

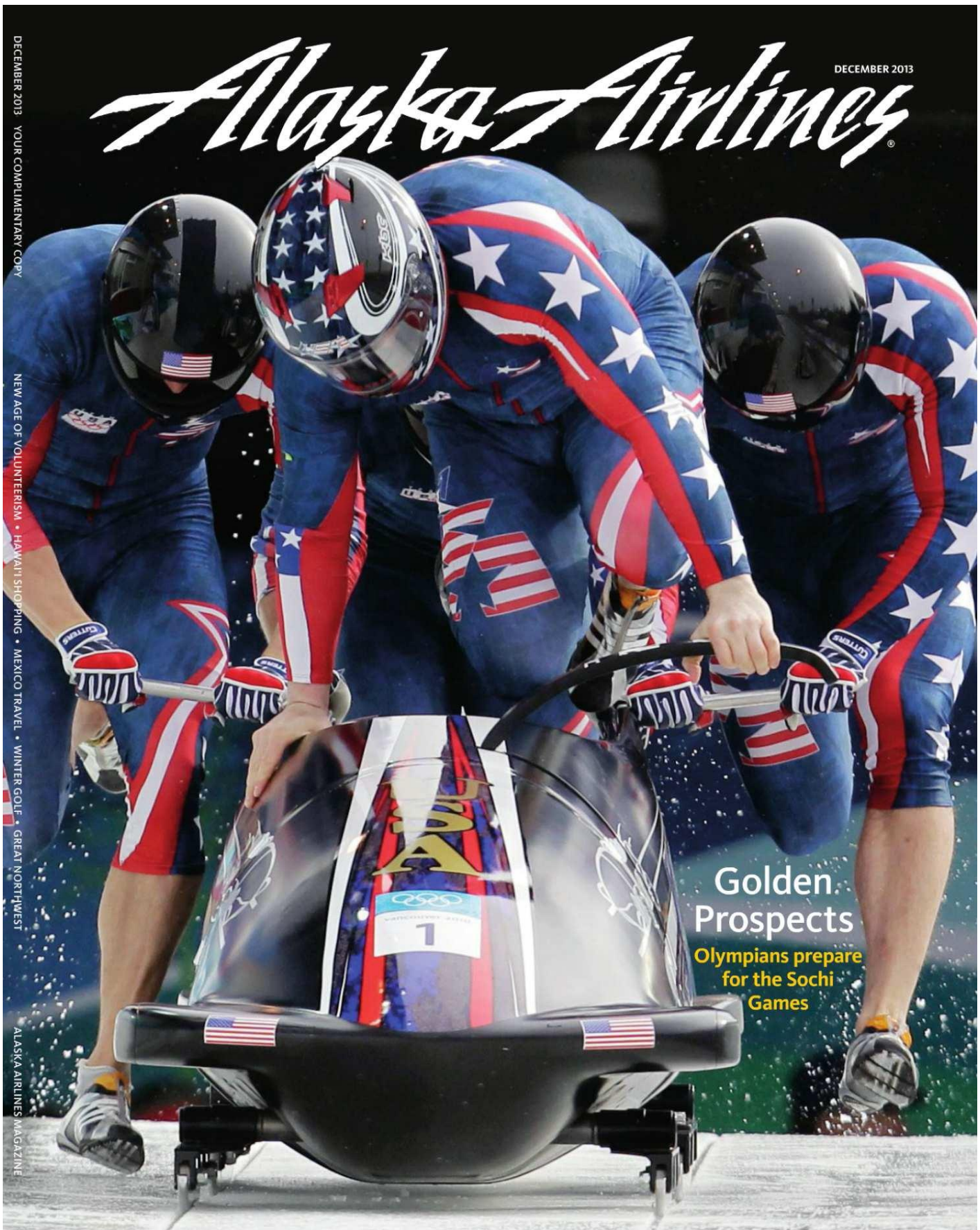
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