

48 Hours in Mazatlan

What this Mexican town lacks in glitz and glam, it makes up for with rich offerings of art, culture, history and, of course, sun.

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You could consider Mazatlan the lesser sister of Mexico's glitzier, more popular beach towns like Cancun and Cabo San Lucas. But, once you scratch the surface, you'll discover a coastal city that's got loads of character and grit to spare.

Known as the Pearl of the Pacific, this beach town with a population of nearly 600,000 has thrived for centuries, thanks to its strong fishing industry and its status as a port city. Tourism is just gravy here. In Mazatlan, it's a double-whammy trip; you get long stretches of golden, sandy beaches with thundering waves and warm, sunny skies year-round, but you also get a chance to jump feet-first into the area's rich history, arts and culture.

Getting Around

After arriving in the Pearl of the Pacific, the best way to get your bearings is with a jaunt through downtown. And there's no better vessel for your journey than a pulmonia, which looks like a souped-up golf cart and was introduced in the 1960s. They were so-named by taxi drivers who used to discourage passengers from riding in them by claiming they'd catch pneumonia from the open-air vehicles. Smear campaign be damned — these peppy white cars zip all over the city today. There's no meter, so negotiate a fare before you get in, and hang on tight.

Walk On

Mazatlan's downtown is a joy to walk around. Start off with a seaside stroll along the Malecon, a cement boardwalk that stretches for more than 22 kilometers along the city's coastline (the longest in all of Mexico). Check out the striking sculptures dotted along the Malecón commemorating various facets of Mazatlan's rich history, including the ever-strong fishing industry (especially shrimp), and the 110-year-old Pacifico brewery.

Acapulco, about 1,200 km south of Mazatlan, is known for its cliff divers (called clavadistas), but here, there's a group of loco locals who do just the same. You'll find them farther along the Malecón, in Paseo Claussen, just before Olas Altas. A group of men jump from a 15-metre-high perch several times daily if the tide is high enough, and if they can get enough passersby to cough up dough (divers usually jump for about 120 pesos, or about \$10).

Old Town

Mazatlan's Historic District (Centro Historico) took a beating in the 1970s and '80s, when shiny high-rises sprouted up throughout the resort- and resto-laden Golden Zone, and newly developed tourist hotspots such as Cancun and Cabo San Lucas scooped up the spotlight. Streets fell into disrepair, businesses closed and facades languished. Today, businesses are back, and the old cobblestone streets have been upgraded with durable, walkable stone. With a busy downtown that's full of shops, restaurants and historic structures, the feel is cosmopolitan and cool. (mizatlancentrohistorico.com)

In the heart of the old district is the sprawling Pino Suárez market, dating back to 1899. Covering a full city block, the market is crammed with vendors shilling virtually everything from fresh seafood, meat and baked goods, to handmade crafts and souvenirs.

Just one block southwest, you'll find the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in the Plaza Republica. The Gothic/Moorish structure was completed in 1895 after 40 years of construction. With its yellow-tiled exterior, soaring columns and shimmering chandeliers, the chapel is an architectural beauty to behold, and it's best visited if you can sit in on a service (occurring daily, with a whopping 10 mass services each Sunday).

Arts and Culture

Music flows throughout Mazatlan, but the city's signature locale for the arts is the Angela Peralta Theater (culturamazatlan.com). Named after a famous singer who perished in Mazatlan after being struck with yellow fever in 1883, the theatre flourished throughout the decades, before declining as a movie house that shut down in the 1960s and suffered severe hurricane damage in 1975. It was lovingly refurbished to its past glory in the 1990s, and it's now a hot spot for all sorts of performances, including theatre, opera, ballet and music. The building also houses a small art gallery, with a bustling music and dance school next door.

Dining



It's a snap to eat well in Mazatlan without parting with too many pesos. Just across from the stately cathedral is one of Panama Restaurant's three locations (panama.com.mx). Grab a yummy pastry or one of the hot breakfasts, like hot cakes. For dinner, stick to the Historic District and dine at Pedro Y Lola (restaurantpedroylola.com), an upscale casual joint with a fantastic patio in Plaza Machado. The menu changes seasonally, but count on fresh, tasty creations, including the signature

Pedro Y Lola shrimp dish with Cointreau and fresh oranges.

For a seafood experience that's off the tourist-beaten track, make the trek to the legendary Cuchupetas (669-967-0460) in Villa Unión on Mazatlan's outskirts. Gobs of locals and visitors, alike, flock to this pueblo-style building daily from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. for über-fresh bounty from the sea, including delicious shrimp, crayfish, lobster and marlin.