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MEXICO CITY— As this city prepares for bicentennial celebrations of Mexican independence this Wednesday, the streets are expected to fill with crowds dressed head to toe in green, white and red. On a recent visit, though, the scene in the beautiful neighbourhood of Polanco was an oasis in a city that can be overwhelming.

Not long after my mid-afternoon arrival, I was sitting in a café on a busy, tree-lined street in Polanco. In my hands was a warm cup of café de la olla — coffee boiled with sugar and cinnamon — and even though the day was so hot my arms turned bright pink in the shade, I happily gulped one of the best cups of Joe I have ever tasted. And this was only the first of many pleasant surprises the neighbourhood had in store.

On the way to my hotel, the taxi wound past rambling, gated mansions partially obscured by tall, flowering trees, now converted into luxury apartments and embassies. Polanco, which borders the north side of the massive [Chapultepec Park](#), has long been popular with Jewish, Lebanese and Spanish immigrants, and the streets are named after writers, scientists and philosophers, from Bernard Shaw to Socrates. The neighbourhood is filled with manicured cafés and parks, boutiques full of colourful dresses and stylish leather folios, little shops with buckets full of cheap roses, and bakeries with perfect pain au chocolat.

Fashionable Mexicans valet their cars when they stop for coffee, and everyone seems to knock off work early to linger at the ubiquitous ice cream stands (tequila ice cream, anyone?) or sip a slightly warm glass of red wine at one of the countless sleek bars and elegant restaurants. The sidewalks are wide, though often interrupted by parked cars, vendors selling helium balloons and labourers taking a break in the shade.

On a busy corner of Presidente Masaryk, a main boulevard, sits a new boutique hotel designed by Canadian duo Yabu Pushelberg. The 35-room, seven-storey [Las Alcobas](#) (Presidente Masaryk 390) is a cozy alternative to the giant international chain hotels nearby. The lobby is a softly lit living room with an impressive spiral staircase that winds to the top floor. Each guestroom combines clean, contemporary chic with distinctly Mexican accents, and is full of nice details like a complimentary mini-bar stuffed with local candies and cookies. Las Alcobas also has a small spa, where I had a 60-minute Avena Y Agave body scrub, and came out with brand-new skin.

For food, start at Las Alcobas' Dulce Patria. Try the zucchini blossom and pine nut quesadillas, guacamole with ricotta and pomegranate rubies, and duck confit in mole negro.

If you're looking for something cheap and easy, visit La Casa del Pastor (Alfredo Musset 3) for that aforementioned café de la olla, cactus salad, spicy shredded chicken on house-made corn tortillas, flan with dulce de leche, and (my personal idea of heaven) large sheets of crispy, baked cheese served with a variety of salsas. Kaffe Bondy (Galileo 38) serves up a fantastic brunch, with platters of fresh, cinnamon-laced pastries and phenomenal chilaquiles (essentially, fancy breakfast nachos) with spicy green chili sauce and shredded chicken. There's also Klein's (Presidente Masaryk 360), a popular lunch and late-night spot, where office workers and Mexican hipsters (less irony, more facial hair) linger over enchiladas and bagels.

And if you're in the mood to mix it up, try Astrid y Gaston (Tennyson 117) for Peruvian food on a secluded second-storey terrace lined with roaring stone fireplaces. Shrimp and fish ceviches are wonderfully light and tangy, and red snapper bathed in soy and ginger falls apart at the touch. Leave room for a dark chocolate sphere filled with mango ice cream, and the five-sorbet sampler (including a tamarind variety



Beauty abounds in Polanco, where flower stands and tree-line streets are an escape from the rest of the overwhelming city.

anja muticpolanco photo/for the toronto star

that almost made my head explode).

While we're on the subject of consumption, do you need a new anything? The neighbourhood is full of shiny, recognizable luxury brands like Hermes, Cartier and Ermenegildo Zegna. But I recommend hitting the boutiques lining the narrow lanes between boulevards Presidente Masaryk and Emilio Castelar. Here, mansions and townhouses have been converted into ornate retail spaces; above, oversize apartment windows open to the warm air and balconies have all manner of flora spilling over the sides. Try a pair of hot pink Francois Pinton frames at Ottica Micromega (Presidente Masaryk 360), a pink, yellow, and red and pink floral sundress by Ferriano at Yuriko (Presidente Masaryk 360), or a heart-shaped choker in red marble at Ciceronne (Presidente Masaryk 360).

When not eating and shopping, take a walk in the shadows of the tall trees in Polanco's Lincoln Park (along Emilio Castelar, between Aristoteles and Edgar Allan Poe). There, businessmen (who still look suave in three-piece suits in 30-degree weather) chat on cell phones and kids are pushed in strollers by parents or nannies alongside statues and a large pond. Be sure to duck into the Aviario Abraham Lincoln for lovely, slightly off-key singing from the many brightly coloured birds.

Other attractions include the Anthropology Museum, Botanical Gardens (complete with orchid farm) and abundant galleries, where you can attempt to wrap your head around Diego Rivera's intricate murals. The city will be bustling for the nation's 200th anniversary festivities, but if you're visiting be sure to stop and sit with a cup of warm café de la olla, taking in Polanco's infectious energy and moments of tranquility.

Sarah Treleaven is a Toronto-based freelance writer. Her trip was subsidized by *Las Alcobas*.