

JOURNEYS

An Old Mexican Town Turns Spry

By FREDA MOON

ON a cool Friday night at a sidewalk cafe in Plazuela Machado, in the center of Mazatlán's old town, a wedding party of well-dressed Mazatlecos greeted each other with kisses and toasts. They clinked glasses of imported wine, the women wobbling on high heels, the men looking on.

Across the plaza a few hours earlier, the layered rhythms of música folklórica erupted from the city's Municipal Arts Center. Those horns and drums had been replaced by the wedding band's jazz saxophone and bass.

Music is everywhere in the Centro Histórico, the resurrected arts district and architectural marvel of this city on Mexico's west coast. So are galleries, sidewalk cafes and that illusive, prized product of a cosmopolitan city: the so-called creative class — artists, actors, writers, musicians, designers, hipsters, foodies and fashionistas.

Around the plaza are the broad porches and tall ceilings of neo-Classical homes, freshly repainted in tropical colors and restored to an approximation of their previous grandeur. A few houses down, though, there are similarly grand edifices in a state of decay so advanced they hardly seem salvageable.

Behind one set of unhinged and rotting wooden shutters, trees from the patio have grown through the roof. Vines climb the walls and bricks clutter the floor. The remains of domestic life — a television, a bookshelf, a typewriter — are damaged but intact. It's as if the family that had lived there fled for Mazatlán's suburbs and their subdivisions too quickly to pack their things.

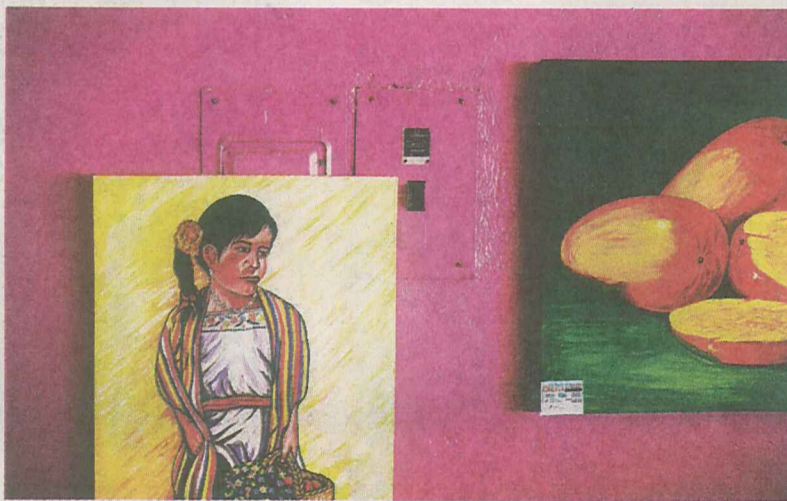
Mazatlán was one of Mexico's first popular resort towns for vacationers from "the other side," as the United States is routinely called there. In the 1950s, a tourism boom began in what was then a small, coastal city with an active port, expansive beaches and European architectural character. Modern hotels were built along Olas Altas, the old town's wide beachfront boulevard.

But it wasn't long until these relatively modest hotels were replaced with skyscraping resorts at the northern reaches of the city. The Golden Zone, as the area came to be known, replaced the Centro Histórico as Mazatlán's primary destination. Soon, the city itself fell out of fashion as new resort towns like Cabo San Lucas and Cancún were developed to draw the American tourist dollar.

The return of those artists, actors, foodies and fashionistas to old Mazatlán didn't happen by accident. The neigh-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EROS HOAGLAND FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Art is seen all over Mazatlán's renewed Centro Histórico, as on a building near Plazuela Machado, above, and in small restaurants like Te Amo Lucy.

people who lived here," Mr. Gómez Rubio said.

It's not just the people that have returned to old Mazatlán, but a certain lilt-tropical mood. Days begin and end at the plazuela, where the ocean — several blocks away — often smells so close as to be at your feet. For the fortunate, there are extended breakfasts; unhurried walks along the malecón; raw oysters and coconut water at thatched-roofed beach restaurants called palapas; a sunset Pacifico beer on the roof of the old Freeman Hotel, now a Best Western; a late dinner of fresh seafood and competing rhythms.