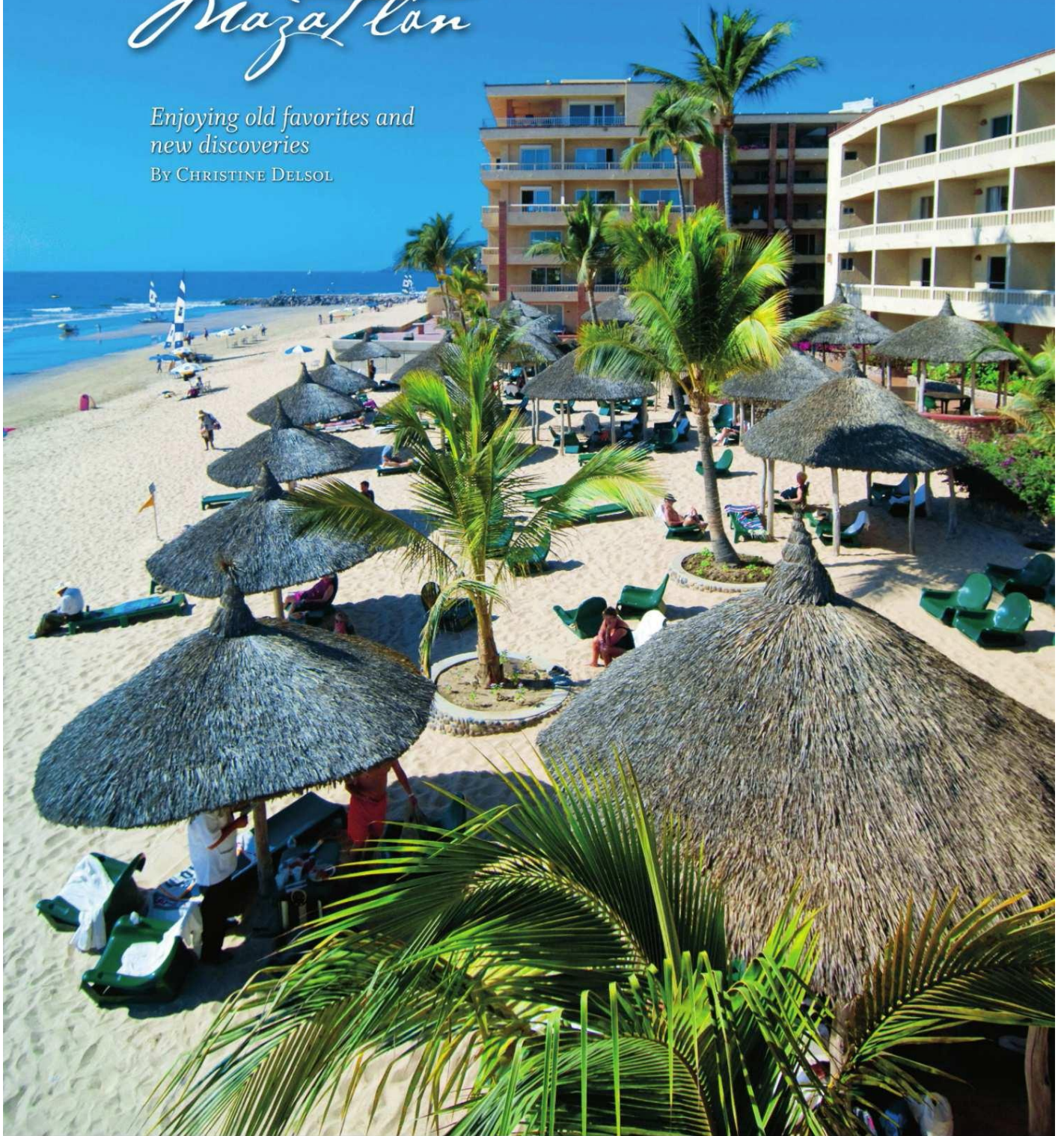
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# Memorable Mazatlan

