

Mazatlan's Crown Jewel: The Plazuela Machado



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In the late 1820s a fellow from the Philippines showed up on the docks of a little Mexican town on the Pacific called Mazatlan. His name was Juan Nepomuceno Machado, and he created something that has since been enjoyed by millions of visitors to Mazatlan – everyone from foreign miners to old-time movie stars to modern-day tourists.

Legends say Machado was drawn to Mazatlan by the local pearl diving business. Or perhaps by trading opportunities at the town's busy deep-water port.

Or maybe by the silver mines outside town in the nearby Sierra Madres.

Whatever the reason, he went on to make a fortune here. And to thank the community, he built a block-long plaza said to have looked much like a neo-classical European town square. It was likely ringed by porticoed walkways, shops behind wrought-iron lattices, small inns and *al fresco* cafes shaded by orange trees. Tales say it was a pleasant place, where *Mazatlecos* could take leisurely strolls, chat with friends, catch up on the latest gossip and go to a concert in the evening.

Not surprisingly, the plaza became known as the *Plazuela Machado* (Plaza Machado). Some say Machado created it to prompt immigration by Europeans, particularly hard-working Germans, to replenish the mines' dwindling supply of diggers. If that was the reason, it worked. Thousands of Germans among other Europeans in fact moved in over the next few years.

The 49ers stop by

Fast-forward to 1849, and the plaza again made a big hit – this time with wanna-be miners heading to the newly found gold fields of Northern California. Steamships took them down the East Coast to ports in Nicaragua and Panama, where they hopped on smaller boats to cross those countries on river routes through the jungles. On the other side, steamers waited to take them up the Pacific shores to San Francisco.

About half-way up the Mexican coast, ships packed with 49ers often stopped at Mazatlan to let the lads enjoy a little R&R at the plaza, which by then had grown into a small city full of old-world charm (and likely with close-by places of other delights).

How dry I am

Next, jump to the 1920s, and Mazatlan is again in the spotlight, this time thanks to a new law up north: an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that outlawed the consumption of alcoholic drinks. It was called Prohibition.

In the States, booze was (supposedly) hard to get. But it was a whole other story south of the border. And getting there – especially if you could sail down the Pacific coast with a yachtful of friends – was half the fun.

Waiting for you at Mazatlan was not only the plaza but some of the country's earliest resort hotels, wide open for business a few blocks away on a beach called Olas Altas.

So the town filled up with foreigners again, this time with merry-making Hollywood stars, studio execs, oil barons and other miscellaneous moguls. “There were speakeasies (illegal bars) all over the States, but Prohibition was a great excuse for the stars to hop on their yachts and sail down here to get a drink,” reporters were told by Gilberto Limon, Mazatlan's legendary public relations man.

Jump ahead to today, and you'll find some of the once-posh hotels on the half-dozen blocks of the old resort strip are still open. One, La Siesta, offers 57 smallish rooms (mostly with ocean views) around a colonial-style courtyard. Another is the Belmar, believed to be the oldest resort hotel in the country. Opened in 1920, her then-opulent guest rooms, lush gardens and elegant ballrooms were once filled with Hollywood superstars of the likes of John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino and Mae West and later on by John Wayne, Tyrone Power, Rock Hudson and Gregory Peck.

And what happened to the Plaza Machado? It's not only still there, but thanks to a multi-million-dollar facelift it's the crown jewel of the city's 180-block “Historic District.” Lined by trees and iron benches and on three sides by outdoor restaurants, the plaza is again the cultural center of the town, enjoyed by *Mazatlecos* and tourists alike.

Wander around outside the plaza and you'll find block after block of cobbled lanes lined with art galleries, sidewalk cafes, museums, jazz clubs, boutique hotels, restored mansions and even an old-time opera house.

Most tourists stay seven or so miles away from the plaza on the other side of Mazatlan in the 11,000 rooms of the city's modern-day resort strip, the *Zona Dorada* (Golden Zone). Hotel guests on the strip can either take escorted day-tours of the Historic District or see it on their own by hailing taxis or Mazatlan's own open-air “pulmonia” cabs for roughly a 20-minute ride to the plaza.

More information: Visit the [Mazatlan Hotel Association](#).

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