



y 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.

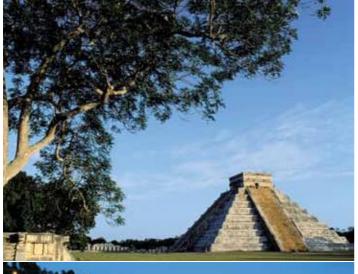
## City in the sky

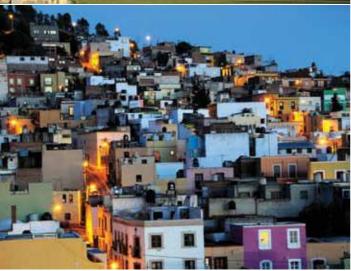
Zacatecas, Mexico's second-highest city, is another favourite spot when I'm seeking an undiluted dose of Mexican lifestyle. With its peachy pink stone buildings and the legendary Eden silver mines on which it stands, this UNESCO-listed Baroque wonderland has been dubbed the city 'con rostro de cantera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

VOLUM IN DIGGO.

## travellers' tales







#### 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 desertlike landscape to discover hacienda distilleries, opal mines and gourmet eateries.

# \*Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino Home to 20 rare species including

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 blancmange-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





time unwinding, it's a magnet for a bohemian crowd who have opened a slew of hip galleries here over the past decade. If you only have one day to visit, come on a Thursday when the arty boutiques and chic galleries along Alvaro Obregon open their doors until late and you can wander along cobbles shiny with the flicker of candlelight and browse for symbolic Huichol yarn paintings and beadwork, or pick up investment-grade artwork.

## When the sun goes down

If you're not sidetracked by Market, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's deceptively simple restaurant showcasing his Asian-fusion take on Latin American food, it's a 20-minute zip along The Corridor to Cabo San Lucas. With its more sophisticated, North American vibe, this is the place for revellers to let down their hair, for it has numerous nightspots. Cruise ships call here, too, which means plenty of shop-till-you-drop opportunities, whether you're after sombreros and kitsch tat in the crafts market near the harbour or diamonds and designer wear in the sleek shops along Puerto Paraíso.

For me, the real magic of modern Mexico is just this range of contrasts. Whether it's the hot bite of chilli pepper or cool colonial towns, steeped-in-tradition celebrations or chic modern resorts, this magical country really does have something to suit just about every taste.

## WHERE TO STAY

For further information and reservations, please visit SummitHotels.com

## **EMPORIO ACAPULCO, ACAPULCO**

Set right on the beach in Acapulco's Golden Zone, this contemporary-style hotel (pictured right) has recently renovated facilities and the largest swimming pool in the bay – and all 422 guestrooms come with a balcony and sea view.

#### LASBRISAS HUATULCO, BAHÍAS DE HUATULCO

Popular with both families and couples, this secluded resort feels like a village, with four distinct areas and a choice of restaurants. The white-sand beaches are ideal for lazing in the sun – but there are lots of sporting activities on offer, too.

#### OASIS SENS, CANCÚN

Set between the Caribbean Sea and the Nichupte Lagoon, Oasis Sens is an adults-only hotel with all the ingredients for a relaxing break, including three pools, a spa and a library as well as seven restaurants and nine bars.

## EMPORIO IXTAPA, IXTAPA-ZIHUATANEJO

At the beachfront Emporio Ixtapa, questrooms have calm, contemporary décor and there's an impressive range of recreational activities available, including access to the nearby Marina Ixtapa Golf Club, which offers special rates for hotel guests.

#### EMPORIO MAZATLAN, MAZATLÁN

Seafood specials, glorious Pacific Ocean views and easy access to all the local attractions, shopping and nightlife are just some of the things that make this elegant Mazatlán hotel appealing. And it's perfect for both business and leisure travellers.

## MELIÁ MÉXICO REFORMA, MEXICO CITY

Rated a Four Diamond hotel by the AAA, the Meliá México Reforma is a stylish retreat near the city's historic centre. Upgrading to The Level (a VIP selection of guestrooms and suites) brings privileges such as afternoon appetisers.



## STADIA SUITES SANTA FE, MEXICO CITY

Just steps from the Santa Fe shopping mall (one of the largest in the world), these home-fromhome suites are perfect for longer stays in the city, and come with a fully equipped kitchen, washer and dryer, daily housekeeping and high-thread-count linens.

## **EMPORIO ZACATECAS, ZACATECAS**

This beautiful colonial city is famed for its baroque architecture – and Emporio Zacatecas is a perfect example. The hotel also has a prime central location in front of the cathedral, making it the perfect base for travellers with a love of culture, art and history.