

The Telegraph

Mexico City's most artistic corners – and where to find them



Graffiti painting on a hoarding, Mexico City CREDIT: ALAMY

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The queue for entry snakes around the block like a serpent of Aztec mythology. As happens every morning, several hundred pilgrims from around the world have descended upon Casa Azul (The Blue House) in the Coyoacan district in Mexico City's south.

Once the home of Frida Kahlo, Mexico's most famous artist, these days it serves as a museum-cum-shrine, with everything from her paintings, jewellery, Tehuana dresses and earthenware cooking pots on display within the cobalt-colour walls.

Kahlo (1907-54), who as a teen had suffered a tram accident that left her infertile and in lifelong pain, shared this house with her philandering, domineering husband, the muralist Diego Rivera.

Her unflinching self-portraits - pained, bloodied but unbowed - hark back to the Mater Dolorosa of Catholic tradition and have turned Frida into a feminist icon worldwide. An icon too for anyone who's suffered emotional or physical pain. Hence the queue. Casa Azul has more than the whiff of a secular Lourdes about it.

A new ballet about Kahlo's life, *Broken Wings*, has just been premiered by ENB in London: proof that Frida-mania shows no sign of abating.

What is changing fast, though, is the notion that art in Mexico City is synonymous simply with her. Various prestigious Travel publications have named Mexico's capital their No.1 destination to visit in 2016, a major reason being its thriving art scene.



Casa Azul, Frida Kahlo's home CREDIT: ALAMY



Frida Kahlo's studio in Casa Azul CREDIT: ALAMY

“Galleries and independent spaces are popping up everywhere”, says Zelika Garcia, director of the city’s art fair, Zona Maco. “There’s so much artistic talent here, it’s hard to keep up.”

This talent shows itself in many settings, from converted taco stalls and newspaper kiosks to the pristine, white-cube space of Gallery OMR in the trendy neighbourhood, Roma. Interestingly, the days of Mexican art meaning explicitly Mexican subject matter (such as cacti or sombreros) seem over.

“The discourse is broader now, more international,” says Garcia referring to the fact her country’s best-known artists in the 20th-century - from Kahlo and Rivera to the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo – made work that was rooted in “Mexicanidad” and the question of Mexican identity.

Timelapse footage shows stunning rainbow over Mexico City
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The concerns of today’s artists are often different - a symptom of the globalised, 21st-Century art world. A typical work is 'People on People' by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, for Gallery OMR, in which you walk around the exhibition space but with the image of other visitors projected within your shadow. Tackling themes from surveillance culture to individuality in a digitalised world, this installation could have been made by any artist, anywhere on the planet.

Held every February, Zona Maco, the biggest art fair in Latin America, just celebrated its 13th edition, welcoming 125 galleries from 25 countries. It’s testament to Mexico City’s growth into an art-world hub.





Museo Soumaya, designed by Mexican architect Fernando Romero CREDIT: ALAMY

The latter's glimmering exterior calls to mind an outsized, aluminium hourglass; its interior presents a mish-mash of art, European and Mexican, from the 15th to 19th Centuries. It has been criticised by connoisseurs as an unwieldy, barely curated charge through art history, but, if the scores of school groups are anything to go by, it squarely meets Slim's own aim: to offer his countrymen free access to the great artists of Western civilisation without leaving Mexico City.

The Soumaya boasts six storeys, all connected by a ramp staircase that rises to a show-stopping top floor, complete with skylight and resplendent Rodins. Among its other highlights is Van Gogh's 'Cottage with Peasants', possibly the first painting the Dutchman ever signed.

