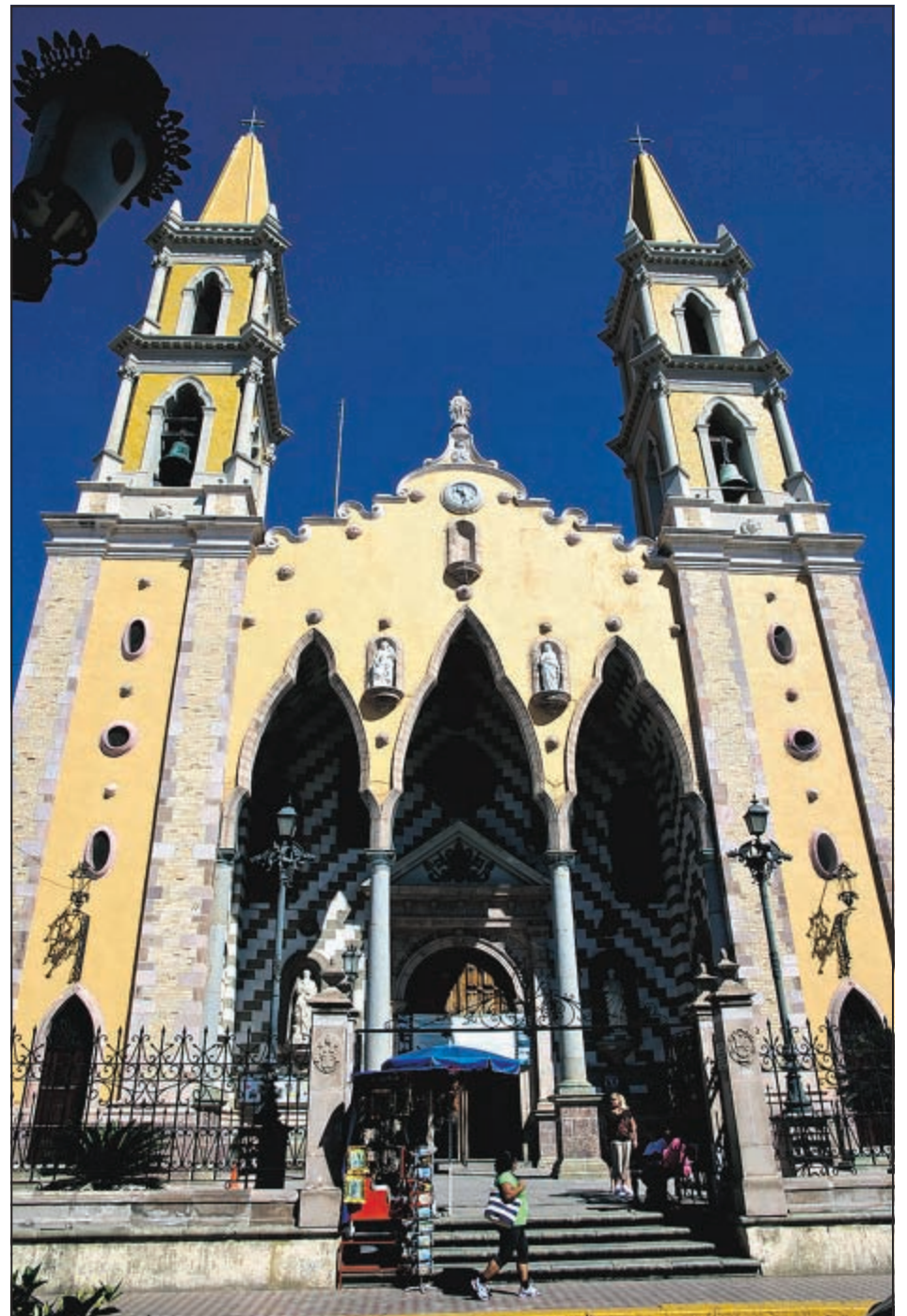




Restored buildings line the narrow streets of Mazatlan's Centro Historico.



A cathedral rises above Mazatlan's central plaza.

Taste of Europe in Mexico

Fine beer with German roots just one of the special flavours of Mazatlan

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Special to The Journal
MAZATLAN, MEXICO

On Mexico's long Pacific coast, Mazatlan stands out for its lively historic quarter and rich cultural life. Because unlike smaller or newer sun destinations — such as Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas, even Ixtapa and Puerto Escondido — Mazatlan is a city with all the advantages of an urban metropolis.

"Mazatlan is a lot like Europe — but closer," says Ricardo Urquijo, director of tourism and culture for this Mexican state of Sinaloa.

"And we're not a colonial city," he adds, referring to interior cities that emerged from the 16th-century Spanish conquest, such as Oaxaca or Guadalajara.

"We were founded by Europeans who came later to trade. So while this is now a sun and beach place — it's first of all a city and a port."

Indeed, Mazatlecos — as its 400,000 residents are called — prefer to boast of the founding of the Pacific Brewery by a few of the German businessmen who settled in Mazatlan around 1800 (and the fact that the brewery still produces huge quantities of Pilsner-style ale).

Urquijo and I chat over dinner in the Casa Lucila, a chic hotel on the Olas Altas — a particularly picturesque part of the original waterfront, fronted by a rocky promontory and spectacular stretch of beach and boardwalk.

Extending back from the Olas Altas are 180 city blocks that comprise the Centro Historico. Here, neo-classical-style houses and businesses, dating to the mid-1800s, have been restored — often with carved wooden doors, old-world lanterns and decorative tiles — as up-to-date homes, shops, restaurants and cultural institutions.

However, I begin my visit to Mazatlan at the newly renovated Oceano Palace in the Zona Dorada (Golden Zone) in the more modern northern part of the city. From my fourth-floor room I look west to Bird and Deer islands.

