



Like many, I had my own ideas about what Mexico's west coast may bring, a little apprehensive about the unknown. Almost all my expectations were shattered, as soon as I saw the sunset dip below the Pacific Ocean as we all clapped it away on the beach. This special place called Mazatlan, steeped in rich traditions and undeniable pride, welcomes visitors with open arms to enjoy its kaleidoscope of wild activities, amazing cuisine and cultural ventures. Located across the gulf from Cabo San Lucas and known as "The Pearl of the Pacific", after a quick plane ride you can be Oceanside and indulging in all the wonderful features in this unique and charming destination.



Ocean and island views for miles

After checking into the stunning Royal Villas Hotel, I made a beeline for the water. The large pool surrounded with rocks and a waterslide stand side by side to the beach for easy access to both. Rooms were cozy and most sported incredible vistas of Mazatlan and the islands, called Deer, Bird and Goat respectively. One of my favorite things to do was lounge in a chair and watch horseback riders and Mexican musicians stroll by. Off resort, the streets are busy with traffic and chatting locals, but also boasts plenty of fun cantinas and little cafes to grab a cheap bite to eat.

Seafood as a centerpiece

Travelers flock to Mazatlan for many reasons, including the seafood bursting with flavor. Plucked straight from nearby oceans, the "ceviche," or raw plates filled with scallops, octopus and shrimp can be found at restaurants and cafes throughout the area. Marlin fish tacos are another specialty when it comes to marine cuisine, as well as baked whole fish. Many main courses are accompanied by real fried beans, rice or corn tamales.

Cruising along Mazatlan's coast

To get a real feel of the urban sprawl, I took a bus tour that dipped between narrowly places buildings and around crazy curved roads. It was a wonderful way to see how the neighborhoods and historic buildings hugged the coast and cliffs, which extended into the nearby historic district and various clusters of resorts. Mazatlan has both the feel of musical Miami and the laid back atmosphere of the parks near San Antonio. There is a perfect blend of Mexican color, coastal wonders and personality bursting at the seams. We did make a stop by the beach to watch one of the city's staple show-off occasions - brave cliff divers to fling themselves into the choppy ocean below from impossible heights.

The striking Angela Peralta Theater

That evening was spent at the lovely and historical theater in the center of the historic district. Inaugurated in 1873, it has an open courtyard in the front so you can wait for shows to start while admiring the intricate pink and white details of the exterior. I was honored to watch some local dancers give an informal performance in a contemporary style, illustrating Mazatlan's flourishing art scene.

A brand new place to gather

While Mazatlan's mostly fun and games, many organizations and groups also choose this area for their events. A few years ago the city introduced a sleek and modern conference center that can host thousands of guests. It's worth a look at the smooth structures juxtaposed against the raw beauty of Mazatlan's ever-expanding tourism area.

Walking through the Osuna Distillery

After breakfast, we hopped in a van and ventured to a morning tour of Osuna Distillery. In this part of Mexico, they make an agave liquor similar to tequila, although only three places in the country are allowed to use that specific name. This small but scenic location offers an up-close look into the process of creating this strong and smooth drink that is used in cocktails and recipes throughout the area. Their various blends of agave have won big awards for its purity and taste. When visiting, note the bursts of agave plants along the dirt road and those that border the distillery, which are a distinct blue/green color.

Defying the odds at Huana Coa

This trip was many "firsts" for me - the first time in Mexico, first time trying raw octopus and also my first experience zip lining. At the Huana Coa adventure center, we were able to choose from various activities, including horseback riding and riding 4x4 vehicles. However, I had never zip lined before, so I was number one on that sign up list. To take part in these thrilling excursions, riders are harnessed into a system similar to rock climbing, then strapped to a strong cable strung between two elevated platforms. You then fly through the trees like a monkey, gliding from platform to platform until you reach level ground. It's exciting for all ages and abilities to try, giving you a unique perspective on the tropical surroundings of Mazatlan.

Elegant Marina El Cid

The city has done wonders with its beautiful and trendy marina that now is a hotspot for accommodations and dining. I was in town for a special travel awards conference, called the "Fiesta De Amigos", or Fiesta of Friends. To reach the venue, we took a boat ride across the harbour from the Marina El Cid hotel, one of the most elegant places to stay around. I enjoyed a delectable dinner of fresh, locally grown beef and west coast lobster, finished with a mango crème Brule. Fresh fruit truly does make a dessert and Mazatlan has plenty of it.

Living like a local

Since my Spanish is conversational and I like to meet new people, I decided to venture out and explore Mazatlan's nightlife. Discovered was plenty of lively nightclubs near the resorts and on the beach, with a more laid-back crowd earlier in the evening that expanded as the evening went on. Many places had a fun mix of expats from Canada and the U.S. alongside plenty of born and raised residents. If you prefer less dancing and more mingling, the historic district has more comfortable lounges for conversation and delicious late-night appetizers. When it's time to return, be bold and flag down one of the open-air taxis, which provide some wonderful opportunities for watching the lights of the city fly by.

