

## TRAVEL

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## DEARLY DEPARTED

The Day of the Dead festival is one of Mexico's cultural highlights, when for once cemeteries are bursting with life

BY JO TUCKMAN  
THE GUARDIAN, MEXICO CITY

A melancholy man lovingly decorates the grave of his dead wife with marigold petals and prepares for an all-night vigil. A raucous family in the same cemetery remembers their dead relative with alcohol, chilaquiles and song. A three-year-old excitedly carries a sugar skull to his kindergarten where he will proudly put it on the school altar. A protest group sets up an altogether more somber version outside a government office to demand justice for murdered young girls.

Mexico's El Día de Muertos is colorful, poignant, mystical, political, contradictory, satirical, macabre and rather childish — all at the same time.

The classic place to immerse yourself in Mexico's Day of the Dead are the islands in Lake Patzcuaro in the central state of Michoacan, populated by indigenous Purepecha. The mist from the lake mingles with the mysticism of the indigenous culture to produce a particularly intense experience. But finding a place to stay can be a nightmare, and to get away from tourist trinkets you have to get yourself to the most remote islands.

Perhaps the purest sense of the celebration's pre-Hispanic roots requires a trip to the Mayan town of Pomuch in the Yucatan peninsula, where relatives exhume the bones of dead loved ones to give them a brush up for the year to come. While the prize for the most aesthetic celebration may well belong to the city of Oaxaca, long renowned for the quality of its local artists who use colored sawdust in extraordinarily intricate altars set up on pavements.

But of all the many options available you could do a lot worse than choose the easiest of all: Mexico City. It may not sound very exotic, but it does drive home just how adept the Día de Muertos (which is really two days, sometimes more) is at reinventing itself for each new era and remaining at the center of Mexican popular culture.

The origins of the festival stretch back to the different ancient Mesoamerican cultures who lived in the area but shared a fascination with death. None more intensely than the Aztecs who dominated central Mexico for centuries, and held a specific fiesta for the dead in the middle of the year that the Spanish colonial powers moved to coincide with the Catholic holiday of All Saints' Day on Nov. 2.

At the core of the celebration are the



An offering setting at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, in Mexico City. The setting is installed every year for the Day of the Dead and this year is dedicated to Edgar Allan Poe. PHOTO: EPA

*ofrendas*, or altars, which are said to guide the spirits of the departed back to Earth for a brief sojourn among the company of those they left behind. For a feel of how much preparation goes into them, pop into a market from the last week of October until the spirits go back where they came from on Nov. 2. Any market will do, outside the business districts, from the historic center to the southern barrio of Coyoacan.

There you will see locals struggling under the weight of huge bunches of bright orange cempazuchitl flowers (local marigolds) and a very smelly bright purple flower, that act as beckoning beacons. Then there are the piles of *pan de muerto*, a sweet round decorated bread that provides the spirits with sustenance when they've found their way.

Most of the stalls are dedicated to the more humorous side of the whole endeavor that became a key element of the urban celebration in the 20th century. There will be models of skeletons getting drunk in cantinas, sculptures of ornately clad female versions, and sugar skulls with space to write your name on the forehead in colored icing.

There is a lot of Halloween paraphernalia, too. But rather than smothering local traditions it has simply been incorporated into the general cacophony, rather like the Catholic theme imposed

## Celebrate Mexico's Day of the Dead in the Xcaret theme park

BY JOSHUA STEIN  
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The jungles of the Mayan coast are full of authentic living Mayan villages. plonk down a Mayan see fiberglass ruins real ones? But Xcaret, built in 1999 that's and part Mayan more than one million There's a monkey in a theater, numerous swimming in underground cross between snorkelling and selling textiles and stuffed animals. Yes, it's tacky (it serves the mega-resort of Cancun), but it's not entirely lacking authenticity, especially during the Day of the Dead festivities. Ask a kid whether they'd rather spend a day here or at a local cemetery, and you can guarantee they'll choose the option with pools and a boat ride.

The Day of the Dead, or Hanal Pixan in the local Mayan tongue, is the major event of the year at Xcaret. This weekend sees the Life and Death Traditions festival marrying living Mayan culture with historic (and some not-so-historic) re-enactments. During the festival, the park goes a long way to bringing Mayan culture to the Mexican public's eye. (The event is co-sponsored by the Instituto de Cultura de Yucatan and other serious-sounding organizations, such as the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.)

