



Festivals and Holidays

Mexicans have lots of festivals and holidays throughout the year. Most of them are regional and a few are national.

On these days, Mexican people might dance or sing, eat certain foods or wear special clothes. Holidays in Mexico are often linked to religious events, or historical anniversaries.



One of the **Catholic traditions** brought over by the Spaniards to Mexico during the 16th Century is the Saint's Day, a day which is similar to someone's birthday. Every day in the calendar is dedicated to a different Saint. The day that your name appears on the calendar is your **Saint's Day** (for example, Sofia's Saint Day is on September 18th and George Saint Day is April 23th).

On that day people have a party and receive presents, and it can be as important as your birthday.

El Día de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead)

November 2nd is a national holiday in Mexico, called "**The Day of the Dead**". Traditionally, the dead are expected to visit the living on this day and be their honoured guests for the night. It combines pre-Hispanic beliefs with Catholic traditions of Medieval Spain.



It is believed that on November 1st, the souls of children who died return to their homes, and then on November

2nd, the souls of the adults come back. This is a very happy occasion because Mexicans like to remember their loved ones.

Beginning on November 1st, incense and candles are placed in order to light the way to the family altar. In many places, families make a path of marigold petals from the street to the family altar so that the souls will recognize their way.



Sometime, families celebrate this holiday by visiting the cemetery. They take offerings of **Pan de muerto (bread of the dead)**, food, drink, flowers and candles.

In many homes altars are prepared for relatives or friends who are dead. A typical altar is



decorated with **Cempasúchil**, (a kind of marigold that is the traditional flower of the Day of the Dead), **calaveras** (sugar skulls), and **Pan de muerto**. The altar is usually a table covered with tissue paper where several items are carefully placed, such as pictures of saints, incense and many candles.

Food and drinks are always included on the altar, especially the favourite food and drinks of the person to whom the altar is dedicated. It is believed that those no longer alive enjoy the food in spirit, while afterwards, the living eat it. Some people like to include clothes the dead people wore or things they enjoyed using when they were alive.

For example, if the altar is for a grandmother, her shawl and her spectacles might be set up. If she enjoyed knitting, then needles and wool could also be included. If the altar is for the grandfather, perhaps his sombrero or his playing cards will be placed upon it. If the altar is for a child, then toys and sweets are set up.

Altar for the Dead

To set up an altar you will need the following:

- *Cempasúchil* (a kind of marigold)
- Pictures of saints
- *Calaveras* (sugar skulls)
- *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead),
food, fruit, sweets.
- Drinks: beer, wine or soft drinks
- Candles in glasses
- Small table (covered with cut-out tissue paper as in the picture)



The regions in which the celebration of the Day of the Dead is particularly important are Oaxaca, the State of Mexico and Michoacán. In Metepec, in the State of Mexico, it is believed that the children's souls arrive on this day at 8.00 am. At this hour they are served a breakfast of rice with milk, chocolate, pumpkin seeds, sweets, almond sugar dough and bread.

Children give each other sweets in the shape of skulls called *calaveras*, which have their names printed on them.

How to make a *calavera* (sugar skull)

Ingredients

- 2 cups of icing sugar
- 1 egg white
- 1 tablespoon of clear honey
- 1/2 teaspoon of vanilla
- 1/3 cup of corn flour
- vegetable colouring



Mix the egg white, honey and vanilla together in a bowl. Stir in the icing sugar (previously sieved) with a wooden spoon. Using only your fingertips, mix everything together until it forms a firm dough.

Sprinkle a work surface with corn flour, and make the dough into a ball. Put the dough in a plastic bag and close the bag until you are ready to use it, if the dough becomes hard just add some warm water. On the work surface, make the dough into skulls, coffins, birds, etc. When the figures are dried, paint them with vegetable colouring. Don't forget to put someone's name on each skull.

Christmas celebrations



Christmas is a time of many traditions in Mexico. One of the first signs that Christmas is coming is the blooming of the Mexican flower called **Nochebuena**, also known as *Poinsettia*. They are used to decorate gardens, parks, streets, shops and houses. The word *Nochebuena* means Christmas Eve.

Mexicans eat their Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve, and then, if they are Catholic, go to Midnight Mass. Children may receive a few presents on Christmas Day or on January 6th, when families and friends get together to celebrate the arrival of **The Three Wise Men**

to visit the infant Jesus. On January 6th they eat a cake made in the shape of a ring, called **Rosca de Reyes**. Hidden inside the cake are some tiny plastic dolls. Everyone cuts their own slice of cake, and the person who finds a doll in his slice must host a party for everyone on Candlemass, the 2nd of February.



The Posadas

The **Posadas**, which means lodging or shelter, are celebrated every evening from December 16th to 24th. These celebrations mark Mary and Joseph's cold and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter. Nowadays, the Posada party is both a religious and social occasion, a festive representation of the journey to Bethlehem.



People form a procession and walk towards a house. Everyone in the procession carries lighted candles and sings as they slowly walk along. On reaching a house, half the group stays outside and “begs” for shelter from the other half, who stays inside the house. After the songs, the doors are opened. With this, the religious part of the celebration ends and the fun begins.

Piñata

At the end of each Posada, a piñata is broken. **Piñatas** traditionally are made of a fragile earthenware jar covered with *papier-mâché*, but these days they can be made by pasting *papier-mâché* over an inflated balloon. The *piñata* is filled with seasonal fruit or candies. Traditionally *piñatas* are star-shaped to represent the one that guided the Three Wise Men to the newborn infant Jesus.

Today, *piñatas* are often made in the shape of animals, stars or popular cartoon characters, and are filled with trinkets and sweets. The *piñata* is strung up on a rope, and a blindfolded child tries to break the *piñata* with a stick. The *piñata* is lowered and raised while several children take turns to hit it. Eventually someone gives the *piñata* a good whack and there is a general scramble as everyone tries to get some of the goodies that come spilling out. *Piñatas* are also used at birthday parties for children up to ten or twelve years old.



How to make a piñata

Materials

- 1 large balloon
- Newspaper strips (3 x 6 cms wide)
- Paste (made of one part water and two parts flour)
- Colour tissue paper (cut in strips of 2 x 5 cms)
- Strong rope
- Scissors
- Broom stick



- Sweets, fruits, peanuts in shells or trinkets

Instructions:

Blow up the balloon to the desired size. Dip the newspaper strips into the paste and apply several layers of paper to the balloon. Leave an opening at the top. Attach a rope so that it can be hanged. Allow to dry for three days. Pop the balloon. Decorate with tissue paper strips. Curl the ends of each strip at the bottom with a spoon. Fill it with sweets, fruit and trinkets.