

MEXICO CITY

Uriel Waizel casts off some of the stereotypes and explains the fascinating appeal of Mexico's capital – one of the largest cities in the world

This mega metropolis, stigmatised by travel guidebooks for its infamous water quality (known as Moctezuma's Revenge), its *Blade Runner*-grade toxic air and the Russian roulette prospects of getting robbed by taxi drivers, is in reality a warm and beautiful technicolour place with plenty to offer in entertainment and cultural activities.

There are many Mexicos and the DF – pronounced 'day effe' – an abbreviation for Federal District, (also known as 'The Defective') is the melting pot where modernity meets the arcane. Dancing neo-Aztec *concheros* – performing what looks more like 80s high-energy aerobics than the actual pre-Hispanic rituals – stomp on a daily basis on the earthquake-prone grounds of the Zócalo district in a bold move to wake up the ancient gods laying asleep inside the

buried temples of Plaza Mayor below.

Saturday mornings at the Ciudadela Plaza, are perfect for learning the slow paced handheld *danzon* (a derivative of waltz and Cuban *son*), a favourite among elders and incurable romantics. On Sunday mornings, the Alameda Plaza next to Bellas Artes Palace becomes 'Plaza de la Cumbia', where a multitude of workers, couples and beggars converge to dance amidst gigantic speakers booming tropical music.

There seems to be surreal acoustic phenomena taking place wherever you walk: rowdy brass bands collecting money for their old school polkas; the self-taught downtown man who knows how to play Agustín Lara's famous *bolero* 'Mujer'; or the clean-cut *organilleros* – relatives of the hurdy-gurdy men – scattered throughout the city cranking their out-of-tune 19th century

German music boxes in a polyphonic battle against the traffic racket. The pinnacle of folk sensory overkill takes place either in Plaza Garibaldi, where sometimes up to 50 *mariachi* bands tout for business or in Xochimilco – the Mexican Little Venice – where you may take a gondola with drunken mariachis and sojourn into the night.

It's easy for foreigners to get lost in the pursuit of the real Mexican experience, but beyond all the folklore, Mexico City is buoyant and cosmopolitan, with a Westernised vein owed to its proximity to the US. It offers not only concerts by international artists who pit-stop in the capital, but also a solid jazz scene, a vibrant indie rock circuit, a myriad of discos, house parties, including a large array of festivals, and venues specialising in African, *gamelan* or zydeco music, to name a few.



El Zócalo, aka Plaza de la Constitución, Mexico City's main square. Below: the angel of independence statue

GOING TRAVELLING?

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LISTINGS

Primera Fila

Published on Fridays by the popular *Reforma* daily, it's a weekly supplement covering culture and entertainment.

www.reforma.com

Chilango Monthly

Leisure magazine (produced with *Time Out*) covering everything from food to music.

www.chilangoweb.com.mx

Tiempo Libre Weekly

Magazine sensitive towards culture and the fine arts.

www.tiempolibre.com.mx

RADIO

Ibero 90.9FM

Indie rock and specialised world music, jazz, hip-hop and *rock en español*. www.ibero909radio.com

Horizonte 107.9FM

Smooth jazz, *bossa nova* and world music. www.horizonte.imer.com.mx

El Fonógrafo 1150AM

A station that preserves the essence of 50s Mexican music.

www.elfonografo.com.mx

La KeBuena 92.9FM

The loudest, fastest and most widespread radio in the city with a furious mix of popular and regional *gruper*, salsa and *norteñas*.

www.kebuena.com.mx

BUYING MUSIC

There are plenty of music stores in the malls, yet bootleg music of *narcocorridos*, *rancheras*, *cumbias*, boleros, *marimba*, local and global pop is on offer for a dollar on street stalls outside subway stations.

Chopo Market

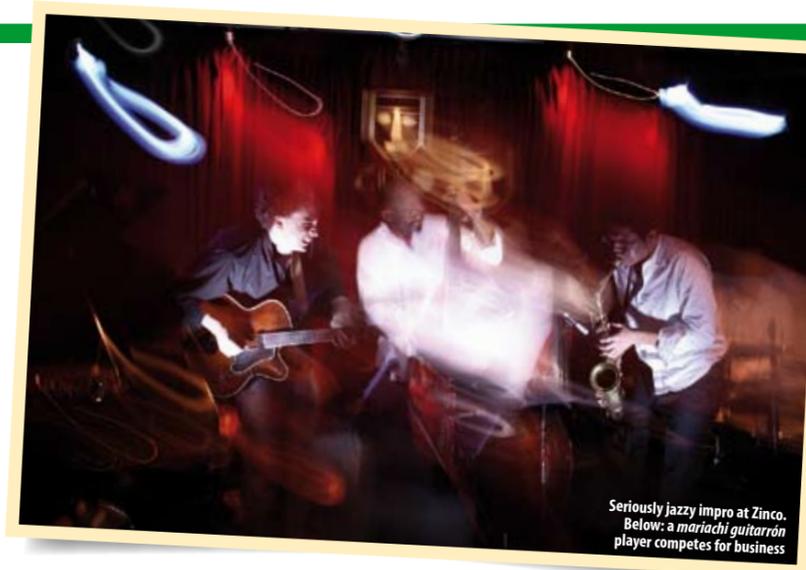
The Mexican Camden Town where many musical minorities coexist in the Saturday bazaar. Plus there's vintage vinyl and CD swapping.