*Enjoying old favorites and  
new discoveries*

BY CHRISTINE DELSOL





As the sun sinks below the horizon, Plazuela Machado's streets fill with people making their way to clubs and sidewalk cafes, enjoying the band in the gazebo and watching street artist at work. Guitar strains, the wail of horns and the sigh of violins escape doors and windows to swell into a single festive cacophony. My sister and I join the promenade, enjoying street performers and getting caught up in random conversations with amiable strangers. We get to our restaurant a half hour later than we'd planned, but nobody minds.



When I first visited Mazatlán in the 1970s, the once-elegant buildings around this beguiling square were abandoned and crumbling; the streets were dark and empty at night. Today, the square and surrounding neighborhood are busy with life, and are the hub of the city's burgeoning arts scene and epicenter of one of the world's largest Carnival celebrations. The revitalized Old Mazatlan is the focal point in a city that has forged a new identity.

The "Pearl of the Pacific" began life as a center of commerce. The Spanish conquistadors who landed in 1531 settled beside the protected bay, building a port that funneled gold and silver from the Sierra Madre back to Spain. Mining made a fortune for a Filipino trader named Juan Machado, who arrived in the 1830s. Wishing to share his prosperity, he donated the land for today's Plazuela Machado.

Thanks to new techniques that Japanese fishermen brought to Mazatlán in the 1930s, the city's seafood industry is now the second largest in Mexico. Fishing and agriculture are still important industries here, along with tourism, and the city boasts one of the busiest ports on the Pacific coast.

After World War II, Hollywood stars Gary Cooper, Rock Hudson and John Wayne were among the many tourists lured to Mazatlan by deep-sea fishing and a coastal lifestyle. The growing city enveloped the white sands north of the old city, where a strip of large, modern hotels grew into the now-famous Zona Dorada, or Golden Zone. While bringing unprecedented affluence to the region, the new resorts drew visitors from downtown

which eventually was all but abandoned.

ON A TRIP with my husband and daughter in the late 1990s, we were attracted to what is now Old Mazatlán. A few of the ornate buildings were splashed with color and festooned with bougainvillea, shining like beacons among the graceful but still dilapidated colonial buildings. Even then, the sight inspired visions of a city center transformed like Oz into Technicolor.

The city began methodically reviving its historic core in 2002. When I visited with my sister a few years later, the transformation was stunning. Our introduction to the new Old Mazatlán was the rose-colored Angela Peralta Theater, an 1874 opera house with imposing white columns and carved stonework, where we saw a mesmerizing performance of its resident Delfos Contemporanea dance company.

My favorite building stands opposite the theater. Casa Machado, which the philanthropic trader built in the mid-1800s, is the oldest building on the square. Its block of imposing arches houses commercial storefronts, while the home upstairs is a museum filled with provincial French furniture, including canopied beds and a dining table all dressed up and waiting for company. A Mardi Gras parlor, with its fiery colors and glittery costumes, is a monument to Mazatlán's Carnival queens going back more than 100 years. While immersed in the Mazatlán of a century ago as its most privileged residents knew it, we took a coffee break and surveyed the entire plaza from the wide second-floor patio, still graced by the original red, yellow and black tile floor.

The Angela Peralta Theater's 1992 rebirth inspired revitalization of the entire Centro Histórico—which occupies the knob of land that juts out from the coastline in the city's southern reaches and the birth of the annual Mazatlán Cultural Festival, a 10-week feast of art exhibitions and performances by hundreds of artists from around the world. With 180 blocks and 479 buildings, each designated a historical landmark, the restoration is a massive undertaking that is still in progress.

On my most recent visit, earlier this year, men were at work resurfacing streets with adoquin-paving pieces that suggest cobblestones while retaining a smooth surface.

MAZATLÁN RADIATES out from Plazuela Machado and the surrounding neighborhood of Old Mazatlán, which sits roughly in the middle of the Centro Historico. For my latest visit, I've hired a guide, Julio from Pronatours, to help me catch up on what's going on in my favorite haunts and take me to places I've missed.

The Plaza de la Republica, four blocks from the Plazuela Machado, is the traditional Mexican central square dominated by the mostly Gothic, double-spired Catedral Basílica de la Inmaculada Concepción, built between 1875 and 1899. The unique exterior is an artistic composition in contrasting stone and tiled bricks; the interior is graced by a gilded baroque altar, Renaissance domes and an enormous crystal chandelier.

A band stand is central to almost every Mexican town plaza; in Mazatlán's case, the bandstand is a lacy wrought-iron structure with a cafeteria underneath. I pass vendors around the plaza who politely offer handicrafts, food, clothing and jewelry, and make my way to the century-old Mercado Pino Suarez, the central market two blocks behind the cathedral. Filled with fresh meat, fish, produce, clothing, crafts, household goods and souvenirs, the market has everything I could imagine needing-but Julio urges me on.

"I want you to try *suaves*," he says, leading me to a little bright-green storefront a block from the plaza. "You can get them only in Mazatlán."

I'm well acquainted with Mazatlán's *raspados*, cups of crushed ice soaked with fresh-squeezed juices-they are everything a snow-cone wants to be: fresh, natural and re-energizing on a hot day. I've also sampled fresh, homemade ice cream from street carts. But I'm a newcomer to *suaves*, a rack of plastic bags full of what look like ivory-colored marshmallows dusted with some type of crumbles stands by the doorway. Opening the bag releases a rich, creamy scent and I'm delighted the moment I pop one of the treats into my mouth. The crumbles turn out to be toasted coconut that erupts with flavor before my teeth sink into a cloud of airy sweetness.

