

# Mexico's date with death

SUGAR SKULLS, GRAVEYARDS FULL OF MARIGOLDS AND TEQUILA-ADORNED ALTARS – NO HOLIDAY CELEBRATES DEATH LIKE DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

PAUL EWART

A child decorates the grave of her dead mother, piling orange marigolds on top of the freshly tidied earth. Nearby, a family breaks bread over the graves of their deceased, preparing for an all-night vigil in the candle-lit cemetery. At an adjacent plot, tequila is being poured by a group of brothers, who are laughing hysterically as a funny tale about their departed father is re-told.

While the Mexican festival of Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead shares calendar space with its famous Western equivalent, Halloween, it couldn't be more different. In Mexico, rather than ghosts and monsters, people welcome the benign spirits of their departed loved ones with food and tasty sweets decorated like skulls.

With its roots stretching to the Aztecs (and then later fused with the Catholic All Souls Day), this celebration is the highlight in Mexico's religious and cultural calendar. Its importance was cemented after UNESCO declared the festival an "intangible world heritage" back in 2008. And while the main three-day event lasts from October 31 to November 2, preparations begin weeks in advance. Gravestones are cleaned and festooned with decorations, the favourite foods of the dearly departed are lovingly prepared and home altars or "ofrendas" are constructed to lure family spirits back.

Poignant, fun and macabre all at the same time, Day of the Dead really is a party like no other. No one place in the country offers the same experience and every region has its own unique customs. Here are four of the biggest and the best.

## MEXICO CITY

Of the many options available, Mexico City is undoubtedly the easiest. While it may not be as quaint and austere as the more remote areas, Mexico City is where you can see the evolution of the festival from religious holiday to pop culture mainstay.

Check out the zocalo (main square) in the centre of town where there are hundreds of public ofrendas and an annual altar contest and the vibe errs on the side of party. Local museums get in on the action with giant papier-mache skeletons.

Within the urban areas, the holiday is celebrated as a folk tradition, rather than a spiritual or religious affair but drive 30 minutes out of town to the cemetery in San Gregorio Atlapulco, Xochimilco and you'll see something special. By midnight, the place is heaving with mariachi bands and families crowded around graves, laden with decorations. Mixquic is another great option where a procession led by a cardboard coffin heads to the town's cemetery, where a candle-lit vigil will take place until morning.

## LAKE PATZCUARO

If you're after a more traditional experience, head to the sleepy islands of Lake Patzcuaro, in the central state of Michoacan. But one island holds mass appeal — Janitzio.

Here thousands come to watch the indigenous Purepecha people perform elaborate rituals, which continue until the wee hours of the morning. Street stalls sell pan de muerto (sweet bread) and traditional crafts, including the orante "catrinas" (handmade skeleton figures). All the while, the mist emanating from lake mingles with the candlelight from the canoes of local fisherman providing an atmospheric backdrop to the proceedings. The



Indigenous Purepecha people near Lake Patzcuaro prepare for Dia de los Muertos, and (below) sugar skulls are sold in markets across the country for the festival. Pictures: Paul Ewart



island can get full quickly, so visit at twilight or 3am when the crowds have dispersed.

Day of the Dead celebrations aside, the state of Michoacan is more than worth a trip for its cultural and gastronomic offering alone.

## OAXACA

For Dia de los Muertos aesthetics, Oaxaca takes the crown.

Oaxaca is Mexico's artistic heartland and there's no better time to see the wares than during the festival.

Celebrations here are rich and varied, with a range of markets, sand sculpting contests and parades dotting the city's streets. Market stalls with coloured sawdust altars created by local artists and crowds jostle for space through the night

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## QUINTANA ROO

In the Maya region, the celebrations are known as Hanal Pixan or "feast for the souls". And the locals take the "feast" seriously, so visitors should be prepared to eat — a lot.

In Quintana Roo, one of the three states comprising Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, women prepare food for both the dead and the living in the days leading up to the festival.

However, in the Yucatan Peninsula, it's believed that the dead stay for eight days, so a similar feast is prepared on November 7-8.

Another unique component to celebrations in this region are the sacred freshwater natural sinkholes, which the Mayan people consider as the gateways to the underworld.

Rather than cemeteries like the rest of the country, locals honour their pre-hispanic roots by holding celebrations here.



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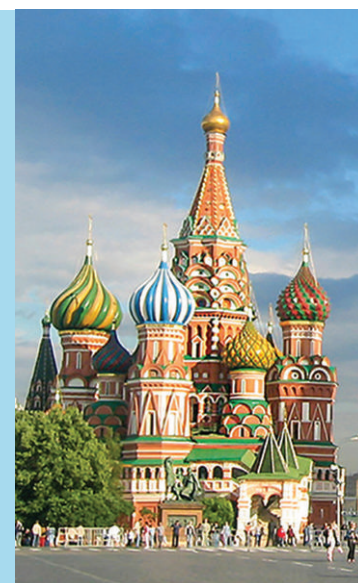
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