Metro Buenavista

Mercado de la Lagunilla

Sunday flea market where you can pick up antiques, vinyl, clothes and recycled pop culture.

Metro Garibaldi



Seriously jazzy impro at Zinco. Below: a mariachi guitarrón player competes for business

VENUES

Although the 25 million populated city sprawls for miles and miles, the active cultural and entertainment scene is tightly located within the Centro Histórico area and the more bohemian Coyoacán, arty Roma/Condesa and wealthy Polanco. Most mainstream acts perform in the large forums such as **Auditorio Nacional**, (Paseo de la Reforma 50, Chapultepec, www.auditorio.com.mx) or the deco-ish **Teatro Metropolitano**, (Independencia No 90 Col Centro, entre las calles de Balderas, Del Cuauhtemoc), while the **Zócalo** hosts massive free concerts every weekend, with such luminaries as *mestizo* star Manu Chao and local superband Café Tacuba. For a *folklorista* tour de force, the National Ballet performs Wednesdays and Sundays at the **Bellas Artes Palace**, (Av Hidalgo 1, Centro, www.cnca.gob.mx).

The ample warehouse-turned-stage **Salón 21**, (Lago Andrómaco #17 Esq Prol Moliere, Col Ampliación Granada), has brought in a wide range of world music acts such as Ojos de Brujo, Baaba Maal and Gustavo Santaolalla's Bajofondo Tango Club. **El Lunario**, located next to Auditorio Nacional, (www.lunario.com.mx) has seen singer Lhasa de Sela, Colombians Sidestepper, local percussionists Tambuco and Oscar winner songwriter Jorge Drexler.

Recent regentrification of the old city's heart, Centro Histórico, has fostered an outbreak of nightlife in an area usually landlocked by cars. **Zinco Jazz Club** An exquisite velvety place for jazz lovers.

Motolinía 20, esq 5 de Mayo Multiforo Alicia

Compared to New York's CBGB's, this venue functions as a forum, studio and label and witnessed the birth of local surf, reggae, ska, hip-

hop in *náhuatl* (the Aztec tongue) and indie-emo Mexican rock.

Av Cuauhtémoc No 91-A Col Roma, www.recia.org/alicia

Centro Cultural de España

Spanish cultural house, museum, bar and stage for freestyle DJs and emerging bands.

Guatemala No 18 Centro Histórico, www.ccemx.org

Pasagüero

A popular bar among the in-crowd for exhibits, independent international concerts and fashion catwalks.

Motolinía 33-104 Centro Histórico, www.pasaguero.com

Centro Cultural Roots

Built on an abandoned bowling alley, this club is the current stronghold of the hip-hop and reggae communities.

Tacuba No 81 Col Centro Histórico

Hayastan

Small bar with Arab food and occasional bellydancing and Balkan music jams.

Regina 18, entre Bolívar e Isabel la Católica La Bipolar Cantina

Trendy bar playing corny Mexican b-music with occasional sightings by rising movie stars, such as Diego Luna (who part owns it) and Gael García Bernal.

Malitzin 155, Coyoacán

For the tropical dancing experience, do not miss **El Salón Ángeles**. At least four groups of salsa and other Afro-Caribbean

rhythms perform every weekend night.

(Lerdo de tejada 206 Col Guerrero).

Same as with **La Embajada Jarocha**, where you can get quality seafood accompanied by Veracruz traditional *sones*. (Zacatecas 138, Roma Norte).

FESTIVALS

There are plenty of festivals throughout the year – the most attractive for mestizo music is **Ollin Kan**, in May, with the mission of 'rescuing sacred music in danger of extinction' counting among the roster Angola singer Bonga, Brit-Asian DJs State of Bengal and Ivory Coast's Manou Gallo. (www.ollinkan.tlalpan.gob.mx)

Radical Mestizo takes place in March as part of the Festival de México and has been the showcase for Sergent Garcia, Clotaire K, Java and Bebo & Cigala. (www.fchmexico.com)

In May **Vive Latino** is a massive festival of rock and pop en español – more than 40 bands coming from Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Spain and Hispanic communities in the US at the Foro Sol stadium. (www.vivelatino.com.mx)

There is also a wide scope of ethnic celebrations throughout the year. For more information contact the **Museo de las Culturas Populares** (Av Hidalgo 289, Col del Carmen, Coyoacán, www.culturaspopulareseindigenas.gob.mx) or the **Instituto Nacional Indigenista**, (www.cdi.gob.mx/ini)



Andrea Echeverri, singer with Colombian rock group Aterciopelados, plays at Radical Mestizo

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