

## MEXICO : DISTRITO FEDERAL ONE MASSIVE CULTURAL FEAST

## Epic adventures await in city of the Aztecs

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New moms push strollers along a leafy sidewalk. Spandex-clad young women jog on the crunchy park path nearby as dusk settles. Restaurant tables spill out on the sidewalk, some couples chatting up a storm while others languidly scroll down their smartphones. A dog walker untangles the leashes of his furry charges – we can't help but pet one tail-wagging little rascal. Occasionally, a bicyclist pedals by.

We could be out on a balmy summer evening in Vancouver – except we're strolling the Condesa neighbourhood of Mexico City. Say what?

Forget what you think you know of Mexico City. Because it's likely to surprise you.

This mega-city (population over 21 million) is so vast that, peering down from the plane, we can't make out its edges. But below we find a people-friendly, vibrant, buzzing hive of a place – a delight to explore on foot, with loads of historical treasures and an explosion of cutting-edge artistic, culinary and cultural venues.

It's got lots of shady, green parks and more museums than any other city in the world (over 150, apparently). It's quite safe – apart from a few (easily avoided) dodgier districts, you don't need to worry about a trip to Mexico City any more than about a visit to New York or Miami. And its air is clean most of the time – air pollution has dropped significantly since the city's dirty days in the 1990s (on our visit, the blue skies are smog-free).

Its name also holds a small surprise – it only officially changed to "Mexico City" this January, from "DF" (Distrito Federal), the moniker commonly used by the locals.

We start exploring our first afternoon. Luckily, the world-renowned National Museum of Anthropology, grand-daddy of Mexico City's museums, is close by in lovely Chapultepec Park. It's easy to reach on foot, so we don't need to sit in the clogged city traffic.

And it doesn't disappoint – it wonderfully displays Mexico's history from pre-Columbian times to the Spanish conquest.

Eye-popping exhibits include the gigantic 25-ton Aztec "sun" stone from the 15th century and fearsome Olmec stone heads. We also come to understand that the Aztecs



Diego Rivera mural in the National Palace, located on Mexico City's main square, the Plaza de la Constitución (El Zócalo).

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centred their empire around present-day Mexico City; the classical Mayan civilization mostly flourished in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, centuries earlier.

Next day, a sunny Sunday morning, we join the locals thronging the Paseo de la Reforma, the City's grandest boulevard. On Sundays, the Paseo is closed to all car traffic until mid-afternoon – a Mexican tradition that makes it a people-magnet. And what a spectacle!

Families pull their kidlets down the street in wheeled wagons, roller-skaters glide by and teens in sporty clothing ride bicycles, raring to go at the lights. Look, there's a group practising yoga. Oh, and how fun! A crowd of fitness buffs is zumba-dancing to throbbing music. Red-nosed clowns are also out entertaining wee ones.

We notice many eco-friendly bicycle stands and rental shacks with lineups in front for modestly priced rental bikes. Bicycling as a way of getting around is a growing, popular phenomenon, and some bike lanes have sprung up in the city too.

The rich assortment of public art along the Paseo vies for our attention as well. The golden Angel of Independence atop its tall column dominates one grand traffic circle. And, yes, we



Zócalo Palace looks over the main square in central Mexico City – prior to the colonial period it was the main ceremonial centre in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.

can kind of see that the very modern, golden "El Caballito" sculpture looks like a stylized horse.

Leaving the Paseo, we walk through Alameda Park. This is the city's oldest park, an expansive green space, criss-crossed by lots of well-loved walking paths and patrolled by policemen on horseback. It's sprinkled with shady popular trees, and children splash about in water fountains. In February and March, when the Jacaranda trees and lavender flowers bloom, the park is a palette of purple.

We finally reach the magnificent Palace of Fine Arts, its white marble dazzling in the sunshine. Inside, we admire huge murals painted by some

of Mexico's famous artists. But we're unable to see the theatre's stained-glass curtain made by New York jeweller, Tiffany, or its crystal ceiling dome. For that, we'd have to watch one of the renowned, twice-weekly Ballet Folklórico performances (and drat, we're not here then).

Then a quick peek into another jaw-dropping building. Really, a post office? Yep, it's the Postal Palace. Marble floors, grand stairway flanked by bronze railings, gilded lamps – imagine mailing a letter here! Under its soaring ceiling of leaded glass, it looks like a lacy confection of bronze and gold and light.

In the city's historical centre, we aim for the bustling

Zócalo. A gathering place for political demonstrations in years past, the city's main square is occupied chock-a-bloc by white tents, some with banners hand-painted with political slogans. But it's peaceful today. Here again, we notice striking contrasts. The baroque Metropolitan Cathedral majestically presides over the square, while brand-new, shiny eco-taxis are lined up nearby.

By this time, our stomachs are rumbling. We stumble upon Café Tacuba with its stained-glass windows. Inside, a treat awaits. It's an elegant, traditional Mexican restaurant, its female wait-staff wearing starched white caps and aprons. The spicy hot chocolate and Mexican chicken sandwich are delicious! Only later do we discover it's a bit of an institution – there's even a local band calling itself "Café Tacuba."

Revived, we tackle the National Palace next. A burgundy-canopied facade faces the main square. But where's the entrance? A friendly guard forgives our mangled Spanish and points us around the corner, where we line up with the many locals for a visit.

In its garden courtyards, we're attracted by signs pointing to the living quarters and official rooms once occupied by Benito Juarez, perhaps

Mexico's best-loved president. We then look for the brilliantly coloured mural by Diego Rivera, "The Epic of the Mexican People in their struggle for Freedom and Independence." Rivera took years to paint this masterpiece, so massive it winds around the palace's central staircase.

History is all well and good. But the day is over and we're ready now for a modern take on Italian cuisine at Il Becco restaurant. Part of the high-end Becco group of restaurants in Mexico, Il Becco tickles our tastebuds with artichoke-and-pistachio risotto and linguine with lobster. Bonus: the bill is less than some Italian restaurants back in Vancouver.

The next day, we hit another museum. In Mexico City, there are museums to suit every intellectual fancy, from shoe to cartoon museums – even a pen museum. We've picked the National Museum of Art, as it's said to house the most impressive collection of Mexican art in the country. We're happy with our choice, as we enjoy rural landscapes, portraits and other artworks by Mexican painters little-known to foreign visitors.

Unfortunately we don't have time for two new art museums we want to see – the Museo Soumaya (which showcases billionaire Carlos Slim's extensive \$700 million art collection of Rodin sculptures and paintings by Van Gogh, Matisse and Monet) and the Museo Jumex (displaying the largest collection of contemporary art in Latin America).

We end our too-short Mexico City visit with one last stroll and dinner at a trendy spot in Condesa. We're a bit sad – we only managed to briefly trundle through the artsy Roma neighbourhood, never made it to the posh Polanco district, and there's still the "Blue House" of Frida Kahlo to see. Next time, perhaps...

#### If you go:

In the five-star category, the Four Seasons Hotel Mexico, D.F. has just been completely renovated and boasts a small outdoor pool. It's conveniently located a ten-minute walk from the National Museum of Anthropology. Visit [fourseasons.com/mexico](http://fourseasons.com/mexico).

The Red Tree House is a lovely, top-rated B&B in the old-world Condesa neighborhood. Its free evening wine hour is a hit with the international mix of guests (as are its rates, which start at \$95 USD). Visit [redtreehouse.com](http://redtreehouse.com).