

Much to enjoy in Mexico's Mazatlan

By Stuart Wasserman

It's 8 p.m. and the Plaza Machado is packed. Dining tables are set up four abreast — two on the sidewalk and two in the street, which has been closed off to all vehicular traffic. This is the oldest public square in Mazatlan and its newest center of attraction.

A city like Mazatlan, especially around the Old Town center, is safer than American cities of similar size. Around the plaza the strolling musicians outnumber the police by a dozen to one, and life around the plaza is tranquil. If there is violence in the region, it is between drug cartels. And most of the problems in Mexico take place in the border towns. Mazatlan is about as far from the U.S.- Mexican border as San Francisco is on the other side.



A block from the Plaza Machado stands the cultural jewel of the city — the Angela Peralta Theater, which houses six operas each year in a structure dating from the late 1800s. Free schedules available in front of the theater list the 100 annual cultural shows. Prices are reasonable at between \$5 and \$15 dollars, and performances include everything from the symphony to violin quartets to modern dance and theater.

Today, Mazatlan's Old Town section, a 180-block downtown area packed with almost 500 historic buildings, is being considered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Alfredo Gomez Rubio has every reason to be proud. He has served as president of the Centro Historico Project for many years, and several years ago he lived in Washington, D.C., for four months in order to study neighborhood revitalization from the National Trust Main Street Center there. Rubio, who grew up in a nearby home that has housed his family for five generations, has kept a close eye on development in Old Town. He contends that Americans or Canadians today own about 3 percent to 4 percent of the buildings in the historic zone.

"They fix them up, paint them up and that has a positive effect on the entire neighborhood," he said.



Rubio and his brother, a banker in Switzerland, own several buildings in the area, including the popular Pedro y Lola restaurant that anchors one corner of the square.

He and his brother purchased the nearby Melville Hotel for \$100,000 in 1998.

"Back then you could buy an old home for the price of a car today," he said.

Five years ago Americans Sharon and Glenn Sorrie opened a B&B, Casa de Leyendas, within walking distance of the square and just one block from Olas Altas Beach, and many of their guests have become repeat customers. The house has also become a center of activity for expats in the neighborhood. Spanish classes are offered here three times a week as well as yoga and cooking classes. Students do not have to be staying at Casa de Leyendas to take part.

Down the road ex-Californians Jim and Candace Penn opened the Casa de Suenos two years ago. They serve breakfast on an outdoor patio that offers a sweeping view of the Pacific and offer bicycles free for guest use, which makes transportation around town a breeze.

Visitors to Mazatlan can find out about cultural events in town in a new English-language monthly newspaper called M! The newspaper is published by a former resident of Santa Cruz, Calif., Janet Blaser, who says she finds life in Mazatlan invigorating.

A handful of American artists, such as former San Jose, Calif., resident Glen Rogers, have taken up residency in Mazatlan's Old Town. Rogers shares her house several times a year when she holds art workshops and teaches monotype.

Regarding travel to Mazatlan, Rogers says, "It is quick and cheap to get here, and the exchange rate has been great for the past two years." Queried about safety in town, she responded, "I feel safer here than when I lived up north."

Rogers is a guiding hand behind Mazatlan's First Friday Art Walks — held the first Friday of each month from November through May. This year 35 artists showing in 21 sites will open their doors to visiting lovers of art.

There's a lot more to do here, too, such as renting bicycles at the edge of the Golden Zone, where most of the high-rise hotels are located, and riding the six waterfront miles to the Olas Altas neighborhood and then five blocks beyond that to the Plaza Machado.

This is also a spectacular location for bird-watching. Ten percent of the 10,000 bird species in the world reside in Mexico for at least part of the year: That's 1,000 different species of birds, but many bird-watchers come exclusively to see one stellar bird: the tufted jay, a long-tailed bird with back and blue markings and a small crest of black on the top of its head.

Last January at the Mazatlan Bird Festival I set off with a small group to catch a view of this regal bird. The trip was organized by a nature tour company called Sendero Mexico, which also offers short kayaking trips around Mazatlan's small offshore islands.



Sendero owners Paul Beckman and Carolyn Felderhof have had a hand in saving the tufted jay's habitat from destruction. The couple worked to start an eco-business in the ejido community (a communal farming area) of El Palmito: 900 people in 64 families sheltered in 350 houses located on 5,000 hectares, of which 1,200 are now reserved for bird habitat. During the course of the last three years, four two-bedroom cabins have been built for overnight lodging. Each rents for \$80 a night.

Beckman and Felderhof believe that if the local people can transition to a different economic base from logging to a sustainable eco-tourism, then more healthy forest and the wildlife that makes their home there will be preserved. Felderhof points to Santos Vasquez, who as a ejido resident used to handle a chain saw and now serves as a lead birding guide.

During our daylong bird-watching trip we saw a slew of tufted jays gliding through the trees. We also saw Mountain Trogons and Townsend Warblers with their black crests, yellow irises, black throats and wings, and long white tails.

"We were blessed that day," said David Tomb, a California artist who had joined the group. "We saw tufted jays 27 times. We were lucky. Who needs to eat?"

El Palmito is located on the twisty Durango highway about three hours away from Mazatlan. Another Sendero Mexico birding option closer to Mazatlan is the Mesa Cacaxtla, a section of coastal mountain range located 45 minutes from Mazatlan that is now protected under Mexican environmental law.