Twenty-four Mayan communities from remote villages set up stalls to sell handmade corn tamales baked in a stone oven and spicy rich *mucbil pollo*, a traditional Hanal Pixan dish of chicken, *achiote* (a native shrub) and tamales wrapped in banana leaves and cooked for hours in a hole dug in the ground. Mayan women tend to the steaming pots with their children in tow, chatting to friends from other villages. For dessert, spicy Mexican hot chocolate simmers in a pot. The stalls are open during park hours and though the food isn't included in the pricey entrance fee, at about US\$1.30 a tamale, it isn't your standard overpriced theme park fare.

But the festival is more than just a food market. A warren of Day of the Dead altars feature morbid yet brilliant tableaux: offerings of paintings, neon skeleton sculptures wearing zoot suits, exquisite marigold arrangements. A long wall glows in the night with lights of a thousand candles, lit in honor of the dead. On a small stage, theater troupes perform traditional dances and stage plays in Mayan, a language of strangely placed 'x's and the mother tongue of 15 percent of the population of the Yucatan state of Quintana Roo. There's a black-and-white photo exhibition of Mayan life in a makeshift gallery. It's hard to picture Disney mounting anything as highbrow and authentic.

Of course, Xcaret is also a theme park so, aside from the Mayan culture, there's a spectacle, too. A cemetery is set up with remarkably realistic-looking graves garlanded with marigolds to attract dead spirits. For scream junkies, there's a tour of the Mayan afterworld — half-ghost ride, half-theology lesson — that wends its ways through ceiba trees (sacred to the Maya) and past a beautiful (man-made) underground river. Ghouls jump out at you, but only to explain, somewhat amicably, the mechanics of Xibalba, the Mayan afterlife. The biggest — and most Disneyfied — spectacle is a massive Mardi Gras-esque show in an outdoor amphitheater featuring towering puppets dancing on stilts. If Frida Kahlo had been the artistic director of a circus, it would have looked like this.

Refreshingly, a look around the stands reveals that most of the audience aren't gringos. "A majority of our visitors are Mexican," confirms Iliana Rodriguez, an Xcaret representative, "and many are Mayan." This simple fact makes Xcaret something more than just a colorful theme park and tourist trap. It makes it part of the Mayan experience, too.

On the Net: [www.xcaret.com](http://www.xcaret.com)

by the conquistadors who ensured it all happened around All Saints' Day.

Public *ofrendas* are easy to find in Mexico City, beginning with those laid out in the great Zocalo (plaza) in the center of town. But my favorite is the *Muertos* exhibition at the Dolores Olmedo museum in the far south of the capital. The central theme changes each year. In 2008 it was icons from the golden age of Mexican cinema — represented in skeletal form.

Set up by one of the main patrons of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, the museum also has an impressive permanent collection of their works set in grounds where peacocks roam and *xoloitzcuintli* (hairless dogs) pose.

For me, the highlight of being in Mexico City on the night of Nov. 1 (the heart of the ceremony) is the chance to drive about another 30 minutes down the road and spend a couple of hours or so in the cemetery in San Gregorio Atlapulco, Xochimilco, on the semi-rural edge of the city. Stretching up from the edge of what remains of the lake system that once filled the Valley of Mexico, many residents still farm the artificial islets known as *chinampas* that were the basis of Mesoamerican agriculture in the area. Definitely worth a wander around if you get there before dark.

Activity in the cemetery itself doesn't really get going until well after dark, but it is worth the wait to see how this traditional community still within the confines of the metropolis fondly remembers its dead. By midnight, it is literally buzzing with activity as families arrive

laden with brooms, buckets, flowers, candles and everything else they need to set up their *ofrendas* on top of the graves. Each is different, and some are stunningly creative. The collective result is both beautiful and rather otherworldly, without being overly solemn.

Some families sit around eating and drinking tequila, chatting about the departed and singing their favorite songs. Minstrels and mariachi bands wander along the paths offering a more professional rendition for a fee. Children play between the graves and the elderly sit wrapped up in heavy blankets preparing to wait the night through. If you speak Spanish, most people are happy to tell you about their dead and their traditions, although there are also those deep in silent thought and more melancholy tributes who obviously want to be left alone.

The cemetery is open to anybody who wants to go, and I have never seen any sign of irritation with strangers taking photographs although it is advisable to discreetly ask permission before taking closer shots. The first time I went, in 2000, there were no other outsiders. The last time, in 2008, I spotted several other foreigners wandering around with cameras. But the cemetery is a long way from being overrun, unlike the much more famous village of Mixquic further down the road.

When you eventually draw yourself away, look back as you drive off towards the concrete jungle to see the orange glow above the cemetery fade into the black night.



A woman carries a figure of La Santa Muerte, or "Death Saint," as she arrives to attend a mass held in the folk saint's name during Day of the Dead celebrations in the town of San Pedro Escobedo, Mexico. PHOTO: AP