugar skulls, *pan de muertos* sweet buns and cheery wreaths of marigolds, to be met by a grinning skeleton in a purple feather boa, who handed me a tumbler of *mescal*, the smoke-flavoured agave liquor.

At the time, I'll admit, it was quite a shock. Five years on, however, having explored much of what French poet André Breton once called 'the surrealist country par excellence', it seems to me that Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrations are an ideal introduction to what this country is all about – the showmanship and the rowdy fun; the tear-jerkingly morbid sitting side by side with the cheerfully ordinary; but also the backdrop of tradition, the centuries-old custom on which the Mexican lifestyle is so firmly pinned.

First celebrated by the Aztecs, the Day of the Dead is just one of the colourful aspects of a country whose history – founded by the Mayans, fostered by the Aztecs and further formed by the Spanish conquistadors – is a living tapestry of traditions. And like several other Mexican traditions, it's considered so important that it is now included on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, along with mask-wearing Parachicos dancers and mariachi music.

Mexican food has earned itself a place on the list as well. The distinctive local gastronomy was born out of a blend of Mayan, Aztec and Spanish culinary styles (with a bit of French baking thrown in for good measure), and there's nowhere better to sample it than in Mexico City, epicentre of the country's lively cultural heritage. Street stands serving *antojitos* ('little whims') can be found all over town, but my favourite spots to enjoy these tapas-style snacks are the *tianguis* street markets in Condesa, a trendy neighbourhood packed with grandly decadent French-style villas and Art Deco buildings, and home to the city's burgeoning design scene.

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Follow *chilangos* (slang term for the city's inhabitants) to the nearest stand and order large corn-tortilla *flautas* stuffed with chicken (or pork), deep-fried and drizzled with sour cream, or ask for a couple of those spicy pork *tamales* that are served, steamy and moist, with a *mole poblana* chocolate-and-chilli-pepper sauce, and I guarantee you'll understand why Mexican food earned that coveted UNESCO inscription. I always head, too, for Plaza Garibaldi. Yes, it's touristy; yes it's rowdy – but it's also the best spot in Mexico to try a foaming glass of fermented agave *pulque* (the one-time sacred Aztec drink that looks like creamy milk and tastes like sour fruit) and hear mariachi bands playing every possible version of 'Lindo y Querido' and 'El Rey', the city's two most popular songs.

City in the sky

Zacatecas, Mexico's second-highest city, is another favourite spot when I'm seeking an undiluted dose of Mexican lifestyle. With its peachy pink stone buildings and the legendary Eden silver mines on which it stands, this UNESCO-listed Baroque wonderland has been dubbed the city 'con rostro de cantera rosa y corazón de plata' ('with a

Previous page: Colourful *trajineras* carry tourists down a canal in Xochimilco
Clockwise from above: A candlelit cemetery during Day of the Dead celebrations; the Kukulcan pyramid 'El Castillo' of Chichen Itza; the vast waterways of Xochimilco; Land's End and Lover's Beach, Cabo San Lucas; bright houses in Zacatecas



UNESCO MEXICO

Mexico has more UNESCO World Heritage sites than any other country in the Americas. Here are three that you won't want to miss...

* Santiago de Tequila

Lying in the shadow of Tequila's 2,986m-high volcano, this region's undulating sea of spiky blue agave plants has been used to produce tequila since the 16th century. Hike to the top of the volcano for panoramic views, then follow the Tequila Route through the desert-like landscape to discover hacienda distilleries, opal mines and gourmet eateries.

* Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino

Home to 20 rare species, including the critically endangered grey whale,

El Vizcaino is Latin America's largest wildlife reserve. Extreme conditions have produced a range of endemic plants and animals here, including the peninsular pronghorn, a deer-goat crossbreed that's one of the fleetest animals the world has ever seen.

* Xochimilco

Twenty-eight kilometres south of Mexico City is the ecological reserve of Xochimilco with its 170km network of canals dotted with *chinampas* (artificial islands). The remains of a far more extensive system created by the Aztecs to link settlements throughout the Mexico Valley, it's been nicknamed the Mexican Venice and is best seen from a vividly painted *trajinera* boat.

face of pink stone and a heart of silver'). On a clear afternoon, there's nothing better than to zip to the tip of the Cerro de la Bufa cliff in the cable car. From here the city's impressionistic jumble of colourful houses far below – crowned by the blanchmange-pink cathedral that's considered a masterpiece of Churrigueresque or Spanish Baroque style – lends angelic softness to the craggy, ravine-studded landscape on which this mining city was built back in the 16th century.

Shaded with scarlet bougainvillea, the winding alleys that hedge the city's yawning gullies are home to some surprisingly good art venues, including the Pedro Coronel Museum, where the works of local artist Rafael Coronel hang side by side with his eclectic personal collection of 20th-century oeuvres, ranging from Pablo Picasso to Joan Miró.

Down by the sea

A few hours from Zacatecas as the crow flies, Mazatlán is a completely different world. Take the Espinazo del Diablo, a truly devilish mountain road, and it brings you, in a nail-biting succession of hairpin turns and sheer drops, down to this sprawling seaside town far below. After a last flurry of mad loops, the road flattens out just before Mazatlán; cacti are replaced by citrus groves; and brightly coloured street food carts sell seafood goodies such as shrimp *ceviche* served on crispy *taco tostadas* and deliciously chewy black clam *conchas negras*.

With its party vibe and its own version of the famed Quebrada cliff divers, the town is like a scaled-down version of Acapulco – it's even rumoured to be vying for the prestigious 'Pearl of the Pacific' title that Acapulco earned for itself in its 1950s and 1960s heyday.



Mazatlán is also known for its Banda music, brought to the city by Bavarian immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century. Visit during fiesta time and you're sure to hear the sound of the tuba and bang of the big tambora drum that characterises this German *oompah* music – which, it has to be said, sounds oddly pompous in the Mexican seaside setting.

The country has 10,000km of gorgeous coastline, so if it's bath-warm seas and silky sands you're seeking, you're spoilt for choice. But if you want to soak up some culture at the same time, hop on a plane to Cancún, perched on the tip of the whale-tail-shaped Yucatán peninsula. An isolated fishing village half a century ago, the resort area is renowned for its powder-white beaches and now has a lively party scene, set around the Parque de las Palapas, where the food stands of the weekend night market bathe a range of live music, dancing and art events in their fragrant cooking steam. Chichen Itza – chosen as one of the New 7 Wonders of the World in 2007 – is a couple of hours' drive away, along with other archaeological sites.

I prefer, though, to hire a bike near Coba, a lesser-known site, and pedal along lush jungle paths to explore its Mayan temple ruins, before climbing to the top of Nohoch Mul pyramid for stunning views.

Head to the opposite side of the country and you come to Los Cabos, on the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula, which has been attracting celebrities since the mid-20th century. Its charm comes from the fact that it's really two resorts, linked by The Corridor, a 30km stretch of ritzy, real-estate-studded highway. To the east is San José del Cabo, with its chunky, rough-hewn adobe houses and blue-flowering jacarandas. A wonderful place to spend

