

El Día de los Muertos

On November 2nd, Mexico celebrates “El Día de los Muertos” or “the Day of the Dead.” This is a national holiday, but its roots go far into the past and the festival still reflects pre-Hispanic traditions and attitudes towards death.

Throughout this holiday, Mexicans celebrate death as a part of life, rather than as something to be feared. During Día de los Muertos, the souls of departed loved ones are welcomed back to earth for a few special hours.

Mexico is comprised of many different ethnic groups and every community has its own unique and distinct customs for welcoming back the dead. The basic ritual, however, remains the same: families prepare altars at home and travel to their loved ones’ graves which they decorate with bright yellow flowers – cempasuchils (flowers of the dead) – as well as with family photos, candles, religious images, offerings of food and drink, and even special objects loved by the deceased in life.

Weeks before November 2nd, bakers and artisans begin creating a dazzling display of arts and crafts like sugar skulls (calaveras), sweet “bread of the dead” (pan de muertos), cut paper (papel picado) and colorful masks. Markets bustle as people prepare for their own family celebrations and El Día de los Muertos becomes the center of community life in many towns.

Community is an integral part of Mexican life, and most families come together during the Day of the Dead to remember their loved ones and participate in the preparations for reunion. In cemeteries throughout Mexico, where many families keep a night-long vigil by their loved ones’ graves, community feasting, music, and storytelling is common. However, despite the communal, festive nature of the holiday, the Day of the Dead ultimately remains a private, sacred event during which individuals contemplate the transitory nature of life.