



Travel | Culture | Adventure

Escape



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Page 40 »

GETTY



GO MEXICO

Thought Mexico City was a crime-ridden, air-polluted hellhole? Think again. It's cleaned up its act, says **Christian Koch**

FRIDAY afternoon and psychedelic pulqueria (tavern) Las Duelistas is hosting a demob-happy crowd. But as you enter the western-style saloon doors, the boisterous cackle and ear-perforating salsa quietens. Customers look up from plastic

buckets of pulque (fermented cactus-sap), mouths agape. Have I committed a major gringo gaffe? Evidently not, because within seconds our passage to the bar is thwarted by arribatoasting backslapping revellers.

You see, tourists just don't visit places like Las Duelistas. Walk

around Mexico City and it's immediately apparent. Selfie-sticks, Kiwi backpackers and tourists shoving long-focus lenses into locals' faces are all noticeably thin on the ground. For an electrifying megalopolis of 21 million people with more than 150 museums, it's weird.

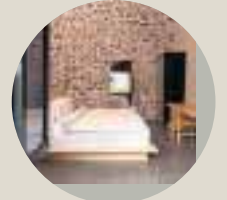
When you do spot non-Hispanic people, they're invariably clambering into people carriers at the Four Seasons. These folk (and the majority of British tourists who visit Mexico without leaving Cancún) are missing

Intoxicating city: **Page 38** »

BEST OF THE REST

MEXICO CITY

HOTELS



Mexico City's most design-centric digs come courtesy of boutique hotel group Habita. I stayed in its eponymous flagship hotel in Polanco. Check-in involves shots of head-spinning mescal, there's a cool rooftop bar with movies projected on the skyscrapers opposite while the minimalist glass-heavy rooms would excite designer Kevin McCloud.

FOOD



Mexico City isn't just about incredible street food. Thanks to putting innovative spins on Mexican cuisine, its chefs are also winning praise. At Rosetta, housed in an ex-art gallery, we feasted upon sublime Italo-Mexican cuisine such as cuchama worm with nasturtium flower while watching Mexican diners choose from the tequila trolley.

GREEN MEXICO CITY



If you need proof of Mexico City's increasing green credentials, you only need to visit Paseo de la Reforma on Sundays. Closed to traffic, the city's main artery is awash with joggers, skateboarders and stray dogs, all running cheek by jowl alongside each other. It's partially thanks to the government's three-year regeneration plan.

Escape Travel | Culture | Adventure

» Continued from Page 37

out on an intoxicating city that should be gabbled about in the same breath as New York or Paris but you can hardly blame them – for years tourists had been warned off visiting due to violent crime, taxi hijackings and smog so bad birds dropped dead mid-flight.

However, Mexico City has cleaned up over the past decade. The murder rate's lower than Cape Town, Miami or New York, with notorious drug cartel wars confined to the country's north. The smog has cleared. Hummingbirds flap in trees. People zip around on EcoBicis, a shared bicycle scheme. Daniel Craig will decamp here later this year to film new Bond flick Spectre, while the Mexican Grand Prix is an F1 fixture for the first time in 23 years.

And so it is that I find myself on a Journeys Beyond The Surface walking tour (customers tailor their own adventures by emailing in



Symbolic:
The Angel Of Independence in Paseo de la Reforma



Strumming away:
A performer entertains passers-by in Plaza Garibaldi



consistency, many will find this 2,000-year-old Aztec drink vile. However, flavoured with pine nut, tamarind or celery, it's smoothie-like delicious and it's not long before we're gawping at Las Duelistas' hallucinogenic walls in a boozy fug.

Our final experience is a four-hour nocturnal stroll. Darting down narrow Centro Histórico streets, each block offers an adventure, such as being engulfed by smoke as snakeskin-loincloth-and-feathered-headdress Aztec dancers perform ceremonies, or listening to silver-studded mariachi bands strumming away in Plaza Garibaldi. A ten-minute bus ride later, we arrive in a different world.

Zona Rosa, or the 'Pink Zone', is home to glitzy shopping malls, fluorescent gay bars and ska clubs. As we tramp through Condesa's art deco home-lined esplanades, a stately, sophisticated city reveals itself. It's a bit like Paris but without the dog poo.

Our guide suggests walking through a nearby park – something we'd be reticent to do at 9.30pm on Sunday night at home. Suddenly, something brushes against my leg. A coyote? A bandito trying to steal my iPhone? No, it's a designer dog followed by a Pooper Scooper-wielding owner.

The Four Seasons-istas would have been aghast. But tomorrow, they'll be shunted towards gift shops and we'll be the ones with an authentic understanding of how everyday Mexico City residents lead their lives. Quite clearly, we win.

Walk an intoxicating city

advance) to experience this city in its visceral, sombreros-and-all majesty.

'In Mexico, surrealism runs through the streets,' said literary giant and long-term resident Gabriel García Márquez. Indeed it does. From the moment blue-haired Mojdeh, Journeys' founder, meets me at my

Psychedelic:
Tourists don't usually get to visit bars like the lively Las Duelistas (below)



hotel, I'm besieged by a succession of bizarre cameos.

As we traipse through the Centro Histórico we weave between sidewalk knife-sharpeners, four men hauling a broken fridge, a female clown and a chap pirouetting ballet by traffic lights. Our nostrils are assailed by kerosene, roasting meat, brick rubble, coriander and sweat.

Every so often, Mojdeh drags me aside to enter a church celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe ('bigger than Jesus', apparently) or stops to eat at the kind of corner-side taqueria you'd normally avoid lest it gives you Montezuma's Revenge. Along the

way, I'm accosted by Day Of The Dead imagery at every turn: scythe-wielding skeletons graffiti here, rows of skull piñatas there.

Eventually we reach Calle Regina, a corridor of hip mezcaterías (serving mescal – tequila's smokier cousin) and peeling pastel buildings speckled with street murals. Taking the baton on from muralist (and Frida Kahlo's ex-husband, no less) Diego Rivera, they're every



'Bigger than Jesus':
The Virgin of Guadalupe; above, Aztec death masks

Instagrammer's wet dream. At Las Duelistas, we sample pulque. Made from maguey cactus, it's unlikely to be drunk outside of Mexico (it can't be bottled and needs to be drunk while fermenting). Thanks to its wallpaper-paste



Journeys Beyond The Surface tours are available from **£99 for four hours** and customers can tailor their own itineraries, such as street art, food or anthropology. travelmexicocity.com.mx
British Airways flies daily to Mexico City from Heathrow, from **£700 return**.

WHO'S YOUR

SOUPER HERO?

#SouperHeroes

Jerk CHICKEN

Italian MEATBALL

Chicken LAKSA

let's EAT.

Chicken POT PIE

Subject to availability