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Mexico's Mazatlan is getting its mojo back

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By ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY — McClatchy-Tribune News Service

The atmosphere in the Plaza de Toros, hot in the afternoon sun, crackled like popcorn, leaving visitors wondering just how long the crowd, growing larger by the minute, would sit patiently and wait. But as late arrivals searched for the last free seats, their concerns melted away.

Suntanned cowboys in big-brimmed hats spotted distant friends and waved. Vendors selling beer worked the aisles and ladies spread sunscreen on their children. Clean-shaven men, eyes hidden behind black Ray-bans, shook hands and strangers compared notes on the afternoon's event, the Carnaval Week bull fight.

Weekly bull fights, a winter sport here in Mazatlan, on Mexico's Pacific Coast, run from Christmas through April. But the bull fight held during Carnaval, featuring world-famous "rejoneador," Pablo Hermosa de Mendoza, is the spectacle that packs the arena. Challenging the bull, the charismatic Hermosa and his horse - he travels with six trained Lusitanos - are super stars, leaping, dancing, and spinning, melding the crowd into a cheering, gasping, groaning, clapping, handkerchief-waving mass.

While we waited for the first bull to enter the ring, I overhead a conversation behind me, a couple discussing their new house on the hill overlooking the beach. Another family moving to Mexico, I wondered? Immigrants heading south, instead of Mexicans coming north?

A favored beach retreat since the 1940s, Mazatlan has been shunned lately, tarred by the same brush that paints the country as crime-ridden and unsafe. But this couple seemed to be ignoring conventional wisdom. Why? I wondered.

"Are you living here permanently?" I asked, turning around to introduce myself. "Maybe you've met my friends. They live in that neighborhood, too, up on the hill."

"Vacation for now, but permanently soon," said Edward Klop, a company owner from British Columbia, smiling and leaning over to shake hands. "Why? Because people here are so decent. Look at this crowd. I've never seen so much beer drunk by so many people who are so good natured," he said. "You don't find that very often. You've heard of the Vancouver riot, after the Stanley Cup match? People got drunk, turned over cars, broke store windows, looted merchandise. That doesn't happen here."

"Mexicans are family people," added Yvonne Klop. "They take their kids when they go out to eat or to a concert. The kind of restaurants we'd like to eat at in Vancouver, or San Francisco or New York, don't allow kids. If there's a bar or they serve alcohol, it's illegal."

Right about then, the crowd broke into cheers and Hermosa cantered into the ring mounted on a white Lusitano stallion. Whether you condone bullfighting, it's impossible not to watch Hermosa as he gets down to business, teasing the bull until it charges, then wheeling away, leaning and turning, whirling and circling the ring with the bull in hot pursuit, staying just inches away from the bull's horns. At the conclusion, Hermosa took a victory lap and the ladies tossed red roses. The fight committee awarded prizes and the crowd collected their things and filed peacefully away to the parking lot.

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The Klops, when they do move, won't be outliers, but part of a settled expat community, people that bring time, energy and expertise to the town. "There are more than 10,000 Americans and Canadians in Mazatlan," said Francisco (Frank) Cordova, secretary of tourism for Sinaloa, speaking by phone from a meeting in Miami. "They rent apartments and some even own houses. Now, if it wasn't safe, why would they be here?"

Drug cartel murders are a fact, he conceded. They are, he said, the federal government's most pressing internal security issue. But most violence occurs far beyond the Golden Zone (the town's designated tourism area), in the mountains or along the U.S. border.

"There isn't any crime in the Golden Zone, not that we've heard about," agreed Paul Petty, a 12-year resident. "Nothing violent, no drive-bys, no school shootings like we had at home. We feel a lot safer than we did when we lived in Los Angeles."

It could be the bounce-back effect, but 2013 is shaping up as the town's best year in a decade. According to Carlos Berdegué, President and CEO of Mazatlan's four El Cid hotels, \$6 million has been allocated for tourism from the U.S. and Canada, a promotion that's already filling the town's 12,000 beds. "Our group and convention programs have been very successful, the cruise lines are returning and the airlines are looking at creating more capacity," he said.

The cruise industry, often the first to fold up and run when bad news hits the wires, agrees. After pulling out abruptly 18 months ago, Holland America and Norwegian Cruise Lines are returning to Mazatlan, adding 10 port stops to their Mexican Riviera route this year (in November and December) and 35 more during the 2014 season.

"We'll be ready for them," said Cordova. "I've got a tourism budget of 400 million pesos (U.S. \$32,541,000), half for the new cruise port and the rest for restoration and improvements in the historic city center."

The cruise port and passenger terminal, a contemporary stunner designed for comfort - and for passenger security - has docking room for eight large passenger ships at once. Adjacent tour bus parking will allow passengers taking shore tours to board the buses without much walking. Travelers who'd rather stay on the ship or at the port will have shops, a restaurant, a tourist information center, and gift stores to explore.

Shore tours in Third World ports, often the bête noir of cruise passengers, haven't been forgotten. "Funds are set aside to train tour guides to make sure every tour is unforgettable," said Cordova. Cognizant of first impressions matter, the adjoining neighborhood has also gotten a facelift. Seedy shacks are gone, cracked stucco was painted and vacant lots turned into gardens. "They've spent \$3 million restoring the colonial buildings on the corridor between the port and the historic district," said Berdegué.

Shore tours will visit several nearby 16th and 17th century-era villages, and the ancient pictographs on the shoreline. But visitors who opt for a stroll through the historic center's narrow streets and shaded plazas, dating to 1837, won't be sorry. It was these plazas where the first colonists gathered and where much of the time's social and civic life played out. Still popular gathering places, this is where people meet to walk, talk, work, eat out or sit and watch the world go by. Wander around and you'll find the Plaza Machado, the Cathedral, the elegantly restored Angel Peralta Opera House and the art museum.

The Central Market, humming from early morning to late afternoon, is where housewives shop for food, teenagers for cheap purses and jewelry and travelers take photos. Covering a city block, the two-story iron structure (think late Victorian), houses hundreds of stalls selling fruits of every color and shape, vegetables, nuts, bread, tortillas, cheeses, woven hats, souvenirs, fish, shrimp, chickens (whole and butchered), pigs (everything but the squeal), beef ribs, cakes, pies, cookies, puddings and candy, not to mention soap, brooms, buckets and dish towels.

If the past is prologue, the outcome is already written. Some cruise passengers will make a beeline for the beach, sample real Mexican cuisine at Pancho's and take the sightseeing boat to Deer Island. On the second trip they'll dine by candlelight at Pedro & Lola's, sit on the Plaza Machado, meet expats from home and play golf. On the third visit, they'll check out the bullfights.

After that, who knows?

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