## Dining

**El Presidio** (*Ninos Heroes 1511 esq. Mariano Escobedo*; 52-669-495054). This surprising new Old Mazatlan restaurant's conversion of an old mansion left some walls unrestored and trees growing up through the courtyard, making for an eerily beautiful setting at night. The food is simple but with artful application of lime, chiles, vanilla and other local flavors.

**Mariscos La Puntilla** (*Interior muelle turístico s/n*; 52-669-982-8877; *lapuntilla.com.mx*). Mazatlán has countless seafood restaurants, but I doubt any is better than this place by the port. At lunch-time, it's full of locals taking a long lunch break. Food is fresh, expertly prepared and plentiful.

**Pedro y Lola** (*Av. Constituciones q. Carnova*; 52-669-982-589; *restaurantpedroylo.com*). Located in Plazuela Machado, this restaurant was named for a pair of Mexico's most beloved singers.

## lodging

**Las Siete Maravillas** (*Av. Los Po/mos. Col. Los Pinos*; 52-669-136-0646; *las7maravillas.com*). Each of the seven rooms at this eye-popping B&B is a journey to a different country, decorated by the Swiss expatriate owner with items collected on her travels. France is royal blue, Cuba red-hot. And Bali, the largest, is bright green with a garden view. The quiet residential neighborhood is close to the *ma/ec6n*. about 10 minutes' walk from Old Mazatlán.



THE ZONA DORADA has about six miles of sublime beaches, beginning at Punta Camaron, where the large, white, extravagantly spired nightclub called Valentino's (part of the Fiesta Land complex) rises over the ocean. The hotel zone extends about two miles north to El Cid Marina Beach Hotel and marina, taking in silky-smooth Gaviotas and Sabalo beaches.

It's common to speak of Mazatlán as a dual destination, divided between Old Mazatlán and the Zona Dorada, yet there's plenty to occupy repeat visitors. The sea-front boulevard north of Old Mazatlán, named Avenida del Mar here, is lined with 1960s-era hotels built to ride the tourism wave. Behind them, we find the Acuario Mazatlán, which was thoroughly renovated in 2011 and boasts Latin America's largest shark tank, and the Estadio Teodoro Mariscal, where the Venados de Mazatlán play baseball from October to January. Thanks to Julio, for the first time I'm out on the seafront boulevard early enough to see the fish market, located just before Avenida del Mar becomes Paseo Claussen at Calle Benito Juarez. Fishermen pull up on the beach and sell fish right off the boat to restaurants, local families and tourists.

I also make a trip to Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island, actually a peninsula but easier to reach by boat), where I'd camped for several weeks in the late 1970s with one of about 20 *ejido* (communal agricultural land) families who lived in palapa houses and farmed coconuts there. I could have taken a catamaran from El Cid, but Julio obligingly takes me "the local way," paying a fisherman a few pesos to take us across the channel in his panga. Once I get over the surprise of seeing paved roads, concrete buildings and a beach lined by palapa restaurants, we have a bucolic afternoon wading in the waves, indulging in cerveza and guacamole, and exploring Amaitlan, the botanical garden being developed a short distance inland.

But my last night in Mazatlán brings me back, as always, to Plazuela Machado. We stop a block off the square at Nidart Nido de Artesanos (Nest of Artisans), a family work-shop that produces leather and clay art work and also exhibits the work of other local artisans in a whimsically restored colonial building that is a work of art in itself. The most striking display is a series of Carnaval-inspired masks rendered in leather.

A sunset drive up Cerro de la Neveria (Icebox Hill)-whose limestone caves protected ice imported from San Francisco in the mid-1800s-provides magnificent views of Old Mazatlán and the long crescent of beach all the way to the Zona Dorada before we settle into Plazuela Machado. Dinner will be at Pedro y Lola, named for the much-loved actor/singer Pedro Infante, and Lola Beltran, a highly acclaimed ranchera singer. We pick our outdoor table, and I order the Pedro Infante, which Julio tells me was the singer's favorite meal-a simple country preparation of spiced beef.

As the sun makes its last bow and the candles are lit, the guitarist who's been entertaining us puts his instrument away and a band takes over in the gazebo. Julio sips his beer and leans back in his chair, smiling.

"When I take my family out in the evening," he says, "we almost always come here. This is the place I like the best."

My sentiments exactly...

Christine Delsol is a writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

## GETTING THERE

Alaska Airlines offers regular

service to Mazatlán. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, visit [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 800-468-2248.