

LOS DÍAS DE LOS MUERTOS

The Days of the Dead Holiday

The Days of the Dead holiday is celebrated in Mexico, in some parts of Central America, and in some parts of the United States by Mexican-Americans.

The holiday is for the living to honor dead relatives and loved ones and to celebrate life. It is said that **Los días de los muertos** is the most popular holiday in Mexico.

The holiday begins on October 31st at noon, but it should not be confused with Halloween, which falls on the same date in the United States. It is believed that little angels, or *angelitos*, who are the souls of infants and children who have died, follow the path of marigolds (a type of flower) home, where the families have altars or *ofrendas* with the bread of the dead or *el pan de los muertos*, milk, sweet tamales, and sugar skulls (*calaveras* in Spanish).

On the next day, November 1st, at noon, the *angelitos* must leave. Items for the adult spirits are then added to the *ofrenda*. Mole (pronounced moe-lay), a thick sauce made from peppers, sesame seeds, herbs, spices, chocolate, and/or fruit is thought to be too spicy for the children's spirits but are set out for the adult souls. Tamales made from meat, cheese, or nuts are also added to the altar for the adult spirits. Drinks that include *atole* (pronounced ah-toe-lay), an ancient drink made from corn meal and water flavored with various fruits, tequila, and traditional liquors are also added to the *ofrendas* after the *angelitos* depart. The favorite food and drinks of the deceased are placed on the *ofrendas* also.

None of the dead souls actually partake of the food, but the living are certainly free to do so. Many times, a separate miniature altar might be made for the souls of the infants and children who return. Small cups and saucers, and perhaps miniature *pan de muertos* would be on the small *ofrenda*.

The Aztec Indians in Mexico dedicated an entire month to the dead, instead of just a few days. When Spanish invaders conquered the Aztecs in 1521, they changed the Aztec tradition of celebrating the dead. They used the dates of the Christian celebrations of All Saint's Day (November 1st) and All Soul's Day (November 2nd) for this celebration. The main religion of Spain was (and still is) Catholicism. This change made the Catholic Spaniards feel more comfortable with what they felt was an offensive celebration.

On November 2nd, at noon, people in masks run around town and chase any stubborn souls that have not yet returned to the dead.

In front of *la ofrenda* is *el petate*, a newly made palm leaf mat. The altar or a table is covered with a white embroidered cloth or bright sheet. An arch is made by the men of the family from canes and decorated with palm leaves and many, many flowers.

The flowers, which symbolize the brief life of man, are used as an offering on the altars. Relatives often save money for months ahead of time in order to be able to buy all the flowers needed for the *ofrendas*, or they rely on relatives and friends who grow flowers.

Cempasúchil or yellow and/or orange marigolds, the flower of the dead and other fragrant flowers are used. The second most important flower is the *Mano de leon* (Lion's paw), a bright purple flower. Other flowers that may be used are *nube* (a very small white flower), gladioli, and carnations. These flowers communicate to the spirits of the richness of the offering being made to them by their living relatives. Sometimes paths of marigold petals are made by families to help the souls find their way home.

Family members place photographs of saints of particular importance to them on the altar, and they put portraits of the deceased loved ones on the *ofrendas*.

Candles or *las velas* are on the altars also.

El papel picado, or a string of paper cut-outs or a sheet is placed above the *ofrenda*. It represents the sky.

Incense, called *copal*, is usually burned on each *ofrenda*. It is made from the resin from a particular tree.

Some families, especially those in rural or country areas, visit the graveyards, where they spruce up the graves of loved ones. They may hire bands or bring tape players to the cemetery in order to play the favorite music of the deceased. The graves are decorated with candles, flowers, and crosses. A day time or night long candle vigil may be held. Sometimes the loved ones bring feasts to the graveyard.

In Mexico, death is something to be celebrated and not feared. Skeleton dolls and toys are made for living children. The child's first acquaintance with death is a cheerful one.

Bread decorated with skulls, skeletons, sugary flowers, and little plastic heads in different shapes can also be found on *la ofrenda*. Shapes made of sugar are also an important part of the altar: skulls, animals and skeletons.

The *pan de muertos* or bread of the dead represents the souls of the dead. The essence or soul of the bread is consumed by the dead when they visit their loved ones.

Most of the bread is shaped in an oval, which is believed to be the shape of one's soul. Each loaf may differ in ingredients and decorations. In some parts of Mexico, the bread may be shaped as humans or animals. Traditionally, the male members of the family make the bread. If an oven is not available, they may purchase the *el pan de muertos* at the market, *el mercado*.

Skeletons used for the holiday always have a grin, in order to lessen the fear of death.

The holiday may be unusual to many Americans, who generally do not like to talk about death, much less celebrate death. There are some small similarities between the Mexican and the American customs surrounding death. Americans sometimes visit the graves of loved ones or family members and decorate them with flowers. “Wakes” are sometimes held after someone dies, and people tell stories, often humorous ones, about the deceased in order to pay tribute to him or her. In the United States, people often send flowers to the funeral home or to the homes of the family members when someone dies. Americans, however, do not have a custom of waiting for the souls of loved ones to return for a few days each year.

cempasúchil



la ofrenda



pata de león



sugar skull (*la calavera*)



on the right

el cempasúchil on the left, la pata de león in the middle, los nubes

(palm leaf mat)



Copal



el papel picado



el pan de muertos



el petate is in the background