



Mexico City: An Ancient Goddess in Avant Garde Dress

by Emilie C. Harting

Mexico City has a vast overlay of cultures and centuries. Tall modern office buildings with hues of blue, pink, even bright red on navy, rise up next to tan and yellow colonial buildings, ancient stone statues, and modern sculptures. Toltec, Aztec, Spanish and modern images meet the eye in many places. Whether you enjoy exploring foreign cities with map and guidebook in hand as my husband Rob and I do, by taking organized day tours, or by hiring guides at your hotel, peeling away the layers of this complex international city is intriguing and fun. From early morning to late at night, the upbeat buzz of everyday rhythms blends with the quiet murmuring of the centuries.



Palace of Fine Arts ©Mexico Tourism Board

The double decker, hop-on-and-off Turibus is one of the best ways to get a sense of the city's grand layout. From seats on the open second floor you look down to wide tree-lined avenues graced with fountains, sculptures, and squares, many of the older ones with Italian or French influences. It takes a route east and west from the Zocalo, the main square and center of the historic district, passes through the Zona Rosa and Polanco--the newer hotel, restaurant, and financial districts--and begins circling back at Chapultepec Park with its museums and lakes. On its return, the bus dips south into Condesa, a newer Art Deco neighborhood with many galleries and cafés.

Inspired by the Champs-Élysées in Paris, Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian, ruler of Mexico in the mid-1860s, built the route from the Zocalo to Chapultepec Park so he could move easily from the castle to his office in the Zocalo.

On a Sunday morning we walked through Mexico City's huge Metropolitan Cathedral while a priest in a white robe and rope belt stood in the center section conducting the Sunday service. A large crowd clutched prayer books and softly uttered responses, while tourists, seeming to follow the cadence of the music and the singing of the priest, headed toward a huge gold baroque altar and wall at the back of the church. Dark side chapels filled with carved walls, altars, statues, gates, oil paintings in gilded frames, and flickering candles were reminders of cathedrals in Spain.

A svelte, well-coiffed Mexican woman in an elegant silk suit genuflected in front of me on the marble floor, while a sea of silver haired American couples in Bermuda shorts, tee shirts, and white sneakers and socks walked by, their arms swinging slowly like mall walkers. Appearing rushed, a tall Mexican man in a suit cut through the crowd and headed toward the main altar with a double-seated stroller packed with lilies. His wife followed, slithering fast through the crowd, her hands clasping several tiny children.

Outside we passed through the heavily embellished front façade with its grand 17th century baroque portals and bas



Metropolitan Cathedral

relief panels, and stepped onto the Zocalo, one of the largest squares in the world. Temple Mayor, the ruins of the Aztec city which the Spaniards had destroyed to build the cathedral, was next door. Mexican families strolled along the paths while their children took notes for school history projects. Crowds gathered around the statues of the serpents and the eight ton stone disc in honor of the goddess Coyolxauhqui. The Temple is said to be on the spot where the Aztecs first had a vision of Mexico's symbol: an eagle with a snake in its beak.

The excavation of the Temple Mayor actually began in the 1980s when an electrician discovered Coyolxauhqui. Now many artifacts, including a number of unusual sculptures, are housed in the excellent indoor museum to the side. I was drawn to a painting of the valley of Mexico City at the time the Aztecs came to build their three cities on islands surrounded by the waters of Lake Texcoco: Tenochtitlán here at the Temple Mayor, now surrounded by the heavily baroque Zocolo, the heart of old Mexico City; Tlatelolco, a sister city a mile north at the Plaza of Three Cultures, where the Aztec ruins are surrounded by a smaller 16th century Spanish church, and high, modern buildings; and Teotihuacán, an hour to the northeast, where the vast temples to the Sun and the Moon, popularly known as the Pyramids, stand, ringed by mountains.

Diego Rivera's murals depicting two thousand years of Mexican history line the hallways of the National Palace, also on the Zocalo. We spent a long time trying to identify the faces in the 1,200 foot square Italian-inspired fresco series. The section with the elaborate Aztec marketplaces, much admired by the Spanish, was especially vivid because we had just bought jewelry from a woman in native dress who sat on a blanket outside.

At the top of the Temples to the Sun and Moon, often called "the Pyramids," thirty miles northeast of Zocalo, you can stand where the Aztecs conducted ceremonies to the gods, and get a view of the Mexico Valley. Built between 100 and 300 A.D., Teotihuacán was probably Mexico's largest city before the Conquest, and, at its height, controlled much of the trade to Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras. Serpent carvings, their heads surrounded by feathers, and extraordinary bird and jaguar murals seemed to be sending messages from a former time.



Mayan temple facade ©Emilie C. Harting

At the world renowned Anthropology Museum in Chapultepec Park a guide told us it would only take an hour or two to view the exhibits. However, we spent the day there, enchanted, and will certainly return on our next trip. The museum made the several thousand years of Mexican and Central American history before the Spanish Conquest much clearer. We saw giant Olmec heads from the jungles, a statue of the snake-headed Aztec goddess wearing a necklace of human heads and hearts, gold jewelry and other objects from Oaxaca, and a figure of the wind god Ehecatl, the wind god, discovered when the excavations were made to built Mexico City's subway. In the Mayan section, partially set in a garden, temple facades and worshipping stones had been brought here from as far away as Belize and Honduras.

