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Mazatlán's makeover

Long neglected, the seaside resort's historic core is coming back to life

Christine Delsol, Chronicle Staff Writer

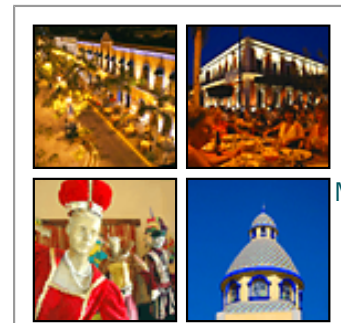
Sunday, July 1, 2007

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(07-01) 04:00 PDT Mazatlán, Mexico -- Sunset brings a fresh burst of life to Mazatlán's Plazuela Machado, as the day's heat loosens its grip and the streets fill with people. Some fling open shuttered French doors to watch from wrought-iron balconies as others head for sidewalk cafes and clubs, or simply claim a bench or a well-placed lamppost to watch the passing parade.

Joining the promenade, my sister, Diane, and I are quickly swept up in random



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conversations. The festive cacophony, the street performers and the competing strains of horns, violins and guitars issuing from open doorways, trigger major New Orleans flashbacks.

Also like New Orleans, Mazatlán's historic zone is a haunting brew of beauty and decay, with grandiose European architecture dulled by decades of neglect. But since 2002, the "Pearl of the Pacific" has worked feverishly to reclaim the splendor at its core. What is emerging is unique not just in Mexico but the world: a historic city with a bright, postcard-worthy colonial district mere steps from a 12 1/2 -mile crescent of gleaming beach.

In the 1950s and '60s, Mazatlán and Acapulco were Mexico's only Pacific resorts. Other cities -- some built expressly for the purpose -- have since overshadowed them with wanton development of increasingly luxurious hotel chains and all-inclusive resorts. But in Mazatlán, what's new is what's old.

The protected port served 16th century Spanish conquistadors as a vital conduit for gold and silver from its far-flung colonies; later, it was a stop for hordes of '49ers on their way from the East Coast to California's gold fields.

The end of World War II brought port improvements, new highways and throngs of tourists to one of the world's longest beaches. Movie companies shooting in the nearby Durango hills put up Rock Hudson, Tyrone Power, John Wayne and other stars in the Belmar and Posada Freeman hotels on Avenida Olas Altas, the seafront

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The growing city enveloped the white sands to the north, where a strip of high-rise hotels grew into the Zona Dorada ("Golden Zone"). The new tourist zone brought unprecedented affluence, but as it siphoned off tourists, downtown eventually was all but abandoned.

On numerous visits since the 1970s, I've avoided the Zona Dorada, camping on beaches or staying in modest hotels along the stretch of Olas Altas ("high waves") that links downtown with the Zona Dorada. A stay in Old Mazatlán with my family six years ago was both sad and inspiring. Once-elegant monuments to pride and prosperity stood crumbling and littered -- but some were brightened by an exuberant renovation, the Mexican addiction to color emphasizing ornate profiles graced with cascades of bougainvillea. I could almost imagine the city center transformed like Oz into Technicolor.

In 2002, it began to happen. Private committees working with the city and state governments are methodically reviving Oz. It's a big job: El Centro Histórico, as it's known, encompasses 180 blocks with 479 buildings, each designated a historical landmark.

Javier Páez, director of the Mazatlán Hotel Association and unofficial ambassador for Old Mazatlán, told me last fall that the restoration is about 30 percent complete. The historic square Plazuela Machado, with its stately buildings, outdoor cafes, museums, tropical trees and a band shell hosting free concerts, is a splendid example

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of what the heart of the city is becoming.

New life around square

Our introduction to the new Old Mazatlán was the Angela Peralta Theater, built in 1870 as the Teatro Rubio opera house, where we were mesmerized by the Delfos Contemporanean dance company. Four men and four women metamorphosed from free-form sprites to self-destructing harridans to feathered warriors to tuxedoed and gowned dancers executing something between flamenco and a river-dance stomp. Serendipitously, it was the night the troupe was named the Peralta's resident dance company, which incited all the pomp and applause of an Olympic triumph.

The sienna theater, with its graceful white columns and carved stonework, reigns over Plazuela Machado, the commercial and social center of the original Spanish settlement. Restored in the early 1990s, it was renamed after the Mexican diva who enchanted the world in the mid-19th century. It now hosts a steady schedule of events ranging from the state symphony to a local children's chorus to visiting jazz bands. The restoration also gave rise to the annual Mazatlán Cultural Festival, stretching from early November into mid-December.

Old Mazatlán's revival spread from the theater to the stately Pacífico building with its atmospheric corner cafe, and then to buildings all around the plaza, which now house restaurants, museums, shops, galleries and clubs enough to keep a visitor busy for weeks. The first phase, completed in 2005, included landscaping, underground

Inmaculada Concepción a few blocks away.

Work on the boardwalk and monuments of Avenida Olas Altas was finished last fall. Currently, Páez told us, accent lighting is being added to more of the buildings around the square and along Olas Altas to illuminate the ocean waves.

The oldest building on the square is Casa Machado, built in 1885 as the home of a merchant who made a fortune in silver and gold mining and donated the land for Plazuela Machado. Above a block of imposing arches enclosing commercial storefronts, the residence upstairs is now a museum.