Then, when the air cools, this easy pace gives way to a feverish night life. The energy and noise of Centro Histórico's club scene is incongruent against the backdrop of the architecture of two centuries past. At night, when crowds of young hipsters with ironic oversized glasses, neon tennis shoes and shaggy hair fill the long, narrow balcony at La Tertulia and flirt to a remix of "Don't You (Forget About Me)" at Modular, old Mazatlán becomes young again. ■

borhood's rebirth as an urban cultural district is the product of years of work by a small but committed cadre of advocates. It is a rebirth rooted in ideas of urbanism and smart growth that have breathed life into decaying downtowns across the United States.

In Mazatlán, those ideas have been championed by Alfredo Gómez Rubio, the president of the Centro Histórico Project and a student of the National Trust Main Street Center in Washington, the preservationist organization behind many of those reinvented down-

towns.

"You don't have to sell the soul of the city to tourism," Mr. Gómez Rubiosaid. "One of the mistakes of the '70s and '80s was to forget the old."

Today, Mazatlán's Centro Histórico is anything but soulless. The old mingles with the new on every block of this nearly 200-year-old downtown, where a mix of multigenerational families and recent transplants from around the world amplify the neighborhood's cosmopolitan air. "The best thing we did was a social thing, bringing back the

AN OLD RESORT AS FRESH AS ITS SEAFOOD

GETTING THERE

US Airways, Continental, Alaska, American, Mexicana and AeroMexico all have one-stop flights from New York-area airports. In November, round-trip fares start at \$529, according to a recent Web search.

WHERE TO STAY

Casa de Leyendas (Venustiano Carranza 4; 866-391-2301; www.casadeleyendas.com) stands out for its elegant wood furniture, tile work and inviting common spaces, including an ocean-view rooftop lounge. High-season prices for the six rooms start at \$99 (plus 18 percent local hotel tax).

On Plazuela Machado, **Hotel Machado** (Sixto Osuna 510A; 52-669-669-2730; www.hotelmachado.com) could not be more central. Double rooms start at 750 pesos, \$63 at 13.5 pesos to the dollar, including breakfast and taxes.

A few blocks from the plaza's bustle, the **Old Mazatlán Inn** (Pedregoso 18; 866-385-2045; www.oldmazatlaninn.com) offers large suites — a blue tile swimming pool, an outdoor kitchen and a rooftop garden overlooking the Pacific. Studios begin at \$68 a day.

WHERE TO EAT

Topolo (Constitución 629; 52-669-136-0660; www.topolomaz.com) serves authentic Sinoloan dishes in a colorful courtyard garden. For excellent chiles rellenos stuffed with squash blossoms, and other traditional fare, **Domitila** (Constitución 515; 52-669-136-0436) is a good choice. At both restaurants, diners run about 250 pesos a person, with appetizer, main course and a drink.

For seafood, take a stroll north along the malecón to the palapa restaurants lining the beach north of Ice Box Hill, at the north end of Olas Atlas. Try the pes-

cado zarandeado, a whole grilled fish (dorado, white corvina or róbalo) stuffed with peppers and onions. Sold by the kilogram (2.2 pounds), a two-person serving is about 140 pesos.

WHAT TO DO

The monthly **First Fridays Art Walk** (www.artwalkmazatlan.com) runs from November to May, from 4 to 8 p.m. The series offers visitors an excellent sampling of the old town's growing arts scene.

The rooftop bar at the **Best Western Posada Freeman Express** (Olas Altas 79 Sur; 52-669-985-6060) offers a breathtaking sunset panorama.

Later, music and overflowing crowds can be found at **Cafe Bolero 1987** (Venustiano Carranza 18; 52-669-985-0003), **Beli Pub** (Belisario Domínguez 1406), **Modular Cafe & Bar** (Sixto Osuna 24) or **La Tertulia** (Belisario Domínguez 1414).

