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Life / Travel

Mexico City: Two days in the kaleidoscope of the big enchilada

A riot of palaces, colours and flavours, DF, as the locals know it, is home to a people known for its festive good humour

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Museum of fine arts in Mexico city Palacio Del Bellas Artes in DF. DREAMSTIME

By: **Becca Hensley** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Fri Jan 30 2015

I am wandering through the thronged, tiny, brightly coloured rooms of the Frida Kahlo Museum in Coyoacan, a Colonial-inflected suburb outside the urban sprawl in Mexico City. Although I am a Frida fan, I am probably the only person here not visiting to pay homage to the artist herself. My mission is personal.

I make the pilgrimage as a tribute to my mother.

Like Frida, she grew up in this somewhat tranquil, still unsullied, singularly authentic neighbourhood to the southwest of the city.

Today, tourists roam Coyoacan to shop at the traditional market, stroll down the stunning Francisco Sosa Street, and light a candle in the church.

But nobody leaves without waiting in line to channel Frida.

At the architecturally sensitive museum, visitors walk through the cobalt-coloured house, La Casa Azul, where Frida was born and died, to see the icon's clothing, her letters, paintings, photos, even a macabre death mask poised on her notorious bed.

I do that, too. But, I channel my mother. She once told me a story about seeing Diego Rivera standing in the front yard here, painting. The azure walls of the house were part of her memory. She said Diego kept squinting upward at the sun, as if for inspiration, as if trying to transfer some of the golden light to himself or the canvas.

My mother remembers a woman wrapped in shawls. I like to think that was Frida. I bet it was.

From the museum's window, I look out, and imagine that.

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PARTNER CONTENT

Love stories: There's romance in the air at Palace Resorts

Recently, much of Mexico, including Mexico City, known to locals as DF (distrito federale, akin to saying "DC" for the city of Washington, D.C.), has been the victim of naysayers, touting its dangers.

"The truth? Mexico City is the safest city in this country," says Jose Adames, general manager at the Four Seasons Mexico City, located in the ritzy Polanco neighbourhood.

Adames talks about how both leisure and business guests enjoy exploring the city by foot or private tour, before returning to enthuse about how "wonderfully different" DF is from what they hear or read. Indeed, the U.S. State Department does not have an advisory for Mexico City, just as it does not have one for Quintana Roo, the state that holds Cancun, nor does it have one for much of the nation, for that matter.

As in any city, precautions should be taken, but to miss this cultural haven, which has more than 150 museums, four UNESCO sites, life-transforming gastronomy, top-notch designers, native culture and an architectural motherlode (think Luis Barragan's world famous "emotional architecture") would be to miss one of the greatest cityscapes in the world.

If You Only Have Two Days

Day One: Start early! With the guide you've booked through the concierge at your hotel, visit the nearby mysterious Teotihuacan Pyramids, famous for the Temple of the Sun, long before the crowds arrive.

As you return to the city, make a pit stop at the 16th-century Monastery of Acolman, where, my concierge at the Four Seasons tells me "the piñata was first used to lure the locals to Christianity."

Continue to the Basilica of the Lady of Guadalupe, touted for its unique design, and said to be the second most visited basilica in the world next to St. Peter's in Rome.

For lunch, head to the Centro Historico. There, ensconced in at Parisian-style, multi-storied mansion find El Cardenal, touted for its traditional Mexican cuisine. Don't leave without trying the shrimp tostados and the Oaxacan-style chile relleno, washed down with margarita or some sips of Don Julio reposado (tequila) neat.

After lunch, peruse the National Palace, where Diego Rivera painted some of his most revered murals. While in this area, squeeze in visits to the Colonial-style Metropolitan Cathedral and the Templo Mayor ruins. Drive down Francisco I. Madero Avenue to glimpse the array of palaces, especially the House of Tiles, the Palace of Fine Arts and the Postal Palace.

For dinner, celebrate at Pujol's, Enrique Olvera's flagship restaurant, rated number 20 in the world on Pellegrino's list, and arguably the most famous eatery in Mexico for its creative reinterpretation of local fare.

Day Two: Begin with a set appointment at the Casa Luis Barragan, the home (now museum) of one of the world's most influential architects. Soulful, colourful, reflecting the vigor of the Mexican people his textures, organic shapes and nearly otherworldly hues combine to represent the vigor, emotions and life force of the Mexican people. Note that the guestbook shows recent visits from such luminaries as Sir Norman Foster, a famous English architect.

Then, head over to my mama's barrio to crowd into Frida Kahlo's Blue House. After, meander through the folkloric market to try some tostadas, just as Frida might have done. Shrimp or chicken, mounded atop a crispy tortilla, and capped with salsa makes the grade at Tostadas Coyoacan inside the market, at Calle Malintzin, between Aguauo and Allende Streets. Energized, finish your day at the National Museum of Anthropology, which contains artifacts dating back to Maya times. Toast your successful two-day foray with dinner at Dulce Patria, which serves the creamiest guacamole. Order anything smothered in mole.

A sensorial feast, Mexico City or DF is as intricate and multi-textured as the folkloric artwork of its people. The duality of cultures melds to create something you can't experience anywhere else. Old intertwines with new. Add to this the warmth and "festive humour" of its people, as Jose Adames calls it, and you have a city which can transform visitors forever.

Correction- February 9, 2015: This article was edited from a previous version that misspelled Coyoacan.

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Websites

Museofridakahlo.com

Fourseasons/mexico.com

Restauranteelcardenal.com

Pujol.com

Casaluisbarragan.org

Dulcepatriamexico.com

National Museum of Anthropology: <http://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/index.html>

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