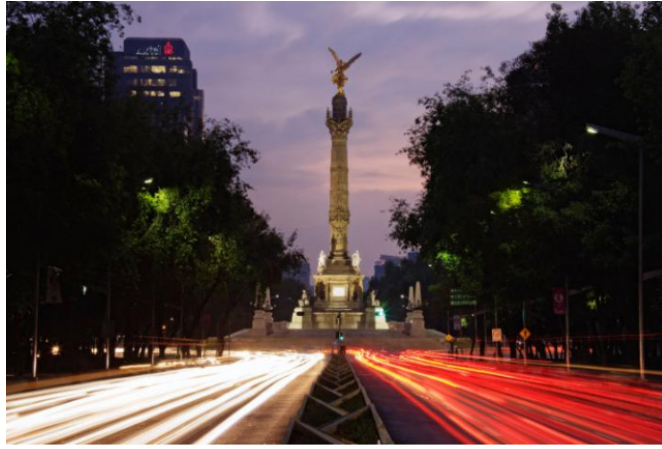
Another is 'Valle de Mexico', a landscape from 1897 of the very spot where the Soumaya now stands. It's a strikingly rural vision, and proof of how much the city has mushroomed.



Gates of Hell sculpture, from Carlos Slim's collection CREDIT: ALAMY

The current skyline is littered with buildings of great variety, marking the many epochs of the city's past: pre-Hispanic; baroque; Art Deco; modernist (notably, Ricardo Legorreta's structures in bold geometric shapes and even bolder colours); and contemporary.

Mexico's capital has never been bound by strict building regulations, as so many cities are. Hence innovative edifices like the Soumaya, and also La Lavadora (The Washing Machine) and El Pantalón (The Pair of Trousers), whose names tell you all you need to know about their appearance.



Paseo de la Reforma CREDIT: ALAMY

Passing down the city's central boulevard, Paseo de la Reforma, eclectic new buildings appear at every turn, a riot of mismatched windows and projecting planes. As Garcia points out, "It's not just art. All areas of creativity are flourishing: design, food and architecture too."

Clearly, life for all 21 million of the city's inhabitants isn't a bed of dahlias. Traffic is still a problem - though developments such as elevated highways and car-free Sundays in much of the city centre have helped. (For tourists, Uber represents a cheap, safe and efficient way to get around.)

On the plus side, Mexico City seems immune to the drug-related violence that afflicts much of the country. Despite its reputation for pollution, there's also a huge oasis of green at the city's heart: Chapultepec park. Walkers, joggers and cyclists revel in it, and it's also home to the peerless National Museum of Anthropology.

“Passing down Paseo de la Reforma, eclectic new buildings appear at every turn, a riot of mismatched windows and projecting planes”

Through a series of consistently colourful, informative displays, this tells the story of the country's many pre-Hispanic civilisations and their legacy across Mexico today: from the Toltecs to the Zapotecs.

Mexico City itself was founded by the all-conquering Aztecs, as capital of their Mesoamerican empire – and the museum's star exhibit is the Stone of the Sun, a vast, sacrificial altar dedicated to Xiuhtcuhtli, their god of fire.

There must have been 200 people standing before it on the day I visited and, incredibly for a tourist attraction in 2016, nobody resorted to their smartphone camera or to grabbing a selfie. To a man, woman and child, everyone stood in awe.



Stone of the Sun, in the National Museum of Anthropology CREDIT: ALAMY

highly eventful past in which it experienced empire, invasion, conquest, independence and revolution – and from which it has ultimately emerged all the stronger. As Carlos Fuentes, Mexico’s finest novelist put it, his country “has a genius for survival, seduced by the past into the future... The greatness of Mexico is that its history is alive and well.”

The current buzz around the capital’s food scene appears to bear that out. Three of the world’s top 50 restaurants, according to the vaunted San Pellegrino rankings, are in Mexico City. The key to their success has been reworking ancient dishes with a contemporary, fine-dining twist.



The master of this, and in whose wake countless imitators have followed, is Enrique Olvera, founder of Pujol, in the city’s swanky Polanco neighbourhood (current ranking 16). His dishes include ant larvae tacos and egg-stuffed tortilla with grasshopper salsa, and tables at his ultra-cool restaurant require booking a good month in advance.

“All I do is rooted in the traditions of Mexican cooking,” says Olvera, “starting with the ingredients. It’s only from that base that I think about the future.”

“Mexico’s culture is rich and long, with a special connection between old and new. Perhaps that’s something that is lost in the current hype.”

For Olvera, then, his city's rise isn't so much revolutionary as evolutionary – and, like his dishes, it's well worth getting your teeth into.