

Cultural Centerpiece

Embracing vibrant Mexico City

By ERIC LUCAS



David Alfaro Siqueiros was not only among Latin America's most famous artists—one of the “Big 3” muralists who vaulted Mexico's vitality and culture into global prominence—he was a political firebrand.

Carlos Slim is not only a multibillionaire rich enough to be ranked among the wealthiest individuals on Earth, he's an art collector whose new museum in Mexico City features, in a position of honor, a vivid and uncompromising canvas by Siqueiros—who did his best to block the rise of tycoons like Slim. The latter had begun accumulating his billions, and his art, by the time Siqueiros died in 1974, and there's no telling whether the two ever met.

But Siqueiros' presence on the fifth floor of Slim's Soumaya Museum is memorable indeed. *The Land, Like the Water and the Industry, Belong to Us* is a 1959 8-by-25-foot painting that depicts early 20th century Mexican workers and farmers in a palette of intense reds and browns, and strong, swirling shapes—colors and patterns that commonly represent Mexico largely because of Siqueiros and his compatriots Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. *The Land* features burly workers, hands raised in supplication against a background of mineshafts. It's one of those world-art masterpieces that requires a viewer to take a second and third look.

That's just like today's Mexico City.

Known widely as “México DF,” the latter acronym standing for *Distrito Federal*, the Western Hemisphere's biggest single conurbation is a modern marvel built on the foundations of one of the world's oldest civilizations. The city's a cultural standout, holding well-known parks and excellent museums. It artfully melds old and new, as evinced by the 19th century Paseo de la Reforma, a historic boulevard that is now closed to vehicles some Sunday mornings so that bicycle riders and pedestrians may utilize it.

And the lives of its residents proceed in

other delightfully intimate ways, despite the overwhelming size of their metro area. Weekend mornings draw families to neighborhood restaurants where several generations extend breakfast into brunch then lunch and beyond. And each evening, promenaders arrive at city parks to snack, visit, play chess and dance at outdoor pavilions.

My wife, Leslie, and I are passing one such park early one evening on our way from the Centro Histórico back to our hotel when we hear the strains of *cumbia*, the popular South American dance music. Here, at the southwest corner of Alameda Central, two dozen couples are twirling in a remarkably tiny space on a concrete patio, boombox blaring. We pause near a young pair who are eyeing the *baile*, or dance, experimentally.

“You should give it a try,” I suggest, in Spanish.

They shrug amiably at this advice from two obvious Norteamericanos. “*Bueno, quizás. ¿Y ustedes?*” The young lady, eyebrows raised politely, urges Leslie and me toward the packed dance floor. We plead hunger: “*Estamos buscando cena.*” And off we stroll toward supper.

That night's dinner takes place in a marble-and-brass dining room beneath



LUCAS VALLECILLOS / AGE FOTOSTOCK / SUPERSTOCK

Opposite: The Monument to Independence (known as “El Ángel”) on Paseo de la Reforma was built to commemorate the heroes of the 1810 Mexican Revolution. Above: The Aztec Stone of the Sun and other historical artifacts are displayed at the National Museum of Anthropology.

enormous chandeliers, with tuxedoed waiters—all to satisfy a bit of personal nostalgia. I first came to Mexico City decades ago as a boy of 14, and I fondly recall the European ambiance epitomized by high-style restaurants serving Spanish cuisine—platters of paella, to be precise—that my European-born father declared the best one could find anywhere outside Barcelona.

I've not been back to Mexico's capital since that halcyon trip, and so when we strolled into Hotel Imperial's Restaurante Gaudi and found starched white linen, leather-bound menus and, yes, paella in several forms, I was ready to say little had changed in almost 50 years.

Not quite. Here is a capital that aspires to rank among the world's finest, a city whose more affluent neighborhoods feature display windows with glittering jewelry along elegant boulevards with \$100,000 cars—and food vendors selling 5-peso sacks of *churritos*, spicy corn snacks that blend centuries of European and Central American cuisine. Here are 20.5 million people, and architectural wonders

more than a millennium old—and architectural standouts just two years old, such as Museo Soumaya.

The 20.5 million total ranks the city among the world's biggest, and yet the majority of attractions are in a relatively small oval along Paseo de la Reforma, from Chapultepec Castle to the historic downtown, Centro Histórico. From a hotel along Paseo de la Reforma one can walk from one attraction to another, as we were doing on our journey back from the National Palace.

And despite the city's size, in many of its areas—such as Polanco, the neighborhood abutting Chapultepec Park—relative tranquility reigns. Tall plane trees shade streets lined with boutiques, restaurants and embassies; celebrities take coffee on sidewalk patios, while their limousines wait nearby. At another architectural landmark, the midcentury Hotel Camino Real, the inner courtyard clasping a sun-splashed blue tile pool is as quietly serene as any countryside resort. And in the candlelit dining rooms of a dozen path-breaking restaurants, today's chefs conjure up masterpieces of neo-traditional Mexican cui-

Rodging

El Camino Real Polanco (Mariano

Escobedo 700, Col. Anzures; 52-55-5263-8888; caminoreal.com). A pulsing Isamu Noguchi fountain greets arrivals at this famous midcentury architectural standout, whose poured-concrete, cantilevered construction, vast public spaces, priceless original murals and bright color scheme result in one of the world's most memorable urban hotels. The eight on-site restaurants include Centro Castellano, one of the city's best Castilian dining rooms.

