

Mazatlán offers two vacations in one: sun and culture on a budget

Mazatlán's Golden Zone and Centro Historico offer two vacations in one for travelers seeking sun and culture on a budget.

By **Carol Pucci**
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For 10-year-old Morgan King of Saskatchewan, a Mazatlán morning starts with a new hairdo from Valeria Lopez, who sets up her mobile salon on the beach near the El Cid resort.

Soft music from a poolside yoga class blends with the whirl of blenders as bartenders whip up the first batch of piña colodas.

Working with a handful of pink and white beads, Valeria braids Morgan's hair while her mother, Lana, soaks up the sun on the beach that fronts the city's Golden Zone of high-rise hotels, bars and restaurants.



enlarge CAROL PUCCI
Morgan King of Saskatchewan gets a new hairdo from Valeria Lopez, who sets up her mobile salon on the beach near the El Cid Resort in Mazatlán.

A few miles south, a different scene unfolds along the streets of Old Mazatlán.

Guests at the faded Hotel La Siesta breakfast on huevos rancheros while joggers and bikers get their morning exercise along a paved seawalk. Boys in swimming trunks grab their fishing spears and inner tubes and head out into the surf for the day's catch.

Golden or Olden? Most tourists choose one or the other when they vacation in Mazatlán, a commercial fishing and port city founded by the Spaniards in the 1500s on Mexico's Pacific coast.

I sampled both on a recent five-day trip, checking in first at El

Cid, a \$146-a-night all-inclusive beach resort, then moving downtown to a \$50-a-night room at La Siesta, one of the first hotels built in Mazatlán when tourism began developing in the 1950s.

As other parts of Mexico began to draw visitors, Mazatlán developed a reputation as a party destination, more suited to the spring-break crowd than families or those interested in art and culture.

That's begun to change. The rebirth of the historical center as a cultural district is drawing new galleries, restaurants and shops to its European-style neighborhoods. Resorts in the Golden Zone,

less showy and built-up than in Puerto Vallarta or Acapulco, are picking up on the trend toward family-friendly vacations.

Both Mazatláns have something to offer budget-minded travelers. With just a 10-mile stretch of beach connecting the two, why settle for just one?

The Zona Dorada

Built in 1983, El Cid's 393-room Castilla Beach hotel was among the first high-rise resorts developed when Mazatlán's tourism industry shifted north, and the Golden Zone (Zona Dorada) replaced the historical center as the favored destination.

Its orange and green towers, part of a mega-complex of four hotels, a marina and golf course, face a long swimming beach. The entrance fronts on a busy highway flanked by a bikini boutique and a restaurant called Señor Frog's.

My husband and I weren't sure what to expect when the desk clerk snapped on our purple wristbands, a sign to waiters and bartenders that we were on the all-inclusive plan.

Would all the drinks, food, activities, even taxes be included, as promised, with no hidden charges? Yes, it turned out.

"Think of it as a cruise ship that doesn't move," advised Bob Levinstein, CEO of ResortCompete.com, a Web site that searches for the best deals on all-inclusive resorts.

Chances are we could have snagged a room upgrade had we agreed to a time-share sales pitch. But the sun was out and our time was short, so we settled for the resort equivalent of an inside cabin.

The walls were covered in a bumpy white stucco that looked like popcorn. The air conditioner rattled, but the room was large and overlooked one of two sparkling pools.

A flash of the purple wristbands bought unlimited beer, wine and drinks — not the watered-down variety you sometimes hear about — and anything we wanted from an oceanfront seafood buffet and four sit-down restaurants serving Mexican, Argentine, Italian food and sushi.

Slipped under our door each night was the "El Cid News," listing yoga classes, cooking lessons, water aerobics and a Spanish class taught by Fhernando, a young man who doubled as an Aztec dancer at the nightly dinner shows.

Signs warn guests not to buy from beach vendors, but no one pays attention. They keep the local economy humming, and what could be easier than having a shopkeeper come to you?

"Hello amigos. Good prices today. Almost free," was how one man with a pile of straw hats on his head greeted us. He opened a case filled with silver earrings and beaded necklaces. Next came a man balancing a tray of fruit cups on his head, then three Mariachi singers, one dragging a bass fiddle through the sand.

Sipping a piña colada on our balcony after a day of swimming, snacking, and learning to cook fajitas, I concluded this was a good value for anyone who wants to keep a vacation easy and hassle-free.

