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Following the Big Blue Line to Mazatlan

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If you've been to a party in Mazatlan, Mexico, you know what they mean by "fiesta." Now multiply by 10, add a chorus from Julio Iglesias and a wow from Lady Gaga, and you'll have a faint idea of the welcome celebration awaiting cruise passengers soon to disembark at this classic seaside port town.



It's been two years since the cruise ships stopped at Mazatlan, formerly a regular port-of-call on the traditional Mexican Riviera route. The dry spell was partly the result of changing trends in travel, with Mexico losing ground to Hawaii and the South Pacific. But the perception that crime was on the rise and security was inadequate scared the cruise ships off.

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Since then, Mazatlan has gone back to school. Now graduated and wiser, the town is ready for visitors, showcasing an enticing blend of something old and something new. Its historic downtown is spruced up and polished and its port-side neighborhood manicured and tidy. Shops and restaurants promise to knock your socks off (and your wallets out), and if you're good for a short stroll (two-thirds of a mile), following the big blue line painted on the street will lead you straight from the port to the Plaza Machado.



Still, there have been some surprises. After reading regular reports detailing the millions of pesos spent to (1) ramp up security and add personnel and surveillance cameras, and (2) to clean, shine, paint and renovate every visible surface within a hundred miles, I'd expected to see the project include a bright new port terminal. There, rising above the port and visible from all directions would be two stories of soaring glass and buffed steel, unneeded, probably, but guaranteed to put architect Frank Geary to shame and Mazatlan on the map.



But that's good news, especially for those Mexican Riviera cruise fans who've docked at Mazatlan a time or two back in the day. The port terminal looks the same as it did in 2009, the last year that I arrived by ship. Like me, they probably remember a comfortable, low-key stucco structure manned by friendly people, the sort of building you'd expect to see in a colonial city. And that's just what they'll find this time.



A crew of workers were busy when I was there recently, charged with inspecting the security measures designed to control the entrance and exit gates, and the plans to ensure that things go without a hitch. As we toured the premises, carpenters and electricians hustled around, painting signs, replacing damaged patio tiles, installing new lighting and washing windows. No one is quite sure why the project budget was limited to a face lift, but if all goes well and the cruise ships are back to stay, a second building phase could be in the long term plan.

When the first ship arrives on November 11 --



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Holland America's 1,350-passenger Veendam, sold out for this inaugural visit -- the passengers will unload at the long dock, board cute red-and-blue trolleys for a quick ride to the terminal, and

stopping to shop or heading into town, will discover what the rest of us have learned. Mazatlan's back on a roll.



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