



Mazatlan's Carnival

The second-largest city in Sinaloa state (after the capital, Culiacan), Mazatlan boasts one of the largest carnival celebrations in Mexico. It's also one of the oldest, and has been celebrated in more or less its present form for more than a hundred years. Less wanton than Rio's and more sedate than that of New Orleans or Veracruz, it is nonetheless a spectacular affair that captures the seaside city and holds it hostage for five days and nights each late winter or early spring. It's a commingling of culture and carousing.

The tourism board touts Mazatlan's carnival as family-oriented, and it's true that there are poetry contents, literary awards, and ballet in the baseball stadium. Kids compete for prizes at school, and a couple is elected as diminutive king and queen to reign over the annual awards presentations. Extended families attend rock and ska concerts at venues throughout the city; they dance the tambora, the traditional oompah band music of northern Mexico.



For many families the highlight of the week is the grand parade. Long before dark, crowds start to fill downtown's main street, which parallels the ocean and malecon, downtown Mazatlan's famous seaside sidewalk. They stand four deep on the sidewalk; young men climb available statues and pillars and posts. Those lucky enough to have scored a room in the Olas Altas neighborhood pack onto the tiny balconies of their hotels. (The rest of the year these hotels play second fiddle to hotels at the Zona Dorada, but during carnival they are in huge demand.)

Clowns stomp down the street atop peg-egged stilts. Adorable kids wearing grease paint and animal costumes snake down the avenue in conga lines. Marching bands rattle and hum.

Along with their court, the carnival king and queen ride in an impressive float of flowers, colored paper, and anything that glistens or glitters. Dressed to kill in tulle, organdy, velveteen, and other sweat-producing fabrics despite the heat, they herald the parade as representatives of cultural and community pride.

The king and queen are chosen from among Mazatlan's young elite. The queen especially is chosen not just for her beauty, but for her connections. The king, originally dubbed El Rey Feo ("the Ugly King"), is now called El Rey de la Alegria, or "the King of Happiness." Both preside over the parade and other carnival events wearing sequined, shiny outfits, but it is the queen who really sparkles.



By late evening the parade sambas to its finale. Youngsters crack their last confetti-filled eggs on the heads of their friends, adding to the litter on the streets. As the hot dog, popcorn, and corn-on-the-cob vendors mentally tally up their profits, the roadies kick into gear, erecting multiple music stages up and down the street.

Parties are held for four consecutive nights up and down the malecon. These all-night parties leave waiters sleeping on their feet and visitors snoring in their hotel rooms until high noon. Local talent boogies each night until near dawn, as do better-known national and even international groups. Barricades keep out the freeloaders; there's a nominal fee, and a long wait in line) to gain entrance to this street party, although surrounding streets, bars, and restaurants are packed as well with mariachis, tambora bands and other live music.

Mazatlan is a navy town, and on the Saturday preceding Lent big ships lurking offshore conduct la batalla naval. Using fireworks instead of ammo, they engage in a mock maritime battle that lights up the night with alegria.