The King family of Saskatchewan spent 10 days here, mainly relaxing while their kids tried boogie boarding and cooled off with SpongeBob SquarePants smoothies at the swim-up bars.

The best part about the all-inclusive plan: not having to worry about where to eat.

"It puts your mind at ease," said Lana King. "If the kids want to eat burgers at 10 a.m. and we want seafood at noon, there's no problem."

The Centro Historico

A snip of the plastic wristbands at checkout, and we were reaching into our wallets for pesos for the first time in two days.



[enlarge](#) CAROL PUCCI
The tree-lined Plazuela Machado is Old Mazatlán's cultural and arts hub. Restored classical buildings house restaurants that set out tables on the streets on weekends.

A few minutes of sidewalk negotiation with the driver of a "pulmonia" — one of the open-air vehicles that look like golf carts and serve as taxis — and we were on our way to the Hotel La Siesta, one of three original oceanfront hotels still in business along a pocket cove called Olas Altas beach in Old Mazatlán.

Faded green tile floors and a lobby atrium planted with trees so tall their vines hang down over the tables evoke a time when the Siesta was once a classy address that drew movie stars and wealthy tourists.

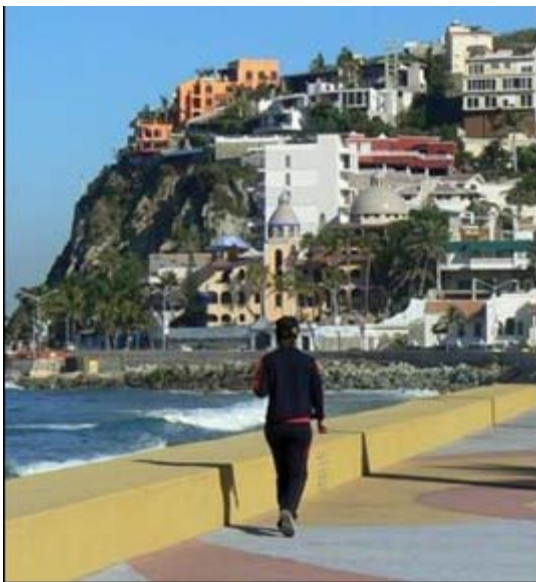
The walls are thin and the furniture worn, but the sunset views that came with a balcony room in the 1950s haven't changed.

No morning blender action here. Just warm breezes and the sound of the surf pounding against the sea wall. We became breakfast regulars on the hotel's sidewalk terrace, amusing the waiter with

our order of huevos divorciados or divorced eggs — two poached eggs, one with red sauce and the other with green.

Away from the beach, a Centro Historico preservation push has attracted artists, restaurants and cafes to back streets lined with classic houses. Rak and Loa Gacia and their children make leather masks in a workshop in back of NidArt, a gallery in a restored mansion where artists sell pottery and art made from coconut and clay.

Expats favor the nighttime music and dining scene around the shady Plazuela Machado, anchored by the Teatro Ángela Peralta, an 1800s-era opera house where we bought tickets to a folk ballet for \$10 each.



[enlarge](#) CAROL PUCCI
Runners and rollerbladers get their exercise on the Malecón, a seawalk along the beach between the Golden Zone and Old Mazatlán.

The best seafood is along the beach or in town at the local cantinas. A walk from Olas Altas along the paved Malecón seawalk leads past a platform popular with local cliff divers. Further north is Playa Norte and a group of thatched-roof beach restaurants. Pick out a fish, then relax while it's grilled over a wood fire and served on a platter heaped with roasted tomatoes, peppers, salad and rice, all for about \$10. One afternoon friends led the way to Serdán, a street of kitchen shops and fabric stores near the twin-spired cathedral and the Pino Suarez public market. There we found the "shrimp ladies" selling fresh prawns wiggling around in buckets of water.

No place to cook? No worries.

Nearby is Mariscos Dunia, a restaurant with oversized plastic Christmas bulbs strung over the bar and party music on the boom box.

A waitress took the bag of shrimp from our hands, then brought chilled beers to our table. Vendors wandered through selling nuts, wallets, cigars and songs. A few minutes later, our waitress returned with our shrimp peeled and cooked to order in butter and garlic.

Bring Your Own Shrimp. I could get used to that.