Thatch *palapa* umbrellas, with pointed crowns, line the beach, while swimming pools are filled with families.

This Zona Dorada is lined with similarly modest-priced hotels, along with tourist-oriented eateries, bars and shops of the likes of Senor Frog's.

At the landmark Mazatlan Plaza

hotel a weekly evening of live entertainment, called Fiesta Mexicana, has been running since the 1960s. And it's a success — from the costumes, dancing and madcap comedy to a fine dinner buffet.

But it's a short ride in a ubiquitous open-sided taxi called a *pulmonia* (when these unusual cars-for-hire were introduced decades ago, veteran cabbies warned riders they'd get a cold, even pneumonia, if they hired them — thus the name) back along the 15-kilometre shoreline road called the Malecón, into Old Mazatlan.

Once there, I slip off the Malecón to the Restaurant Bahia where my friend Beatriz and I order traditional dishes: a seafood ceviche, followed by grilled octopus, squid stuffed with crab, and a mahi-mahi in a delicious green sauce.

Then I amble into the historic district, through the Parque Zaragoza and along narrow streets with names like "5 de Mayo" and Hidalgo, each lined with centuries-old buildings fronted by wrought-iron grates, and painted, say, a bright green or turquoise.

At the Plaza Principal, a cheery-looking cathedral with an oddly scalloped façade and spires painted lemon yellow rises above the scene. Street musicians play amplified flute music, while shoeshine men languish in their chairs.

A big mercado, filled with butchers and fishmongers, is nearby. But the jewel in this historic district is the Plazuela Machado, a few blocks to the south.

Dotted with palm trees and surrounded by ornate buildings with patio restaurants serving contemporary Mexican cuisine, Plazuela Machado is welcoming.

At night, illuminated by thousands of tiny white lights, the atmosphere is evocative.

Live music ranges from jazz through European-inspired Banda Sinaloaese.

One evening, over a crisp white wine and luscious stuffed chicken breast at the restaurant called Domitila, I caught a Cuban-Mexican fusion band comprising students from a nearby arts college.

Just off the Plazuela Machado nestles the 136-year-old Angela Peralta Theater, named for a beloved soprano — "the Mexican Nightingale" — who died here in 1893 while visiting the city.

What is really a small opera house, fully restored, now supports a range of performances, some during two annual festivals that attract artists from around the world. Urquijo points out that tickets to events of international calibre cost much less than comparable offerings in other North American cities.

Another way to experience this Centro Historico is to join the Art Walk on the first Friday of each

IF YOU GO

Getting there

WestJet, U.S. Airways, Continental, Alaska and Delta are among carriers with direct service to Mazatlan

Accommodation

Oceano Palace — a basic holiday hotel with enviable beach frontage in Mazatlan's Zona Dorada. Inexpensive. oceanopalace.com or 1-800-352-7690

Hotel Playa Mazatlan — a slightly more upscale hotel with a long, palm-graced beachfront. Also a weekly folkloric stage show. hotelpalaya.com or 1-866-547-5447

Casa Lucila — small boutique hotel in central Mazatlan, with quality dining. Adult-only rooms are mid-priced to expensive. casalucila.com

Food and beverage

Restaurant Bahia — historic res-

aurant in Old Mazatlan, known for its traditional seafood

Hotel Freeman — historic Olas Altas highrise with a dramatic outdoor rooftop lounge

Restaurants Domitila and Pedro y Lola — two popular courtyard restaurants, with live music, in the Plazuela Machado

Copa de Leche — well-known eatery on the Olas Altas, known for its breakfasts

El Meson de los Laureanos — a character restaurant in the town of El Quelite, serving traditional Mexican dishes

Adventure

Huana Coa Canopy Adventure, near La Noria, huanacoa.com

For more information, gomazatlan.com or visitmexico.com

month, November through May. "You get to know the houses from the inside and meet people in their cultural environment," says a young local historian.

Mazatlan also encourages visitors to experience its rural culture. So a tour guide named Julio and I drive 50 kilometres north to the town of El Quelite, where we dine at El Meson Los Laureanos, a charming restaurant named for "a band of bandits" that roamed the region during its gold- and silver-mining heyday in the 1700s.

But the highlight of the trip is a visit to one of Mexico's largest rooster farms, and a glimpse into cock fighting, still widely practised in Mexico.

While roosters are raised for breeding, says Julio, "the fighters are picked out, trained and caged, and made ready to fight. People come here to buy roosters because they know they're going to fight to the death."

We watch as trainers place *guante* (gloves) on the roosters' claws to protect them from injury as they strut their stuff. Then the men hold

two birds beak to beak, egging them on. Finally, on the ground, the cocks attack each other, feathers flying.

On another afternoon we drive to the town of La Noria, and the Huana Coa Canopy Adventure, a series of zip-lines suspended through a thin forest. With fellow Canadians, I follow instructions and hold on for dear life.

Afterwards, Julio and I stop at a rustic roadside café for *molcajete*, in which a bowl shaped from volcanic rock is filled with steaming shrimp, and accompanied by black-corn tortillas and a cold Pacifico lager.

Back in the Olas Altas, I check into the Casa Lucila. Originally a German mansion, then later a jazz spot frequented by the likes of Ernest Hemingway and John Wayne, the handsome hillside house was recently opened as a luxury eight-room hotel.

My room overlooks a small infinity pool and the beach beyond, to a shapely yet barren island.

Yes, Mazatlan is blessed with sun and water. But there's so much more to this longtime destination — much of it within easy walking distance.



A girl sells a locally made fudge in El Quelite, near Mazatlan.



The Huana Coa Canopy Adventure is a series of nine zip-lines near Mazatlan.