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Day Of The Dead

By Alexander Hanrath

THE MEXICAN DAY OF THE DEAD CELEBRATION IS A BEND OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS—THE PRE-HISPANIC CULT OF DEATH, THE VENERATION OF ANCESTORS PRACTICED BOTH BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND SPANISH PAGAN GROUPS, AND THE COMMEMORATION OF CATHOLIC SAINTS ON ALL SAINTS DAY.

Now here in the world do the dead receive such a warm welcome back as in Mexico. At the end of October and beginning of November, Mexicans welcome back their deceased into the family circle.

Far from being a somber occasion, it is the one occasion each year when the dead are beckoned directly with earthly pleasures—be that mezcal or mole.

For the family welcoming back departed relatives, the ceremony is both a pleasure and a duty.

The scenes at the cemeteries are

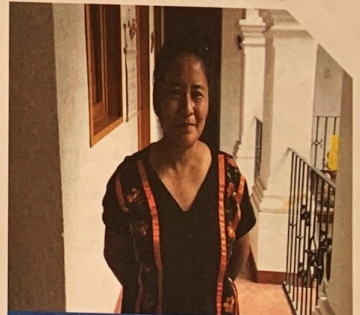
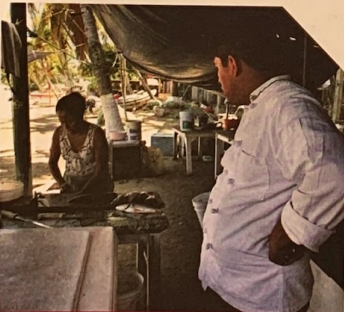
magical. Vivid orange and yellow cempasuchiles (marigolds) decorate the tombstones and crosses, illuminated at night by the incandescent glow of thousands of small candles.

The whole affair is made mystical by the blue smoke and scent of the burning copal incense.

Both the cempasuchiles and the copal carry important symbolism and serve to lead the dead to and from the realm of the living.

Entire families in their Sunday best crowd family tombs with offers of food, alcohol, snacks, photos and

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and books.

It is a full-blown family re-union and many take their evening meal, pic-nic-style, on the tombs, sharing with the dead.

Music and dancing figure highly in the cemetery festivities—people have been known to bring a band of mariachis to the grave.

Throughout the evening, laughter and cheer, and also genuine commemora-tion light the cemetery grounds.

The Mexican Day of the Dead celebra-tion is a bend of cultural tradi-tions—the pre-Hispanic cult of death, the veneration of ancestors practiced both by indigenous peoples and Spanish pagan groups, and the commemora-tion of Catholic Saints on All Saints Day.

Ultimately though, it is a distinctly Mexican occasion. The coun-try vigorously embraces its dead during these days. It drinks, sings and dances with them.

This is the most ostentatious festi-vity of the year—more exuberant than either Easter or Christmas.

It illustrates the spe-cial relationship that Mexico seems to have with death—a laughing, mocking famil-iarly that is embodied in the portrayal of grinning paper mache skeletons perform-ing life's everyday tasks. Dancing on

someone's grave, an action that carries such negative connotations in the rest of the Christian world, here represents a reaching out of the living to the dead, a re-union in the most festive spirit.

At heart, the Day of the Dead is a fam-ily affair and much of the cere-mony takes place indoors, within the inner-sanctum of the family circle.

This is the authentic Mex-ican Day of the Dead, a sight few foreigners see. On October 31, the family builds the ofrenda (offering altar) together.

Typically the altar consists of an arch made of reed or corn husks, placed on a table and deco-rated with flowers, fruit, bread, tins filled with sugar, and decorative tissues or paper.

Figures of patron saints, candles and



they

pic-tures of the deceased occupy the center of the altar. Then come the earth-ly pleasures.

Rich helpings of food are set out at the al-tar for the arrival of the guests (the dead), who arrive in order of sac-redness.

The first to arrive are the souls of dead children, the angelitos, on November 1, around noon. The adults visit at the end of the afternoon on November 2. Glasses of water are left on the altar as refreshment after their long journey.

Naturally, food plays a central role. For breakfast, Oaxacan families often eat ta-males de mole, and for lunch chicken is served with rich, spicy mole sauce and rice.

In some parts of Mexico, tables are set for the entire family, including empty chairs for the ancestors.

In their brief re-tun to the realm of the living, the dead eat and drink, basi-cally, whatever they fancy.

Adults are offered all their old favorites, as well as cigarettes and mezc-al if they were known to partake.

Candy, soda, even junk food is brought for the angelitos. The dead, whose presence is felt throughout the cel-ebrations, are thought to consume essence of the meal and presents laid before them, leaving positive energy as

depart again.

After the feast, the altar food is gen-erously shared among relatives, neigh-bors and friends.

The style and form of the celebration varies greatly throughout the country, be-tween social classes, ethnic groups, even from village to village.

In many rural and indigenous parts, people view the Dia de Muertos cere-monies as an obligation (with dire consequences for those who fail to at-tend) and a private matter. In larger towns and cities like

Oaxaca open and public displays of revelry abound, in some cases emphasized for the curious tourist popu-lation.

Elaborate, costumed processions take place with music, singing and danc-ing.

Weeks beforehand, shop windows are decorated with paper skeletons and skulls, much as Christmas decorations take over shopping streets all over Europe and the US.

In the second half of October, mar-kets sell varied merchandise: waxes, incense, paper decorations, candy skulls, special bread, mole, fruit, nuts, tin work, pottery and more.

Generally, no expense is spared as people honor the dead and attempt to outdo their neighbors.



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By Steven Lee Seung Ho

Las Escaleras del Fortín, literally translated, the stairs of the fortress, is a refreshing route to take for an early walk or a run at 6:00 in the morning.

Located in Crespo de Oaxaca City, the staircase ultimately leads up to the Guelaguetza auditorium.

For the first-time runner, the stairs may be intimidating; but do not fear, the fellow runners are all affable and the ultimate view at the apex of the stairs is more than rewarding.

The breathtaking view at the auditorium provides a comprehensive image of the city streets and mountains.

As always, the trip down is considerably easier than the trip up the stairs. After taking a breath at the auditorium and posing for a couple pictures with the spectacular scene, it is now time for the decline.

While enjoying the view and greeting the joggers who are just ascending, one can smoothly amble down the Escaleras del Fortín.

While it may be difficult to wake oneself early in the morning, the physical and mental refreshment is worth the few minutes or hours of extra sleep.

Las Escaleras are also a popular spot in the night as well. Runners flock to the stairs, hopping up each step and running between to get their cardiovascular or aerobic exercise.

Oaxaca has a fairly stable temperature throughout the year and throughout the day, never too cold or too hot.

As a result, the night is a good time for running just as it is in the morning.

The Stairs of The Fortress: The Optimal location for Exercise



Along with similarly approachable and amiable exercisers to accompany you, the city view at the top of the auditorium is just as impressive.

Rather than letting the balmy weather and pastoral landscape get

to your senses, it is critical to exercise within the city as well. Try lots of traditional Oaxacan food and drink lots of intriguing fruit juices, but also do not forget to take care of your body.



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