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About 1,000 words

## EXPLORING ACAPULCO

by

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The realization hits you suddenly.

Your vacation to Acapulco was well planned, and now you find yourself on the beach in the long-sought-after sun. But then it happens. A few days into your relaxing little beach vacation, you need something... a little more. A little depth, a little color, a little local flavor. A bit of real Mexico, a taste of Acapulco.

The first clue may arrive when you find yourself shifting restlessly on the grainy Acapulco sand. Perhaps that vacation novel you have been waiting forever to read loses your attention. Or that frosty margarita with your name on it has lost a bit of luster. It can happen to anyone, anywhere.

Luckily, you came to the right place. Beyond the sparkling beaches and glittery nightlife awaits another, very different Acapulco. One with significant history and modern charm. Just look up at the fortress, which has been dominating the panorama for centuries--well before the first highrise hotel was ever considered. No, Acapulco offers more than just surfside hedonism.

You don't have to dig very deep to get a lesson in Acapulco's long history. The city was once a major port of Colonial Spain, serving as the only authorized trading point in the New World for Spanish trading galleons sailing between China and the Philippines and Spain. Asian goods and booty arriving in Acapulco were sent overland to the Caribbean port of Veracruz via Mexico City, then on to Spain.

In the 1600's trade was flourishing and so were pirates along the Mexican coast. Fort San Diego was built to protect the shipping and stands today as one of the few obvious reminders of Acapulco's glorious past. With Mexican independence, the port dwindled in significance until it was reintroduced to the world in the 1950's as a prime beach resort.

The fort is still a good place to initiate your feel for the real Acapulco. The ramparts give a fulfilling view out over the Bay and beaches. A small museum inside has exhibits and a few artifacts relating to the area's long history, including its cultural and commercial ties to Asia.

From the fortress, stroll into the center of the old town, the zocalo, and savor the traditional neighborhood lifestyle. It is a place where friends and lovers meet, children frolic and the people simply live; reading, writing, chatting, snoozing or just watching each other. Music tumbles out of nearby shops and creates a gentle cacophony, accented by the chirps and squawks of the birds in the towering mango trees overhead.

A Hemingway off in the corner, brooding over his tequila, would not be out of place at the corner cafe, tucked under the shadow of the main church at the end of the plaza. From there you can look back across the zocalo to the water, with its gently bobbing fishing and sailing boats.

A solitary woman with a blue T-shirt around her head busily passes a straw broom across the stones, in an endless attempt to tidy the swarms of falling leaves and dropped plastic cups. There are no tourists here, but you get the feeling that if you stood in the fountain and sang out loud, or if you took off your shorts and stood on your head, you would not attract much notice. For here, everyone is in their own little universe, and stress is a word that could not be translated in this place.

If the mid-afternoon heat begins to reach through the trees, step under the blue dome and onto the cooling tiles of Our Lady of Solitude church. The church still has a powerful influence on the average Mexican, and here you can quietly blend in with the faithful and they go about their devotions.

Near the church, to the side of the zocalo, pick up a cup of fresh fruit for a dollar at a street stall and stroll along the narrow streets. Even if you don't speak Spanish, smile and say "BWEH-nos DEE-ahs" to the shopkeepers and citizens, and they will cheerfully return your greeting. Their friendly graciousness seems as natural as the warm sunshine.

To make a day of the local experience, start poking your head into some of the tiny restaurants tucked away in the area around the zocalo. For about three dollars you can get a full meal of soup and bread, a main course with rice and beans, and a small dessert. This is the real thing; don't expect Tex-Mex.

As the sun begins to drift down behind the mountains, walk along the water and marvel as the multitudes of lights begin twinkling on all around the city, up into the hills behind, and across the sweeping, crescent bay. Soon you will come to a street market, a colorful collection of wooden stalls featuring clothing, hats, jewelry, and just about any Acapulco souvenir even the wildest imagination could conjure.

Here you can try your skill at bargaining, an interesting game whereby you offer a shopkeeper a quarter of an item's asking price, they offer three-quarters in return, and you end up paying half. It does not always work like that, but it is all part of the fun. Considering what you pay back home, even if you don't bargain you are still getting a deal.

As you come out of the market you are met by dazzling lights, but you are not back into the tourist district quite yet. In the shadow of the first hotels is the Parque Papagayo, where locals bring their families for an evening's amusement among the tropical trees. There are many rides for all ages and the climb to the top of the small hill is worth the fabulous nighttime view.

But here, as in the zocalo, the people are the main attraction. Get an ice cream or hot dog from a smiling vendor, and kick back on a park bench. Take a tip from the locals on how to relax: remember, after all, it is your holiday.

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