Hiking up to El Faro

Before the heat of the day sets in, I strapped on my hiking shoes and made my way to the top of a small mountain to reach the El Faro lighthouse. This is the second highest natural lighthouse in the world. Trekking more than 500 feet to the top, the reward was panoramic vistas of the entire city, which is almost always clear because of the wonderfully sunny Mazatlan weather. They recently added an easier trail so the summit can be reached at a less strenuous pace, offering some of the best views around.



A parasailing perspective

I tend to be a lot happier when my feet are planted firmly on the ground. However, the adventure truly begins when you try new things and push limits. So, after a little coaxing, I was launched into the air by parasail, feet dangling high above the blue ocean with unforgettable views of Mazatlan's mini islands and coastline below. It was certainly a highlight of the trip to be suspended in the sky, and I'm so glad it wasn't missed. The great thrill-seeking experts at The Aqua Sports Center made me feel completely safe and secure as well, although when I was offered a second go I politely declined, I didn't think I could handle another adrenaline rush so soon.

Lunch at Costa Marinera

For a relaxing afternoon we had lunch at the vibrant and traditional Costa Marinera restaurant. There may be nothing better than a massive platter full of shrimp enjoyed with a margarita right by the beach. Waiters serenaded us with old Spanish song as the hours flew by over our relaxing meal.

A drink at the top of Mazatlan

Holidays in Mazatlan and throughout Mexico are celebrated with no reserve. I attended an event at Hotel Jonathon, which is one of the city's newest watering holes that has a sleek rooftop lounge. Music played as people floated by in impossible costumes, gazing out over the buildings and deep blue ocean below. Hors d'oeuvres, including the city's famous shrimp pate, was a treat to enjoy as well at this fun hotspot.

Some cultural adventure downtown

Back at the main arts theater downtown, I was a guest at a fantastic choir show, demonstrating more of the local talent that loves to present their passion to travelers. The massive group of singers performed in the large venue, surrounded by classic balcony seating and amazing acoustics.

Special festivities to honor the dead

Not only is Halloween a big deal in Mazatlan, the locals really go all out for Day of the Dead, or "Dia de los Muertos. Celebrated in the first of November, adults and children honor loved ones who've passed by setting up small altars at their homes and business, covered in offerings like tortillas and pictures of the deceased. By the plaza in the historic district, a massive procession goes by the crowd, like a parade, including people airbrushed and painted like skeletons. Burros, or donkeys, ambled along with carts full of cheerful parade participants offering beer to onlookers. Music was mostly "banda" style, which is a cross between Mexican mariachi and German big band due to the city's European influences.

We were able to enjoy the spectacle street-side and then while enjoying a meal at Pedro y Lola at the outdoor seating area. Although I am a huge fan of seafood, it was great to switch things up and indulge in some prime cut steak with grilled nopales, similar to a flat green bean.

Getting pampered in the city

On my last day in Mazatlan I knew I wanted to treat myself to some wonderfully relaxing activities after a full week of adventure. In the historic district, I stumbled up a cozy spa owned by a few American ex-pats. Tippy Toes offers all types of services, whether it be manicures, full body massages or luxurious facials. I tried a little of everything and felt worlds renewed. They did a fantastic job making me feel at home and comfortable as we chatted about their salon and it's roots, which is family-run and head by American author and hairdresser Debbie Rodriguez. They recently opened a new room upstairs as well to mimic a Marrakech beauty escape.



Welcomed by local artists

I was fortunate enough to learn about the annual ArtWalk happening just outside the doors of Tippy Toes, on a tip from the staff. Local artists opened their doors, literally, and let visitors walk about their homes to view some spectacular paintings and sculptures. Many drew inspiration from their tropical surroundings and created striking images of Mazatlan. Stores and boutiques also participated, giving me the perfect chance to pick up some unique souvenirs. One of the favourite places I encountered was the funky Gandarva bazaar, specializing in Mexican crafts, handmade musical instruments and decorations.

Time to hit the streets

I had no idea how to conclude my amazing trip, so I let fate decide and was led to a few Mexican cantinas for some street-inspired food. I ordered some grilled shrimp, quesadillas and spicy pico de gallo for only a couple of pesos that were some of the best I've ever had, only a few feet from the hotel. Everyone out on a Friday was more than friendly, and we were welcomed to a local bar that had live music and cheery decor. Despite the long flights and the strong sun, my adventure in Mazatlan was absolutely memorable. Mexico has an undeniable price, which is practically palpable every time someone waves and welcomes you to their slice of paradise.

To read the original article visit http://canadianworldtraveller.com/Destinations_&_Articles_Mexico_Winter%202013.htm