

Mazatlan: 10 reasons to visit the 'Pearl of the Pacific'

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If you're looking for a family beach destination in Mexico, more than 2.3 million people who live there say you should buy a ticket to Mazatlan. In a nationwide "Battle of the Destinations" held the first week in July, more than 73 percent of voters gave Cancún, Acapulco and Ixtapa a pass and cast their ballots for the Pearl of the Pacific.

Mazatlan's 16 miles of golden sand beaches and attendant tourism are fringe benefits for the largest port between

the United States and the Panama Canal. The city has a long and still-present history, picturesque surroundings to fuel a lifetime of day trips, and a thriving fishing industry. Besides its golden beaches, Mazatlan still boasts the inexpensive digs, fresh seafood, stellar sportfishing and Mexican day-to-day culture that has appealed to travelers since the 1940s.

Mazatlan did time as a spring break haven, remnants of which can still be found in the Zona Dorada tourist zone. Newer developments have been heavy on marina-golf-spa resorts, but these are removed from Mazatlan's *centro*. At heart, it remains refreshingly simple and affordable. Here, then, are our top 10 timeless reasons, in addition to the beaches, to visit Mazatlan.



1. Old Mazatlan

Evocative and haunting even in its tumble-down days, the spot where the Spanish conquerors established the city in the mid-1500s has been gloriously revitalized and is now the fulcrum of Mazatlan's burgeoning art scene. Elegant 19th century buildings bloom with cafes, clubs and crafts galleries. Streets around Plazuela Machado, the Spanish settlement's original central square, are filled with street theater, photo exhibits and parades by day; at night, when restaurants and bars move their tables into the street and open their shuttered second-story doors to drink in the festive mood, Mazatlan could stand in for New Orleans.

2. Nonstop culture

The Angela Peralta Theater, the 1874 opera house whose 1992 restoration launched the rehab of Old Mazatlan, now hosts a steady schedule of events, ranging from the state symphony to a local children's chorus to visiting jazz bands. The restoration gave rise to the annual Mazatlan Cultural Festival, which hosts dozens of music, ballet, theater, movie and comedy events from early November into mid-December. Almost any visit is bound to coincide with a cultural festival, whether it's the State Festival of Arts, the International Dance Festival, the Mazatlan International Film Festival, the Mazatlan Book and Arts Fair or the International Guitar Festival, all of which bring in international celebrities.

3. Carnival

Only Rio and New Orleans can claim a bigger Carnival celebration than Mazatlan, which sees more than 400,000 costumed revelers throng its streets and beaches. In addition to the big procession, Mazatlan's festival brings roving mariachis, regional rock bands, art and literature programs, fireworks, amusement park rides and culinary festivals starring *pescado zarandeado*, the regional barbecued fish. If you miss the celebration, stop by the Casa Machado Museum and visit the Carnaval parlor, which displays glittery costumes, historical panels, and photographs of Carnival queens going back to 1900.

4. The *malecón*

The stretch of the seafront boulevard known as Olas Altas ("high waves") as it skirts the historic district is Old Mexico at its best, full of seats overlooking the ocean, vendors pushing carts, workers taking a break and families enjoying the air. The land side of the boulevard is conveniently lined with cafes, and you can detour up Cerro Neveria ("Icehouse Hill"), where tunnels were dug in the mid-1800s to store ice imported from San Francisco, and Angel Flores Street, with its phalanx of colonial homes perched on a terrace cut out of the hill. Walking the *malecón* can easily occupy a day, especially if you stop along the way to play catch with the waves, get a cool drink, or look in on the city's first tourist hotels, the aging but proud (and cheap) Belmar or the renovated Posada Freeman.

5. Memorable monuments

Every city in the world has its statues, most of them momentarily interesting but easy to forget. Mazatlan's oceanfront monuments stay with you: The soaring Monument to the Mazatlan Woman, saluting the Sinaloa's beauties, who have captured a disproportionate number of "Miss Mexico" titles; the Fisherman's Monument, honoring the strength of fishermen who still labor to pull the city's livelihood out of the water; the Continuity of Life fountain, depicting a naked man and woman poised on a snail shell — the Aztec symbol for continuity — surrounded by 13 dolphins representing intelligence; and the Deer Monument, paying tribute to ancient history ("Mazatlan" means "Place of the deer.")



6. El Faro

At the top of Cerro Creston, Mazatlan's tallest hill, El Faro's ("the lighthouse") 515-foot elevation qualifies it as the world's second-highest lighthouse (after Gibraltar). Early in the morning, sportfishing fleets set out from the jetty that connects the hill to the mainland. At sunset, you can work off your fresh seafood dinner by climbing to the lighthouse — about 30 to 45 minutes from the base of the hill — for an incomparable view of the twinkling city 500 feet below.

7. Isla de las Piedras

"Stone Island" was a coconut-farming cooperative owned by about 20 families living in simple palapas when I made my first trip to Mazatlan. Today it has a few modest hotels, palapa restaurants selling fresh fishermen's catches, ATVs, banana boats, horseback riding, a golf course and the only seahorse farm I've ever come across in my travels. And yet, it's still mostly coconut groves and sand, a delightful way to enjoy the beach away from urban distractions — but only 10 minutes away by water taxi.

8. Take me out to the *beisbol* game

From October through December, you can see baseball played, and cheered, with a distinctly Mexican passion. Los Venados ("the deer"), Mazatlan's Pacific League team, usually have a few American AAA players. Los Venados has made the January playoffs for 10 years running and won the Mexican championship in 2008. Last year, they represented Mexico in the Caribbean World Series. The game itself is played much as in the United States, but embellishments such as cheerleaders and dancers are...unique. The 2010 season begins Oct. 12; the schedule is available here (select Calendario; the red squares indicate home games).

9. Something fishy

The big marlin, swordfish and sailfish that lured the likes of John Wayne and Ernest Hemingway in decades past are still jumping, and Mazatlan has some of the most experienced and competent captains in the world for sportfishing. Several licensed *flotas deportivas* ("sports fleets") of varying sizes line up along the jetty road beneath El Faro; word has it each boat usually returns with an average of three whopping billfish a day in season (October-May).



10. For the birds

If you prefer feathers to fins, Sinaloa state's coastline is home to more than 500 bird species, as many as 35 of them indigenous. The Mazatlan Bird Festival, established in 2009, highlighted the predicament of the highly indigenous Tufted Jay, which has drawn serious and novice birders alike to the area for decades. High in the pines along the Mazatlan-Durango Highway, one of the world's most important birding corridors, the Tufted Jay Preserve now protects the precious bird's habitat in an attempt to halt the decline in its numbers. The mid-

January festival features numerous tours to the preserve as well as other birding areas, conferences, workshops and art exhibits. Sendero Mexico leads tours to the preserve year round in addition to managing reservations for individual entry.

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