

## Day of the Dead, a brief

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In 2003, UNESCO proclaimed Mexico's Day of the Dead *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. The cultural wealth of this tradition resides on the fact that it not only blends Mexico's ancient mythologies with European Catholic traditions, but also, it combines all fundamental elements of Mexico's rich culture: family, food, music, arts and crafts, and a strong sense of community.

In the three thousand years old ancient Mexican religion, it was believed that dying was just another step in our existence; there was no heaven or hell. Our destiny depended on how we died, not how we lived our lives. In the case of the Aztecs, those who died of natural causes traveled, after a long and tortuous journey, to the underworld known as *Mictlán*, where queen *Mictecacíhuatl* along with her husband *Mictlantecuhtli* welcome the dead. Queen *Mictecacíhuatl* was also known as 'Lady of the Dead', guardian of the bones. It was believed that, if necessary, bones could be used to create humans in the future. *Mictecacíhuatl* also presided over the ancient festivals of the dead, as she is now in the form of *La Catrina*.

After spending time in *Mictlán*, it was believed the dead would return to earth. Mourning and sadness were considered insults to the dead so, month long celebrations in August welcome the dead with a series of festivities including processions, parties, and offerings in the form of shrines with food and gifts for the dead. The arrival of the Spaniards and Catholic missionaries did not stop those celebrations but rather blended them with the European's *All Saint's Day/All Souls's Day* traditions, eventually moving them to November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, creating what it is now known as *Día de Muertos* or *Day of the Dead*.

Nowadays, celebrations take place in cemeteries where people bring mariachi music, food and spend a joyous time remembering the dead loved ones. At home, families set an *altar* (shrine) with *ofrendas* (offerings). The altar represents a complex syncretism of ancient and Catholic beliefs, where each layer represents a different level of existence: heaven or sky, earth, hell or underworld, sins or steps to the underworld. Furthermore, every element of the altar has a meaning: the arch represents a portal into the underworld, *cempazúchitl* (marigold) flowers guide the spirits to earth, candles illuminate the path, *pan de muerto* ('dead bread') represents the soil and bones, *papel picado* (paper cut-outs) represent the wind and the fragile link between life and death, incense to purify the soul, salt to shield the dead from mortal temptations, sugar skulls represent the deceased, and food, drinks and mementos serve as remembrances. Every region in Mexico adds its own special character to the celebrations.

*Day of de Dead* celebrates life, its fragility, its complexity but, at its core, it is a celebration of hope for humanity.