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PUBLISHED BIWEEKLY ♦ SEPTEMBER 29, 2008



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Beyond Mazatlan

Local daytrips to picturesque pueblos reveal the region's rich history

By Heather Burgett

As the Pacific seaside city of Mazatlan, founded in 1531, gains international attention among today's travelers, a number of nearby excursions are on the rise. Pronatours, Ole Tours, Viajes Los Sabalo and Venado Tours are the major local tour operators that host a flurry of options to colonial villages — most within a 30-minute drive of the city limits.

Perhaps one of the closest and most talked about local daytrips into the Sierra Madres is the half-hour drive to the tiny town of El Quelite offered by Pronatours. This village features cobblestone streets and colonial houses made with adobe and red-roof tile. Guests are treated to lunch at the exquisitely and authentically designed El Meson de Los Laureanos Restaurant, owned by Dr. Marcos Osuna, whose family has lived in the town for generations. It is the doctor's zest for life in the countryside and the incredible farm-fresh foods that make this gem such a memorable stop. He is dedicated to preserving his town's

culture, history, legends and verbally bequeathed recipes, which he claims bring visiting Mexicans back to their roots.

Guests can watch the chef make tortillas by hand on an outdoor grill while iguanas traverse the treetops and colorful caged birds sing a symphony of songs. Authentic menu items for the more daring diner include the local delicacies of *lengua* (beef tongue) and *manitas de puerco* (pigs feet). Breakfast dishes are served with a variety of natural local cheeses, yogurt, nachos, fruit salad, fresh-squeezed orange juice, hearty coffee and, of course, handmade tortillas.



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El Quelite is also uniquely known for keeping alive the sport of *ulama*, considered a sacred prehispanic ball game where participants bounce a heavy soccer-sized ball off their hips. This pueblo is also home to the largest cock fight breeding farm in Mexico, with more than 5,000 cockadoodling roosters — fortunately, located on the far side of town.

Word has it that the governor of

Mazatlan loves the town of Cosala, calling it one of his favorite escapes in the Sierra Madres. This larger colonial pueblo, dating back to the 16th century, is surrounded by mountains and lakes. A two-hour drive from Mazatlan, Cosala is referred to as a magic town due to its unprecedented beauty. Nearby are historical and ecological sites, including petroglyphs, mining towns, lush foliage and waterfalls. Here, Ole Tours' Canopy Tour offers an eco-adventure, including zip lines, all-terrain vehicles, carriage rides and lunch. Pronatours' package also offers canopy tours, as well as four-wheel ATV and mountain biking options.

Guests venture to a community of artisans in La Noria for tequila tasting and a tour of the local distillery, La Vinata de los Osuna. Years ago, the state of Sinaloa was the second highest distiller of tequila in Mexico, after Jalisco. The owners of La Vinata are pioneers of its production in the state and continue the time-honored tradition with their brand of 100 percent blue agave. La Noria also features leather factories where horseback saddles and sandals are delicately hand crafted.

Pronatours' Copala Tour is another daytrip option. This excursion

includes a number of stops along the way, including a bakery in Malpica, a cathedral in Concordia, a roadside furniture maker, and finally, a long and winding ride to the quaint cobblestone streets of the village of Copala, which almost feels as miniature as the teeny hand-carved wooden replicas of the pueblo that children sell for "un peso." After lunch, guests can take a stroll into the depths of an old abandoned gold mine that was discovered beneath the restaurant by the owner.

The extraordinary opportunity to visit these enchanting towns offers guests an experiential education on the essential history of Mexico. ❖

CONTACT

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(Official tour operator of El Cid Resorts)
www.elcid.com

Ole Tours
www.bookmazatlan.com

Venado Tours
www.venadotours.com

Viajes Los Sabalo
www.viajeselsabalo.com ❖



The mural in Copala's town square depicts the market that once took place there.

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