Le Meridien (Paseo de la Reforma 69, Col. Tabacalera; 52-55-5061-3000; starwood-hotels.com/lemeridien). Poised along Paseo de la Reforma about a mile east of Chapultepec, this sleek, modern, all-suite hotel is ideally situated for visits to both the park and the Centro Histórico. The spacious rooms feature excellent soundproofing; views of the boulevard are splendid; and service and advice are both excellent.

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sine. At Dulce Patria, the next night, we enjoy sensational octopus *aguachile*, seared sea bass with corn-vanilla pudding—and the very best, chipotle-accented Caesar salad I've ever had.

Just as Dulce Patria is a showcase for the culinary arts, Soumaya gives visitors greater insight into the visual arts. Slim's stated intent at Soumaya is to depict the depth of artistic achievement in Mexico. Each floor therefore offers a potpourri of European and Mexican works roughly contemporaneous. Ecclesiastical art, portraiture, Romantic landscapes, Impressionism, Abstraction—all are here, by Mexican and Old World artists.

The building itself is an architectural marvel, a snail-shell spire of glistening metal scales that has provoked fierce argument over its merit in the world of design. Its interior layout, reached via a Guggenheim-like ramp that descends the interior of the building's shell, takes visitors past hundreds of paintings and statues. The sheer panoply of achievement is stunning, capped off at the bottom by another mural, this one of inlaid tile: *Bath of Tehuantepec*, Rivera's last major work, an apolitically wistful pastoral scene.

The sense of being swept away by history that accompanies immersion in Mexican culture can be experienced at the city's

Above: Visitors cross the vast Plaza de la Constitución near the Palacio Nacional. Below: The Soumaya Museum was built by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim to display the depth of artistic achievement in Mexico.



BENEDICTE DESRUS / ALAMY

most famous cultural shrine, the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park. The museum's 20 acres house an impressive collection of antiquities, displayed in seven separate halls that hold a gathering of Aztec, Mixtec, Toltec, Maya, Olmec and other artifacts. Each display represents a pre-Columbian civilization that flourished and faded, leaving behind treasures such as the gold ornaments that inflamed Spanish imaginations. Today the real treasure is the preservation of priceless artifacts—most famous being the massive 12-foot Aztec sun calendar.

Mexico's 20th century populist strain still thrives in its capital. Slim's Soumaya is free to all; free or incredibly economical

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are other Chapultepec Park attractions such as the Museum of Modern Art, which holds more stunning murals by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco. The Castillo—the 19th century hilltop palace in which the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian lived while he built, among other things, Paseo de la Reforma—is free on Sundays; here a mesmerizing mural by Siqueiros depicts the 1910 revolution that created modern Mexico. The castle's balcony offers sweeping views of the entire bowl in which Mexico DF lies at 7,600 feet—a view much improved from the notorious era 20 years ago when the city had the world's worst air pollution. Last year, 248 days brought good air quality.

Free, too, is the National Palace downtown that holds Rivera's most famous mural, a three-wall stairway panel that attempts nothing less than a complete survey of Mexico's history. Here we hire an especially enterprising guide, Hugo García, who promises complete enlightenment about this masterpiece.

“See how Rivera's sense of irony is on

Dining

Dulce Patria (Anatole France 100, Col. Polanco; 52-55-3300-3999; dulcepatriamexico.com). Martha Ortiz Chapa's Polanco shrine to Mexican cuisine reflects a longstanding fascination: Her university thesis was on how national identity is reflected in food. Thus the name Sweet Homeland. Every dish is inspired by traditional Mexican foods—*esquites* (corn) in mayonnaise with chile de árbol, squash flower fritters, ceviche with sapote (a tropical fruit). Presentation and service are both cosmopolitan; décor blends white linen and bright color accents.

Hacienda de los Morales (Vázquez de Mella 25, Col. del Bosque; 52-55-5283-3000; haciendadelosmorales.com). The building that houses this classic restaurant harks back to colonial times, with pink stucco walls and vast tiled hallways. The menu is traditional Mexican-Continental, with seafood, barbecued meats, *ensaladas* and each night a regional Mexican specialty, such as cod in green sauce. Waiters provide unhurried, black-tie service.

display? Look there—his two wives, side by side. Think that really happened?” García raises his eyebrows, then points out John D. Rockefeller, who famously had Rivera’s murals removed in New York. Here, in this mural in Mexico City, Rockefeller is at the receiving end of a pipe funneling streams of money upward.

“And that upside-down sun refers to the Mayan calendar, which ended last December, yes? But that was just the end of the calendar, not the universe, as we all know now.” García smiles sardonically at the foibles of modern times, which brought thousands of tourists to the Yucatán to witness what they believed the Mayans had forecast as the end of time.

Time didn’t end, but the sleepy sun and serene breeze in the pines and cypresses of Chapultepec make it seem infinitely stretchable. Chapultepec—“grasshopper hill,” in Nahuatl—has human roots stretching back thousands of years. Meso-american inhabitants have been using this spot as a cool-air retreat since Toltec times, just as today’s 15 million visitors a year do.

As we head back toward the Camino Real just blocks away, Leslie and I stop to admire pole fliers, *voladores*, practicing an art that dates back to pre-Columbian times. The four descending fliers circle the 30-meter pole 13 times, that number being a key division of days in the Aztec calendar. A capital as dynamic as Mexico City need not rely on ancient calendars to thrive—but it’s wonderful to see how well historic traditions and modern adornments both keep time here. A hundred cellphones snap images of the pole fliers, record the flute player’s lilting accompaniment and the conclusive ceremonial landing of each flier, then forward the spectacle around the world. ▲

Eric Lucas lives in Seattle.

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