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Historic Mazatlan goes for comfort over glitz Mexican port city goes for comfort over glitz, offers great travel value

Written by Irene Middleman Thomas, Vancouver Sun October 7, 2013



When it comes to making memories, Mexico's Mazatlan has your number.

If it feels familiar, maybe it's because Mazatlan has been catering to tourists for half a century. If it feels comfortable, perhaps it's because it lacks the glitz of other, newer resorts. If the pockets feel full, it's because Mazatlan still pleases its visitors with very reasonable prices, unlike many Mexican resort towns.

Mazatlan doesn't try to compete with the luxury of Cancún, the sexiness of Acapulco or the colonial quaintness of Puerto Vallarta. It doesn't need to.

The popular destination, almost 1,300 kilometres south of Tucson, Ariz., on Mexico's Pacific coast, lies at about the same latitude as Hawaii.

A port city of some 500,000 residents, Mazatlan happily swells to accommodate the 1.5 million vacationers, sport fishermen and snowbirds who flock to it each year.

Its waters are neither turquoise nor crystal clear, but they are delightfully gentle and warm, and a pretty blue, with beaches stretching for miles.

Mazatlan is one of Mexico's oldest tourist resorts and home to one of the world's three major Mardi Gras carnivals, comparable only to those in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro.

Boasting the biggest commercial shrimping fleet in Latin America, with over 500 boats, Mazatlan also has one of the largest tuna fishing fleets in the world.

Visitors, however, often feel they are in a small beach village rather than a large city, due to the way Mazatlan separates its commercial and business sectors from its resort areas.

The city's existence doesn't revolve around tourism - it is a thriving metropolis. In fact, thousands of people live and work here without having anything to do with the travel industry. For tourists, however, Mazatlan offers an abundance of riches: One of the longest stretches of uninterrupted beaches in Mexico; water temperatures between 65 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit (18 to 24 degrees Celsius) year round; nightlife set to music ranging from mariachi to disco to piano bar to salsa; colonial architecture; a wealth of handicrafts; and an endless supply of sidewalk and seaside restaurants.

The city, first settled in 1531 by the Spanish, began to really develop in the mid-19th century. To see Mazatlan as the Mazatlecos do, take one of the open-air jitneys (pulmonias).

Or stroll the impressive 20-kilometre boardwalk (malecón) between Playa Olas Altas and Playa Norte. The breezy stretch, studded with impressive statues and monuments, is the pride of Mazatlan, running from one end of the town to the other.

Here visitors will find the hotel zone, fishermen selling their catch at dawn, lovers embracing, locals gossiping and entrepreneurs selling coconuts, shrimp brochettes and mangoes on a stick, dripping with lime juice. The walk takes holidayers past Mazatlan's outstanding aquarium and into Old Mazatlan's Plazuela Machado (Machado Square) the

heart of the city.

On the north side of the plaza is a strip of open-air seafood restaurants. One of the most famous is lively Pedro y Lola's, named after two famous singers and actors from Mazatlan, Pedro Infante Cruz and Lola Beltrán.

Pedro & Lola's wide variety of shrimp platters is reasonably priced and delectable. Grilled with butter and garlic, "camarones al mojo de ajo," downed with a good Mexican beer like the local Pacifico lager or the heavier Negro Modelo, is heaven after a day on the beach.

Time is also well spent admiring the twin-spired cathedral (built in 1875,) the city's main plaza and the beautifully restored Angela Peralta Theatre (built in 1860.). The theatre is a beautiful, neoclassical-style building named after the beloved 19th-century opera diva who died after her only performance in Mazatlan, struck down by yellow fever.

Strolling on the way to Playa Olas Altas, travellers pass by El Puerto Carranza, an old Spanish fort.

The stroll can conclude at High Divers Park, where young men climb to a towering platform and plunge to the sea below. This happens in the late afternoons, typically but is not an everyday occurrence.

The most famous beaches in Mazatlan are Playa Norte, popular with locals, Playa Sábalo and Las Gaviotas on the resort strip, Playa Olas Altas and Las Brujas for surfing and high waves and Playa los Cerritos, one of the city's finest uncrowded beaches on the north end of the hotel zone.

Lively Sábalo Beach is perfect for jet skiing, windsurfing, parachuting, sailing, sport fishing, etc., while the adjacent Cerritos Beach and Playa Norte are known for clean sand and peaceful sunbathing. Mazatlan's Emerald Beach area to the north is being developed as a tony area with posh shops, hotels and restaurants. There's a beach perfect for every mood - romance, action, peace, adventure and people-watching.

Like most sections of Mexico, this area is quite hot and humid from July through September, and likely to have strong rains. The weather from October through May is delightful. It is recommended to have a sweater handy in the evenings, which can be cool due to the humidity and ocean breezes.

If you go

Where to stay: ElCid Mega Resorts: Four different hotels make up this 1,068-room top quality resort which is more like a town in itself. 800-716-9800, www.elcid.com (...).

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