

Old is New Again in Mazatlán

By Bob Schulman

Source: www.WatchBoom.com



Mazatlan hotel zone seen from a tower of the El Cid Resort. Photo: Bob Schulman

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, even star-studded Old Acapulco, were mostly just barren stretches of sand. “She (the town) may show a wrinkle here and there,” a spokesman for the western Mexico resort says, “but her charms are still drawing millions of visitors.”

How does Mazatlan rank among the country's other resorts? How about walking away with the title, “Best Family Beach Destination” in the prestigious travel site Travelocity's 2010 ratings of 14 major Mexican getaways! Some 2.3 million people cast online ballots in the competition, of which 73 percent gave the nod to Mazatlan.

Like the other resorts, Mazatlan has miles of beaches lined with luxury hotels. But unlike the others, the nearby town isn't a throwback to its Spanish colonial days. Instead, Mazatlan looks more like a jump back in time to the Old World trappings of Germany or France rather than the porticoed walkways of Andalusia.

The city's crown jewel – and a huge plus in the Travelocity competition – is a 180-block area in downtown Mazatlan called the Historic District. Originally built by Central European transplants in the 1840s, the area was once the city's commercial and entertainment center.



Cathedral in the Historic District.

It gained international prominence as a rest and relaxation stop for the “49ers” heading to the gold fields of Northern California. By the time they arrived in Mazatlan, the wanna-be miners had taken long, arduous trips on sailing ships down the east coast of the U.S., Mexico and Central America, after which they hopped on boats to cross the steaming rivers of Nicaragua or pre-canal Panama, then boarded larger ships for the final leg of the trip up the western shores to San Francisco.

Mazatlan was “discovered” in the 1920s by fun-loving Hollywood stars and their friends when alcohol prohibition was enacted up north. “There were speakeasies (illegal bars) all over America, but the law was a great excuse to come down here to get a drink,” reporters were told by Gilberto Limon, Mazatlan's legendary public relations man.

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

Mazatlan's early resort hotels were built along several blocks on the Olas Altas waterfront edging the Historic District. Several are still there. One, the La Siesta, offers 57 small but pleasant rooms lining a colonial-style courtyard. The 77-year-old hotel also offers an unexpected treat: Its restaurant, El Shrimp Bucket, is the flagship of the wildly popular Carlos' n Charlie's chain.



Hotels in the Olas Altas area date back as far as 1920.

Limon loved to tell the story of how a young Carlos Anderson and his pal Chuey Juarez came to La Siesta in 1962 to open their first restaurant. “I guess you could describe the place as something like the Rolling Stones meet Pancho Villa,” he said. “Guests sat at beat-up tables along walls decorated by photos from the Mexican revolution while rock music blared from tinny speakers. Sometimes the waiters sang along. It was fun for everyone.”



Outdoor restaurants in Old Mazatlan. Photo: Bob Schulman

From El Shrimp Bucket came Senor Frog's, Carlos O'Brien's, El Squid Roe and others in what's now a worldwide chain of dozens of restaurants.

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 Wayne, Tyrone Power, John Barrymore, Gregory Peck and Rock Hudson.

Still another, the Freeman, 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.

The Historic District, also called Old Mazatlan, has been enjoying a rebirth over the last few years, thanks to a multi-million-dollar facelifting. A few blocks inland from Olas Altas, tourists now wander around block after block of art galleries, sidewalk cafes,



museums, jazz clubs, boutique hotels, restored mansions and even a restored neo-classical opera house.

Lined by trees and stone benches and on three sides by *al fresco* restaurants, the block-long Plaza Machado takes center stage in the Historic District. At one restaurant, Pedro & Lola, diners look out at a building across the street, now a dance studio but once a grand hotel, where in 1883 Mexico's famous opera singer Angela Peralta stepped out on a balcony and wowed the crowds

with her theme song, *La Paloma*. She'd come to Mazatlan to sing at the nearby Teatro Rubio opera house but died before the performance of yellow fever, along with thousands of *Mazatlecos*.

Sixty years later, the opera house was renamed the Teatro Angela Peralta in her honor. Restored to its original splendor, it's still open. Besides operas, it hosts theatrical and dance performances, art exhibits and jazz and pop concerts.



Pool area at the Oceano Palace. Photo courtesy of Oceano Palace.

On a recent night, diners around the Machado were entertained by an Afro-Cuban group. The plaza, which in the old days was a gathering spot for classical music lovers, this night was jammed with hip-shaking salsa dancers.

Also part of the restoration project was the construction of a colorful, seven-mile-long tiled promenade edging the beaches between Olas Altas and the city's modern-day resort strip, the Zona Dorada (Golden Zone). According to Ernie Sanchez, public relations manager for the Mazatlan Hotel Association, the historic attractions are "a huge draw to the downtown area" for guests staying in the 10,800 rooms of the tropical palaces in the resort zone.



Guests take 20-minute rides in "pulmonia" cabs from the Playa Mazatlan to the Historic District. Photo: Bob Schulman

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

Staying there: Dozens of tourist-class hotels line the beaches of the Zona Dorado while others dot the resort's new marina and convention areas and another new development north of the resort strip called New Mazatlan. Among popular properties is the 400-room Playa Mazatlan (hotelpalayamazatlan.com), one of the first two hotels in the Zona Dorada.

More info: Visit the Mazatlan Hotel Association at www.gomazatlan.com or the Mexico Tourism Board at www.visitmexico.com.

Photo credit: Mazatlan Hotel Association unless otherwise noted.