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## Mazatlan gets a makeover

Article by: ANNE Z. COOK and STEVE HAGGERTY , Special to the Star Tribune | Updated: November 2, 2013 - 4:47 PM

A revitalized, restored vacation destination once again lures travelers to its markets, beaches and bullfights.



A woman steps in the ocean as the sun sets over Castilla Beach in Mazatlan, a resort city in Sinaloa State, Mexico, Sept. 1, 2013. Jack Kerouac's visits to Mazatlan and Mexico City in the 1950s and '60s can be retraced amid the changing landscapes of Mexico.

Photo: Katie Orlinsky

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The mood in the Plaza de Toros, hot in the afternoon sun, crackled like popcorn. Suntanned cowboys in big-brimmed hats spotted distant friends and waved. Pretty girls passed out red roses to people holding preferred "shade seat" tickets while vendors hawking beer worked the crowd. Ladies spread sunscreen on their arms and strangers compared notes on the afternoon's event, the Carnaval

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Week bullfight.

Bullfights, a weekly winter sport here in Mazatlan, on Mexico's Pacific Coast, run from Christmas through April. But the bullfight held during Carnival week, featuring world-famous "rejoneador" Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza, is the highlight of the season, and it packs the arena.

Challenging the bull, the charismatic Hermoso and his string of horses — he travels with six trained Lusitanos — are superstars, 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 overheard a conversation behind me, a couple discussing the anticipated return of the cruise ships to the new terminal, and plans for their new house overlooking the beach. Another family moving to Mexico, I wondered?

Immigrants heading south, instead of Mexicans coming north?

A classic beach retreat since Hollywood celebrities discovered it in the 1940s, Mazatlan has been an outcast of late, smeared by the same headlines that paint most of Mexico as crime-ridden and unsafe. But this couple seemed to be ignoring conventional wisdom.

"Are you living here permanently?" I asked, turning around to introduce myself. "Maybe you've met my friends. They live in that neighborhood 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 riots, haven't you, after that famous 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."

Right about then, the crowd broke into cheers and Hermoso cantered into the ring mounted on a white stallion. Whether or not you condone bullfighting, it's impossible not to watch Hermoso 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 angry bull in pursuit, staying just inches away from those two long horns. Finally dispatching the bull, Hermoso took a victory lap and the ladies tossed red roses. The fight committee awarded prizes and the crowd collected their hats and cushions and filed peaceably away.

### South of the border

The Klops, when they do move, won't be outliers but part of a settled expat community, full- and part-time residents who contribute time, energy and ideas 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 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, and violence is the



### Photo gallery: Mazatlan

Saturday November 2, 2013

A revitalized, restored vacation destination once again lures travelers to its markets, beaches and bullfights.



The sun set on Castilla Beach, illuminating the allure of Mazatlan. Though Sinaloa State often is depicted, along with the rest of Mexico, as unsafe, the Golden Zone along the beach is far from most violence.

Katie Orlinsky • New York Times



A matador did his thrilling dance with the bull at Plaza de Toros, Mazatlan. After dispatching the bull, he takes a victory lap and ladies toss red roses.

Steve Haggerty • Special to the Star Tribune

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federal government's most pressing internal security issue, he said. But most violence occurs in the mountains or along the U.S. border, far from Mazatlan's Golden Zone, the tourist district along the beach.

The U. S. State Department, in fact, suggests that U.S. citizens exercise caution in Mazatlan, particularly late at night and early in the morning, and limit their travel to the Golden Zone and the historic town center.

"There isn't any crime in the Golden Zone, not that we've heard about," said Paul Petty, who's spent most of the past 12 years here in town.

At last things are turning around, promising Mazatlan's best year for tourism in a decade. Visitor numbers have been climbing and hotels and restaurants have invested in better facilities and more security. More than \$6 million in state and local funds has been allocated for tourists coming from the United States and Canada, says Carlos Berdegue, president and CEO of Mazatlan's four El Cid hotels. "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.

### Cruise ships return to port

The cruise industry —often the first to fold and move out of designated ports-of-call when security issues threaten — sees blue sky ahead. After dropping Mazatlan from their Mexico itineraries in 2011, Holland America and Norwegian Cruise Lines are returning, with scheduled visits to the new cruise terminal starting next month, and continuing through the 2014 season. Holland America's Veendam will be the first to arrive, on Nov. 12.

"We'll be ready for them," said Cordova. "I've got a tourism budget of 400 million pesos [\$32.5 million U.S.], 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 that first impressions matter, the adjoining neighborhood has also gotten a facelift. Seedy shacks are gone, cracked stucco is patched and vacant lots have become gardens. "The town has spent \$3 million alone restoring the colonial buildings on the corridor between the port and the historic district," confirmed Berdegue.

### Markets, beaches and bullfights

Shore tours will visit several nearby 16th- and 17th-century 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 won't be sorry. It was these plazas where the first colonists gathered and where much of the era's social and civic life played out. Still popular gathering places, this is where people meet to walk, talk, eat and watch the world pass 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 hunt for cheap purses

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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), cakes, pies, cookies, puddings and candy, not to mention soap, brooms and buckets.

If the past is prologue, the end game is written. Some cruise passengers will join ashore tours or catch the sightseeing boat to Deer Island, across the bay. Others will grab lunch at Pancho's and spend the time in port on Pacific Mexico's nicest beach. Encouraged to return, the second time around will include a candlelight dinner at Pedro & Lola's on the Plaza, and a round of golf. Eventually they'll check out a bullfight. And after that, who knows?

Anne Z. Cook and Steve Haggerty travel widely from their home in Venice, Calif.



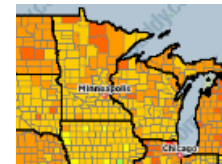

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