Casa Machado's provincial French furniture, canopied brass and iron four-poster beds, kitchen utensils, work tools and clothing offer a glimpse into the life of Mazatlán's 19th century elite. Tall, shuttered doors in back lead to a wide balcony, its original red, yellow and black tile floor still barely scuffed, that overlooks the square. Visitors can linger here for coffee and refreshments.

New Orleans came to mind once more as we viewed a room dominated by the fiery colors, glittery costumes and historic photos of Carnival. Plaza Machado is the epicenter of one of the country's liveliest celebrations, and Casa Machado's Mardi Gras Parlor pays tribute to Carnival queens going back to 1900.

Cloistering in ex-convent

Though the city's unique lure is its juxtaposition of glittery beach resort and elegant

old city, we couldn't imagine leaving Old Mazatlán's narrow winding streets to bunk in a boxy high-rise. A block off the plaza, the newly restored Melville Boutique Hotel is about the same age as the Angela Peralta theater, and it enveloped us in a similar Old World graciousness. Built as a convent, it has been a school for girls, a retirement home and an apartment house. It reopened as a hotel three years ago.

The stone exterior in coral shades with green and white trim, the arched doorways and the wrought-iron balconies are pure 19th century, but the interiors are modern where it counts.

The hotel is named after Herman Melville, who spent several weeks of 1844 in Mazatlán, and each room is named for an artist. We spent one night in the overwhelmingly red Anaïs Nin room and the rest of our stay in the elegantly black-and-white Edward Weston room.

Páez met us one morning for an informal walking tour that began with Casa Machado, where he told us the red pine ceiling beams came from California's forests. A lifelong resident of Mazatlán, he pointed out a spooky, abandoned German house where his crowd used to have Halloween parties. Two blocks away, a palatial white building adorned with statuary had been renovated by a French architect but still stood empty. One day, he said, all the wires that marred our view of the grand facades will be underground.

On our own, Diane and I strolled to such tourist favorites as the handsome Baroque

cathedral whose unusual yellow-tiled steeples tower over the Plaza Revolución. The plaza replaced Plazuela Machado as the central square but is bigger, busier and has less charm. We browsed sprawling Mercado Piño Suárez, a Victorian building modeled after the work of French architect Alfred Eiffel (yes, that Eiffel), and found everything from fresh shrimp to jewelry to handmade clothes to cheap trinkets.

We barely made it to the beach, settling for some perfunctory forays during a hike along Olas Altas. It's not Mazatlán's most spectacular swimming beach, but it is refreshingly uncrowded and free of hawkers.

At the point where Avenida Olas Altas becomes Paseo Claussen on its march to the Zona Dorada, we paid homage to the enchanting Mazatlán woman monument and cooled off with a beer at a cafe in the Hotel Belmar. Built in the 1920s, the Belmar was Mazatlán's first oceanfront hotel. It's a little musty now, but the exuberant tile work is still awe-inspiring -- and the rooms are cheap.

But it was Plazuela Machado that drew us back again and again -- to hear music, sample regional food, watch children play tag around the bandstand and browse the crafts bazaar that set up under the golden rain trees on weekends. If the square lacks the ubiquitous go-cups of New Orleans' French Quarter, it does not lack for places to get a hefty margarita.

Old Mazatlán is a work in progress. Across the street from the Melville's entry stood an ornate but crumbling shell that resembled pre-restoration photos of the theater,

to venture away from the plaza and encounter rubble piled against a dark, disintegrating edifice between buildings lit up with activity. But now, instead of regret, those ghosts of a glorious past inspire visions of more magnificence to come.

If you go

All locations are in Mazatlán, Mexico. Prices are in U.S. dollars unless noted.

Getting there

From San Francisco, several airlines offer one-stop, connecting flights to Mazatlán.

Where to stay

Melville Boutique Hotel, Constitución No. 99 Centro Histórico. 011-52-669-982-8474, www.themelville.com. Capacious rooms, full kitchens, purified tap water. One-bedroom suite, \$80-\$90; two-bedroom, \$100.

Best Western Hotel Posada Freeman Express, Olas Altas 79 Sur. 011-52-669-985-6060, www.bestwestern.com. Bright and lovely, renovated 1950s beachfront hotel. Doubles from \$87.

Hotel La Siesta, Olas Altas 11 Sur. 011-52-669-981-2640, www.lasiesta.com.mx. \$35-\$60.

Bed-and-breakfast inns are sprinkled around Plazuela Machado.

Where to eat

Restaurante Pedro y Lola, Av. Constitución at Carnival. 011-52-669-982-2589, www.restaurantpedroylola.com. Mexican and international fish, shrimp, meat dishes, 75-155 pesos (\$7-\$14 US); sandwiches 38-55 pesos (\$3.50-\$5 US).

Plazuela Machado is ringed by other restaurants and cafes, many of them quite good and all of them fun. El Mosto is a highly regarded Mediterranean-style restaurant on the square.

What to do

Casa Machado, Constitución No. 79. Historic home open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily.

Angela Peralta Theater, Carnival No. 1024. 011-52-669-982-4446, www.culturamazatlan.com/index_en.php (select Theater Angela Peralta).

Coordinación De Turismo, Calle Carnaval 1317, corner of Mariano Escobedo. 011-52-669-981-8883, www.sinaloa-travel.com. Arrange Old Mazatlan walking tours at this state tourism office.

For more information

Mazatlán Hotel Association, www.gomazatlan.com.

Viejo Mazatlán, www.viejo-mazatlan.com. Online version of monthly Old Mazatlán newspaper, in English.

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