

Meatballs and museums

Zacatecas prides itself on being a bit different

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ZACATECAS, Mexico — “Dos?” That was the first question I was asked as I entered Tortas Malpaso in a village outside Zacatecas in the central Mexican highlands.

A smile spread across my face as I pondered the question amid calls of “*buen provecho*” from locals already eating in this roadside institution, which has the air of a Midwestern U.S. soda shop circa 1947. Many years of colorful calendars serve as wallpaper, and regulars sit in the same chairs every day, sometimes for hours.

I did, indeed, want two of the mini sandwiches that three generations of the same family have been serving here since 1923. Almost instantly I was handed a plate with two small, soft, slightly sweet homemade rolls filled with homemade meatballs, about the size of golf balls. The sizzling meat nestles on the roll where it exudes just enough grease, colored bright red from a jumble of spices, to moisten the bread. It's a tidy 10-peso (75-cent) treat.

The second question I was asked was, “What do you think you're eating?”

While my mouth was too blissfully full to respond, it was revealed to me that the meatballs are made from horse meat, a tradition in this community that now farms horses for food. A small gasp escaped before I managed to swallow and remind myself that despite my love of horses, eating them is really no more gasp-worthy than consuming the other barnyard residents.

Though I'd been slowly exploring northern Mexico for nearly six months, I'd never come across horse-meat meatballs. The longer I stayed in Zacatecas, the more I realized that this lightly touristed city prides itself on offering something just a little bit different.



The conquistadors are gone, but Spaniards left a lasting mark on the architecture and layout of Zacatecas.

The art scene in Zacatecas, for example, is an eclectic mix of collectors, local heroes and emerging modern talent that delivers something other than the tortured painting and sculpture of Frida Kahlo and the enormous and politically controversial murals of Diego Rivera that are so common in the museums in Mexico City.

The outstanding Museo Pedro Coronel is named for a local painter and sculptor who died in 1985, leaving an art collection that's now housed in a 17th-century mansion that once was a Jesuit college.

The museum is impressive for its big names (Picasso, Chagall, Miró), its diversity (art from Tibet, Africa, Nepal and pre-Hispanic Mexico) and its humility. Coronel produced hundreds of pieces of sculpture and paintings, often using bold traditional colors in modern contexts and shapes,

and his work remains highly popular. However, only a handful of his pieces are on display in his namesake museum.

More haphazard is the Museo Rafael Coronel, which houses the collection of Pedro's brother, Rafael, who was Diego Rivera's son-in-law and also an artist. In contrast to Pedro's tightly edited, judiciously paced collection, the exhibits in Rafael's museum, in the crumbling remains of a 16th-century ex-convent, can feel a bit random and slapdash. A highlight, however, is the wing displaying 3,000 or so traditional masks from throughout Mexico.

Architecture also gets its due in this city whose historic center was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993 to protect places such as the massive, flamboyant cathedral. Completed in the mid-1700s, the stone facade at its entrance is so

intricately carved that it looks more like a Hindu temple than a church and completely belies the cathedral's plain interior.

The most pervasive and cherished bit of Zacatecas' personality is the city's role in the life of revolutionary Pancho Villa, who defeated the Federales in 1914 during a battle that became known as the Taking of Zacatecas. More than 7,000 died in what is believed to be the bloodiest single conflict of the revolution.

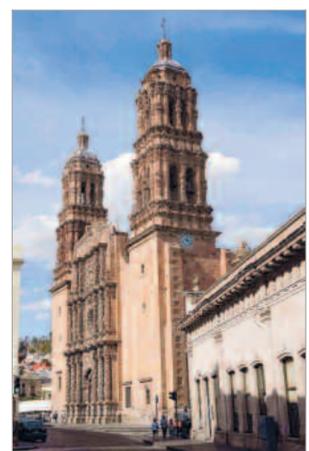
A monument to Villa, on horseback in midbattle, is at the summit of the Cerro de la Bufa overlooking the city. The engine from the train on which Villa arrived is enshrined in the middle of a busy traffic circle, and at Los Dorados de Villa restaurant (Dorados was the name of Villa's army) you can get a heaping serving of their famous green pozole (traditional hominy and meat soup) with your Villa-mania.

The Santa Rita Hotel (part of the exclusive, quality-controlled Mexico Boutique Hotels group) is just one block from the cathedral. It represents a deft combination of the city's historical and artistic sides. The owners spent 10 years restoring the 200-year-old stone facade while simultaneously gutting the building to make way for a thoroughly modern, art-filled interior.

The owners have made the Santa Rita not only a top place to stay but also a great place to shop. Each of its 35 rooms (ask for Room 404 for a mesmerizing view of the floodlit cathedral at night) is full of pieces by esteemed local artists, including both Coronel brothers, and all are for sale at a fraction of the amount charged by dealers.

Neither historic nor artistic (unless plastic chairs and flashing lights do it for you) is La Mina Club, which claims to be the world's only nightclub inside a silver mine. Almost 1,200 feet underground, this night spot is popular with locals and visitors, although less popular with claustrophobics. Like many once-in-a-lifetime experiences, tequila makes it easier.

Tequila is discouraged at the new 600-foot-long zip line across a rocky chasm in the Sierra de los Cardos Ecological Reserve about an hour



Zacatecas' cathedral was completed in the 1700s.

When you go

Details

- Santa Rita Hotel, www.hotelsantarita.com
- Los Dorados de Villa Restaurant, 1314 Plazuela de Garcia. Long waits on weekends. Door is always locked; knock loudly.
- La Mina Club, in Dovalí Jaime. Open Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.
- Lupe Davalos Macias (lupe dav@hot mail.com), owner of the Recorridos Turísticos Plata tour company, and English-speaking certified guide Rosalio Alamo offer a two-day tour out of Zacatecas that includes an overnight stay in the Sierra de los Cardos Ecological Reserve. Cost of about \$135 per person, eight-person minimum, includes all transportation in new vans, English-speaking guide, lodging and barbecue in the reserve.

outside Zacatecas. At 7,000 feet in the Sierra Madre Occidental range, the reserve is forested and green, and a welcome escape from the desert landscape that surrounds Zacatecas.

The reserve's seven comfortable cabins with mini kitchens, full bathrooms, ample porches and grills are ideal for a change of scenery.

Just remember to grab a last torta Malpaso on your way back to the pleasures of Zacatecas.



Locals have been making these not-so-mystery-meat meatballs for three generations.



Silver shops sell a variety of pieces, such as key chains, jewelry and religious items.

Photos by ERIC MOHL/Horizon Writers' Group