The Chapultepec Castle, also in the park, is a fast forward to Spanish Mexico. Once the site of an Aztec Palace, it has been a Spanish monastery, a military center, and later, in the late 1800s, the residence of Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian and his wife. When you walk through the drawing rooms upstairs with their brocade chairs and drapes, and huge paintings with ornate gold frames, you feel like you're in Madrid or Paris. Outside on the porch there's a panoramic view of the city with its many parks and buildings. The route that Maximilian laid out to the Zocalo is a clean cut of wide avenue down the

center.

Several centuries butt together in close proximity in San Angel, a southern suburb that was a colonial town until sixty years ago: the Frida Kahlo House, Trotsky's House, and Hidalgo Square. At "Blue House," many rooms are carefully decorated to illustrate the life and art of painter Frida Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera, the famous muralist. It seems as though Frida and Diego might have just stepped out for a stroll while their home, with its bright yellow walls and red and blue trim, had been spruced up for a house tour.

In the large studio she shared with Rivera, her wheelchair is placed in front of an easel holding an unfinished sketch of Stalin. A sculpture resembling a death mask and a brightly painted body cast she wore after her tragic accident are prominently displayed on her bed. Above is the mirror she used so she could see what she was painting during the long convalescence when she had to lie flat. Throughout the house replicas of both Frida's and Diego's paintings are interspersed with family objects of art and furniture. Especially touching is a large display of their miracle paintings on a hallway landing. Some original works are in a downstairs gallery, but most of their art is in various museums around Mexico City.

Exiled Soviet revolutionary Leon Trotsky and his wife lived with Frida and Diego in "The Blue House" for two years until they had a falling out. The Trotskys then set up housekeeping nearby in a much grayer, drabber compound with gardens, high walls with turrets, and a guard house. Except for reorganizing and cleaning, the rooms look as if they have not been altered much since the family left. His piles of papers rest neatly in the study where he was murdered by a Stalin agent in 1940. The small museum is very informative, with numerous pictures of Trotsky and his wife with world leaders, many copies of letters under glass, and also a documentary film.

At nearby Hidalgo Square, we felt like we were walking around in a colonial town. Children romped along in front of senior citizens sitting on the benches. A stand under the trees sold helium balloons and ice cream. Worshippers slipped in and out of the old Dominican St. John the Baptist Church known for its oil paintings on plain white walls. Tall trees, bookstores and cafés lined the surrounding streets. In one long colonial building at the end Cortes was said to have tortured the defeated Mexican emperor so he could reveal his treasures.

On our last day we sat in a flower-painted boat at Xochimilco, being poled through the canals with other tourists. Tradesmen with trinkets to sell passed by on other boats. Mariachi bands stopped and sang for us. Roosters chanted. Farmers tilled their fields of flowers. The early painting of Mexico City's first temple on islands in the middle of a mountain ringed lake kept coming back to me as I looked at the tree roots reaching a few feet above the water to flat land. I had fallen in love with Mexico City, old and new, and did not want to leave.



Frida Kahlo House ©Emilie C. Harting



River barges ©Mexico Tourism Board

If You Go:

HOTELS:

These hotels are centrally located for sightseeing, restaurants and shopping. All have daytrips to popular sites in Mexico City and the surrounding area.

The Four Seasons: On the historic Reforma Avenue. Garden courtyard is a refuge from the bustling city. Excellent family and children's programs. <http://www.fourseasons.com>

The Marguis Reforma: Also on Reforma Avenue. Elegant, Art Deco hotel with excellent service and state of the art holistic spa that offers half-day airport layover packages. <http://www.marquisreforma.com>

The Camino Real: Designed by architect Ricardo Legorreta. Virtually a museum of contemporary Mexican art, with nine restaurants and bars. Outdoor pool. Executive Club area. <http://www.caminoreal.com/mexico>

RESTAURANTS:

Nearby restaurant discoveries: Las Mercedes, excellent Mexican food. La Bussola, Italian/Argentinian.

TURIBUS:

Takes a continuous route from the historic end of town to Chapultepec Park and back. Hop on and off at stops with large red flags. A narrator provides excellent commentary with headphones.

SAFETY:

The major rule in Mexico City is: do not take taxis from the street. Ask a hotel or restaurant to call a taxi, or call a radio cab from inside a museum. That said, follow the same safety precautions you would in Paris, London, or New York. Do not walk alone at night. Stay on major streets. If in doubt, ask if an area is safe for walking. The Zona Rosa, Condesa, and Polanco districts are relatively safe, and the historic district and Zocalo area are relatively safe in the day time. Take precautions against pickpockets when in crowds.

MARKETS:

The Spaniards had great admiration for the Aztec markets when they arrived, and men and women in native dress have their wares spread out on blankets near many sites. However, Saturday Market in San Angel is the place to go to mix with the locals. La Ciudadela, downtown, has a wide range of goods and bargains. Pasaje del Angel in the Zona Rosa has one of the largest craft, silver, and antiques markets.

AIR QUALITY:

Pollution is worst from November to February, and best from May through August when it rains for a half hour or so in the afternoon.



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