

MEXICO CITY'S PARISIAN PANACHE

With its splendid museums, colonial palaces, leafy avenues, al fresco plazas and gourmet restaurants, Mexico City is now a strong contender for the title of The Next Paris. Charukesi Ramadurai takes a tour



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



The historic Palacio de Bellas Artes, or Palace of Fine Arts, is Mexico's cultural centre. Four Pegasus sculptures by Agustí Querol Subirats stand in its front plaza

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hen I mention my plan to spend a few days exploring Mexico City on my own, the general reaction is one of concern. What about safety? What about the drug cartels

and the mafia wars, ask friends and family. So by the time I check into my hipster hotel in the central historic neighbourhood of Zocalo, all my senses are on high alert. My first reassurance comes from the hotel clerk who laughs at my questions. "On some days, we have more cops than tourists on the streets," he says.

Surely enough, in Mexico City, I find not just oodles of colour and culture (as expected), but also warmth and friendliness from the most unexpected sources. From the lady at the street market who leaves her stall unattended to take me all the way to the nearest train station. From the ticket seller at the Palacio de Bellas Artes who lets me in five minutes after closing time, simply because I am leaving town the next day and cannot bear to miss this stunning museum. And from the young server at the taco stand who offers me generous tastings when I hesitate over unfamiliar ingredients such as huitlacoche (mushroom growth on ears of corn) and nopales (the flesh of the prickly pear cactus).

A SLICE OF EUROPE

Even at first sight, Zocalo reminds me of Europe. The open plaza at the heart of town was built by the Spanish conquerors right over the ruins of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. The square is now lined with magnificent palaces that serve as the seat of local and national political administration, ruins from several centuries ago that once housed both religious temples and sacrificial sites, and an ancient cathedral that marries eclectic architectural styles from different periods. In turn, these rub shoulders with bars and cafes that are buzzing with boisterous tourists, possibly high on both mezcal and life.

At my first stop, the Palacio Nacional (National Palace), there are over a dozen security guards in ceremonial uniform strutting about the premises. I imagine they are there to protect the important politicians who work in these offices. But the tourists who throng this 16th-century palace are not here for a glimpse of the Mexican president, but for a look at artist Diego Rivera's vibrant murals that spread across the winding staircase and corridor walls of the Grand Courtyard building. Painted between 1929 and 1935, these colourful murals showcase the ancient and modern history of Mexico. Gawping at the brilliance of these stories expressed through art, I am once again struck by the fact that all this is available for free to visitors.

Palacio de Correos de México (Postal Palace of Mexico City) is Mexico City's main post office



DETOUR

Beautiful tilework covers three façades of the 18th-century Casa de los Azulejos (House of Tiles)



Left: A fresco by Diego Rivera in the Palacio Nacional
Below: Get the best churros at El Moro



A walk through the pedestrian-only Avenida Francisco I. Madero is a great way to get a sense of how locals eat, shop and shoot the breeze

In fact, that defines my Mexico City experience in a nutshell: a wealth of artistic and cultural riches strewn all over the city. Some of them are hidden inside imposing, even intimidating, façades such as the white-marbled, high-domed Palacio de Bellas Artes, where murals coexist with a concert hall, an arts centre and an architecture museum. And others, such as the Museo Frida Kahlo, halfway across town, are small and charming, drawing eager devotees and curious visitors alike. Popularly known as Casa Azul (Blue House), this museum is an ode to the private life as well as the evocative art of the gifted but troubled artist who was married to Diego Rivera.

SURPRISES AT EVERY TURN

In this city, the air seems to be perpetually filled with the sounds of classical jazz and peppy salsa in equal measure. A walk through the pedestrian-only shopping street of Avenida Francisco I. Madero, or simply Madero, is a great way to get a sense of how locals eat, shop and shoot the breeze.

Strolling along lazily one evening, I take quick detours into the lanes branching off the main avenue to admire the blue-and-white tiles on the

outer walls of the Casa de los Azulejos mansion, and the grand staircases, gleaming marble floors and gilded dome ceiling at the 112-year-old Palacio de Correos de México – even the main post office is an erstwhile palace in this city with a surprise at every corner!

All these apart, Mexico City's greatest cultural offering is perhaps the Museo Nacional de Antropología, a sprawling complex where an entire day is simply not enough to check out the priceless collections of Mexican and Latin American art and artefacts from across the centuries. The highlights here include the impressive Aztec sun stone, Piedra del Sol, which weighs nearly 25 tons, and a replica of the resplendent feathered crown of Aztec ruler Moctezuma II. The exhibits spill outside into the museum gardens, where ancient temples and piazzas have been recreated with great care.

CULINARY CAPITAL

In my short time in Mexico City, I also discover that food is as much a part of its cultural fabric as the art museums and the baroque cathedrals. Creative chefs who are giving traditional Mexican cuisine a

global twist are considered artists in their own right, and are as revered as politicians and poets. And as many people queue up in front of famous restaurants such as Enrique Olvera's Pujol and Jorge Vallejo's Quintonil, as along roadside taquerias and churrerías.

Mexico City is a place to explore at your own pace. For the young and the restless, there are the mezcal dive bars and the sports stadiums, the hipster boutiques and the vegan cafes; for travellers who wish to savour the city slowly, there are the 150-plus museums, the public parks and gardens, and the gondolas in the Xochimilco borough.

While I have chosen to spend my few precious days in Mexico City around the historic centre, many tourists prefer the leafy neighbourhoods of Roma and Condesa, where crowded streets give way to wide boulevards with Art Deco-style residences, designer boutiques and vegan cafes.

People have been squabbling for a while over whether Mexico City is the next Paris or the next New York City. Meanwhile, it marches on, heedless of these speculations, carving a stylish niche of its own in Latin America. **P**

TRAVEL GUIDE

STAY

For a luxury experience, check into Gran Hotel Ciudad de México, which boasts Art Nouveau architecture and a Tiffany stained-glass ceiling in the lobby. granhoteldelaciudaddemexico.com.mx/en

EAT

- Book a table at Limosneros for a taste of traditional Mexican cuisine with a modern touch. limosneros.com.mx
- Sign up for a food tour with Eat Mexico. eatmexico.com/tour/mexico-city
- Go on a Tasty Bites tour to sample the best street food. tastybitesfoodtours.com.mx
- Don't miss the delicious churros at El Moro, serving up the best since 1935. elmoro.mx