

COASTAL LIVING

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Text by Jeff Book

Pacific Pearl

A classic Mexican resort town, Mazatlán preserves its old-world charm.

Watching the waves from the terrace of El Shrimp Bucket, sipping locally brewed Pacifico between swallows of spicy sevicehe, you can easily picture the postwar years, the first peak of Mazatlán tourism. Early visitors such as John Wayne and Robert Mitchum came to sportfish, and to party in hotels along Olas Altas beach. The crowds that followed, from the 1960s on, lodged at resorts that sprang up along the miles of sand to the north. But recent years have seen a revival of the town's historic center, with restored buildings housing new restaurants and boutique hotels.

This makes Mazatlán a sort of tourism time capsule, offering travelers a range of styles from retro-modern to elegant-traditional to beach shack-funky. It's also a working port, the largest between Los Angeles and the Panama Canal, with some 400,000 inhabitants and genuine Mexican character. Its location—just below the Tropic of Cancer, on the mainland across from the tip of Baja California—ensures balmy weather and bountiful waters. The fleet of fishing boats ensures delicious seafood, especially shrimp. Overshadowed by trendier spots in coastal Mexico, Mazatlán has maintained a quirky appeal all its own.

Start with the town's signature transport, the overgrown golf carts known as pulmonías (pneumonias) for their open sides and breezy rides. Perfect for sightseeing, these zippy taxis suit Mazatlán's relaxed, tropical spirit. They're ideal for motoring from Old Mazatlán to the touristy Zona Dorada (Golden Zone) along a shore-hugging drive dotted with monuments, among them frolicking dolphins, sea nymphs, a heroic fisherman, even a life-size bronze pulmonía. On the seemingly endless strand, sunbathers loll and vendors roam, peddling cold drinks, clothing, jewelry, baskets, henna tattoos, and more. Parasailors take off like kites, pulled aloft by speedboats. And every Sunday evening, the Hotel Playa Mazatlán puts on a whiz-bang show of Mexican-style fireworks, pinwheeling and blazing from the beach.

"No other port in Mexico has this view," declares Conchita Bocard from the patio of Casa Lucila, the small, luxurious hotel the Mazatlán native and her American-born husband, Chris, opened last year. The vista extends from the rugged hills around the historic center, to the distant conga line of hotel towers, to nearby islands that suggest painted backdrops floating in the Pacific.

And no other city in coastal Mexico can claim such a concentration of historic architecture in a pedestrian-friendly core of narrow streets and shady squares. Crumbling facades still outnumber refurbished ones. Even so, it's hard to imagine the beautifully restored Angela Peralta

Theater as it was two decades ago, unroofed by a hurricane, a tree growing through the stage. In the adjacent art school, you may glimpse students sculpting or playing marimbas. Steps away lies the parklike Plazuela Machado, an intimate square fringed with restaurant terraces where diners enjoy the evening breeze.

Old Mazatlán's interior courtyards serve as outdoor living rooms, furnished with flowers and fountains. Visitors can soak up serenity over breakfast at the Hotel Melville or Casa de Leyendas (a romantic B&B with very helpful American owners); lunch at Mariscos Bahia, a decades-old favorite for savory seafood; and dinner at Topolo, where watermelon-red walls set off flavorful dishes amusingly billed as "contemporary Prehispanic cuisine."

They also can make the steep hike to Mazatlán's landmark lighthouse—at 515 feet above sea level, said to be the second highest after Gibraltar's—in about an hour, round-trip. Or ride the elevator to the Hotel Freeman's rooftop bar, by Olas Altas beach, for a panorama that stretches from *el centro* to the port to freighters at sea. You can see it all on a boat tour that stops for lunch at one of the beachfront, thatched-roof restaurants on Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island).

Like the cruise to Stone Island, the diversions of the Golden Zone are worth sampling—La Costa Marinera, for example, a temple to seafood with a version of classic albondigas soup that replaces meatballs with zesty spheres of diced shrimp. And the deep-sea fishing remains superb. But the city also ranks high for performing arts and other cultural activities, notably Mexico's largest Carnival celebration. Its time-tripping styles and fun-loving ways make Mazatlán well worth discovering.

Make Mine Mazatlán

For general information, visit mazatlan.com.mx, mazinfor.com, and pacificpearl.com (good for checking scheduled arts and events; also see culturamazatlan.com/index_en.php). Casa Lucila; 52/669/982-1100 or casalucila.com. Hotel Melville; 52/669/982-8474 or themelville.com. Casa de Leyendas; 602/445-6192 or casadeleyendas.com.

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