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The Pearl of the Pacific is a small Mexican miracle

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MAZATLAN, Mexico

For travellers weary of overwrought, glitzy beach resorts, Mazatlan is a relief.

Somehow it's managed to escape becoming too expensive, too manicured or too crowded, a small miracle considering it's the nearest resort within a day's drive of the U.S.

Mazatlan is a true Mexican hybrid: a historical colonial city located on a peninsula with 16 kilometres of golden beaches, perfect for swimming, surfing or just lounging about.

There are two distinct halves to this city: Old Mazatlan (El Centro Historico) pulsates with history while modern Mazatlan (Zona Dorada) sees all the tourist action.

The city's laid-back atmosphere comes from having survived several onslaughts of settlers. Spanish conquistadors were the first to arrive in 1531, staying long enough to build a port, before heading off to find gold in Baja California. Their Aztec translators named the place Mazatlan, Nahuatl for "land of the abundant deer."

Mazatlan's nickname, Pearl of the Pacific, is a passing nod to its past as a stopover for Spanish galleons laden with gold and Baja pearls on their way to Manila. And where there was gold, there was piracy and Mazatlan had its fair share of marauders.

Along El Cerro de Vigia (Lookout Hill), you can see the old cannons used to defend the port. Persistent rumours of pirate treasure hidden in coves along the coast simply add to the area's overall romance.

The settlement limped along for about 200 years, hampered by severe lack of water and frequent attacks but came alive in 1800 when a group of German entrepreneurs built up the harbour's infrastructure. An economic boom followed and by 1820 there was a thriving community of wealthy German, French, Spanish and Filipino merchants who left their mark by building opulent monuments and mansions in neo-classical and Baroque styles.

As a result, El Centro Historico (The Historical Centre) has 180 blocks with 479 buildings and each is a designated historical landmark. Soaring above everything is the dramatic cathedral with high yellow twin towers, started in 1855 and finished in 1894.

So much of the architecture here was determined by history. From 1847 until 1875, Mazatlan was repeatedly occupied by American, French or British and the intricate iron bars and fences seen on every property were the standard security system against those invaders.

The heart of the old city is Plazuela Machado. This tree-lined plaza was built in 1837 by a rich Filipino merchant and is surrounded by former residences of the rich, now converted into museums, restaurants, social clubs, outdoor cafes, shops and hotels. Local musicians play the plaza daily and street vendors sell everything from shoes to ice cream.

The modern half of Mazatlan, Zona Dorada (Golden Zone), owes its existence to Hollywood or rather to Villa del Oeste in Durango. This rustic town, 313 km north, was the preferred location for most Hollywood Westerns shot in the '40s and '50s but since it had few amenities, the stars gravitated south.

John Wayne became Mazatlan's first regular celebrity, lured back by the big-game fishing. To this day, Mazatlan rivals Cabo San Lucas as the western sport fishing capital. The Hotel Playa de Mazatlan on Playa Sabalo quickly became the place to spot stars such as Robert Mitchum, Gregory Peck, Tyrone Powers and Rock Hudson. The hotel's veranda remains a place to seen and watch all the action.

An upgraded highway and new port brought even more tourists. When five-star resorts and hotels began popping up, the area morphed into Zona Dorada. Today most tourists congregate along Ave Camaron Sabalo not only for the great beach but also for the souvenir shops, discos, restaurants and services.

But the real star in Mazatlan is the coastline — the longest uninterrupted beach in the country.

If you can tear yourself away from the beaches, there are plenty of outdoors activities to keep you busy including golfing, horseback riding, surfing, sailing and fishing as well as some interesting historical or ecological day trips.

For the time being, Mazatlan remains economical. Let's hope being added onto the New York Times 53 Places to Go in 2008 doesn't ruin this perfect Pacific pearl.

Canwest News Service

IF YOU GO

BEST BETS FOR SIGHTSEEING: The nearby villages of Copala, Concordia and El Rosario offer a glimpse into old silver mining operations and rustic colonial architecture. Both Concordia and El Rosario are noted for their furniture and pottery. El Rosario also has baroque gilded altar worth over a million dollars.

BEST BETS FOR COUPLES: For couples who play together, Mazatlan has more than 100 tennis courts. Both the 27-hole golf course at El Cid and the 18-hole course at the Estrella del Mar are open to the public. Golf widows can shop along Ave Camaron Sabalo or at the central downtown market. Meet up afterwards for a romantic sunset cruise to Stone Island.

BEST BETS FOR FAMILIES: The Mazatlan Aquarium has an exceptional display of 200 species including fish, sharks, eels and sea horses. The playground next door has a botanical garden, aviary and crocodile exhibit. The Mazagua Water Park at Playa Bruja has giant wave pools and slides.

BEST BETS FOR SINGLES: Head out to party at Valentino's Club. This hot spot has a sea-view terrace, laser dance floor and pool tables. It also includes Bora Bora, a pub-style bar with its own volleyball court and the karaoke-style Canta Bar.

BEST BETS FOR REGIONAL CUISINE: El Shrimp Bucket is one of the popular restaurants downtown and serves up Mazatlan's specialty: shrimp. Restaurante Doney is set in a refurbished colonial home and offers authentic Mexican fare. Watch the sunset while enjoying fresh seafood at the outdoor Copa de Leche cafe, which has retained its 1930s style. The elegant Angelo's, located in Pueblo Bonito Resort, features a superb international menu and imported wines.

BEST BETS FOR REGIONAL INDULGENCES: Teacapan is the country's largest estuary, perfect for bird watching. Kayak through the El Verde Comacho Ecological Lagoon or rent a boogie board and ride the waves at Playa Olas Altos. Sports fishing outfits operate out of the three marinas: Crestron, El Cid or Mazatlan Marina.