

## Mazatlan: Mexico's Golden Oldie

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Mazatlan, the grande dame of Mexico's beach resorts, has been hosting tourists since 1920 – when today's hot spots at Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos and the like were mostly just barren stretches of sand.

And what was it that put this dot on western Mexico's golden beaches on the map nearly a century ago? In a word, Prohibition, the amendment to the U.S. Constitution that outlawed the consumption of alcoholic drinks.

Up north, the wet stuff was (supposedly) hard to get. But it was a whole other story south of the border. And getting there – especially if you could zip down the Pacific coast with a yachtful of friends – was half the fun.

So Mazatlan was “discovered” by merry-making Hollywood stars, studio execs, oil barons and other miscellaneous moguls. “There were speakeasies (illegal bars) all over the States, but the law was a great excuse for the stars to hop on their yachts and sail down here to get a drink,” reporters were told by Gilberto Limon, Mazatlan's legendary public relations man.



Catering to the silky set of the times was a beachfront section of town called Olas Altas, which, to the delight of history buffs, is more or less still there. What's more, some of the posh hotels that lined the half-dozen blocks of the old-time resort strip are still open. One, La Siesta, now better described as pleasant rather than posh – but everything usually works, from its air conditioning to its cable TV -- offers 57 smallish rooms (mostly with ocean views) lining a colonial-style courtyard.

The 78-year-old hotel also offers an unexpected treat: Its restaurant, El Shrimp Bucket, is the flagship of the Carlos' n Charlie's chain of offbeat eateries such as Senor Frog's, Carlos O'Brien's, El Squid Roe and others.



Also still standing (but a lot less preserved) is the nearby Belmar, opened in 1920. Its then-opulent guest rooms, lush gardens and elegant ballrooms were once filled with Hollywood superstars of the likes of John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino and Mae West and later on John Wayne, Tyrone Power and Rock Hudson.

Sometimes the stars stayed and played a little offshore. When the bars along Olas Altas were almost empty, it was a pretty safe bet that party yachts such as Hollywood bad boy Errol Flynn's 75-foot twin-masted *Sirocco* were anchored out in the bay.

The Freeman, a relative newcomer, debuted in 1944 as the first high-rise hotel in town. It's now the Best Western Posada Freeman Express, having been totally renovated a few years ago. A tip to visitors: Don't miss the stunning view of Mazatlan from the 12-floor hotel's rooftop bar.

Prohibition was tossed out in 1933, but even with the Great Depression raging, visitors kept coming to Mazatlan. “Word had spread,” Limon explained, “that our waters are packed with big gamers on the order of marlin, swordfish, tuna and sailfish, and they'll bite at just about anything with a hook on it.”

Today's tourists typically stay seven or so miles away from Olas Altas on the other side of Mazatlan in the scores of tropical palaces lining the city's modern-day resort strip, the *Zona Dorada* (Golden Zone), all told with close to 11,000 rooms. Guests at the hotels can either take escorted day-tours of the downtown area or see it on their own by getting there in jeep-like "pulmonia" cabs, roughly a 20-minute ride. Either way, they'll have a chance to wander around in the footsteps of the movie giants of yesteryear at Olas Altas, and also to sample a second blockbuster hit for tourism in a nearby area.



The latter is called "the Historic District," and it's been the scene of a multi-million-dollar restoration to its original 19th century splendor. There, visitors enjoy block after block of facelifted mansions, art galleries, sidewalk cafes, museums, jazz clubs, boutique hotels and even a restored neo-classical opera house.



Local historians say the district was originally built in the 1840s -- in time to position it as an R&R stop for wannabe miners on their way to the booming goldfields of Northern California.

But that's another story.

**Getting there:** Several major airlines offer nonstop flights to Mazatlan from U.S. gateways such as Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix and Houston, among others.

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