

The Day of the Dead

-- Mexico honors those gone but not forgotten

By [Dale Hoyt Palfrey](#)

Her face is unforgettable and she goes by many names: La Catrina, la Flaca, la Huesuda, la Pelona--Fancy Lady, Skinny, Bony, Baldy. A fixture in Mexican society, she's not some trendy fashion model, but La Muerte--Death.

Renowned writer Octavio Paz observes that, undaunted by death, the Mexican has no qualms about getting up close and personal with death, noting that he "...chases after it, mocks it, courts it, hugs it, sleeps with it; is his favorite plaything and his most lasting love."

November 1, All Saints Day, and November 2, All Souls Day are marked throughout Mexico by a plethora of intriguing customs that vary widely according to the ethnic roots of each region. Common to all, however, are colorful adornments and lively reunions at family burial plots, the preparation of special foods, offerings laid out for the departed on commemorative altars and religious rites that are likely to include noisy fireworks.

In most localities November 1 is set aside for remembrance of deceased infants and children, often referred to as angelitos (little angels). Those who have died as adults are honored November 2.

From mid-October through the first week of November, markets and shops all over Mexico are replete with the special accouterments for the Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead). These include all manner of skeletons and other macabre toys; intricate tissue paper cut-outs called papel picado; elaborate wreaths and crosses decorated with paper or silk flowers; candles and votive lights; and fresh seasonal flowers, particularly cempazuchiles (marigolds) and barro de obispo (cockscomb). Among the edible goodies offered are skulls, coffins and the like made from sugar, chocolate or amaranth seeds and special baked goods, notably sugary sweet rolls called pan de muerto that come in various sizes invariably topped with bits of dough shaped like bones and, in some regions, unadorned dark breads molded into humanoid figures called animas (souls). All of these goods are destined for the buyer's ofrenda de muertos (offering to the dead).

At home members of the family might use the purchases to elaborate an altar in honor of deceased relatives, decorating it with papel picado, candles, flowers, photographs of the departed, candy skulls inscribed with the name of the deceased, and a selection of his or her favorite foods and beverages. The latter often include bottles of beer or tequila, cups of atole (corn gruel) or coffee, and fresh water, as well as platters of rice, beans, chicken or meat in mole sauce, candied pumpkin or sweet potatoes and the aforementioned breads.

The spirits of the dead are expected to pay a holiday visit home and should be provided with an enticing repast and adequate sustenance for the journey. Frequently a wash basin and clean hand towel are provided so that visiting souls can freshen up before the feast. The offering may also include a pack of cigarettes for the after-dinner enjoyment of former smokers, or a selection of toys and extra sweets for deceased children.

In setting up the altar, a designated area of the home is cleared of its normal furnishings. The arrangement often consists of a table and several overturned wooden crates placed in tiers and covered with clean linens. The offerings are then laid out in an artistic and fairly symmetrical fashion. The smell of burning copal (incense) and the light of numerous candles are intended to help the departed find their way.

Meanwhile, at the family burial plot in the local cemetery, relatives spruce up each gravesite. In rural villages this may entail cutting down weeds that have sprouted up during the rainy season, as well as giving tombs a fresh coat of paint after making any needed structural repairs. The graves are then decorated according to local custom. The tomb may be simply adorned by a cross formed of marigold petals or elaborately embellished with colorful coronas (wreaths) and fresh or artificial floral arrangements. In many areas children's graves are festooned with brightly colored paper streamers or other festive adornments.

On November 2 family members gather at the cemetery for gravesite reunions more festive than somber. Some bring along picnic baskets, bottles of tequila for toasting the departed or even a mariachi band to lead a heartfelt sing-along. Local merchants set up provisional stands outside the cemetery gates to sell food and drinks. The booming reports of pyrotechnic rockets may announce the commencement of an open-air memorial mass, the occasion's most solemn interlude.

While death is a topic largely avoided in the USA, the remembrance of deceased ancestors and loved ones is traditional among diverse cultures around the globe, often marked by lighting candles or lamps and laying out offerings of food and drink. Such celebrations can be traced back as far as the glory days of ancient Egypt when departed souls were honored during the great festival of Osiris.

In Mexico the Day of the Dead is a holiday that tends to be a subject of fascination for visitors from abroad. With its rare mix of pre-Hispanic and Roman Catholic rituals, it is also a perfect illustration of the synthesis of pre-Hispanic and Spanish cultures that has come to define the country and its people.

Death held a significant place in the pantheons and rituals of Mexico's ancient civilizations. Among the Aztecs, for example, it was considered a blessing to die in childbirth, battle or human sacrifice, for these assured the victim a desirable destination in the afterlife. The success of the Spaniards' spiritual conquest in Mexico is due in part to their willingness to incorporate certain pre-Hispanic customs into Christian practices.

Not surprisingly, as Mexican society has modernized, long-held customs have begun to fall by the wayside, particularly among urbanites. But the rapid encroachment of U.S. culture, intensified since the enactment of North American Free Trade Agreement, seems to have spurred many citizens to actively pursue the preservation of Mexican traditions. While each October the country's supermarket shelves are now crammed with plastic pumpkins, witches' hats and rubber masks, government and private institutions have recently increased promotion of commemorative altars displayed in museums, educational centers and other public venues.

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