

Día de los Muertos



Introduction

The Mexican holiday of *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, takes place over the first two days of November. Its origins (where it began) are a mixture of Native American traditions and a set of Catholic holidays.

While the holiday's festivities include spending time in cemeteries, making shrines to the dead, and displaying art representations of skulls and skeletons, the special occasion is festive. Death isn't seen as the end of one's life, but as a natural part of the life cycle; the dead continue to exist much as they did in their lives and come back to visit the living every year.

Welcoming the Dead

It is believed that the souls of one's family return home to join in the Day of the Dead festivities. First those who died when they were infants or kids come home, then the older children, and finally those who died once they'd reached adulthood. Families set up altars in their homes, decorated in bright colors, with the favorite foods of their dead. Typically, the altars contain photographs of the dead, representations of things they liked, and items representing the four elements: candles for fire, drinks for water, fruit for earth, and hanging tissue-paper decorations for wind. The dead take in the smells of the food, which will later be eaten by the living during the evening.

In some areas, families go to the graveyard to celebrate through the night. They clean and decorate the graves, sometimes setting up **ofrendas** (*offerings*) on the gravestones, as bells are rung.

Skeleton Decorations

The major feature of Day of the Dead decorations is skeletons, or *calacas*. Skeletons are everywhere, from tissue-paper scenes to tiny plastic toys, from cardboard puppets to ceramic sculptures, from posters to papier mache. These skeletons are usually cheerful, and they are designed to show the full range of activities and professions people performed in their lives. Farmers, barbers, secretaries, fire fighters... if somebody does it while alive, you can find a skeleton doing it while dead. This theme extends to the day's food and treats. The Day of the Dead feast typically includes a special egg-batter "bread of the dead," *pan de muerto*. While the form of this bread is different from region to region, it is often decorated with strips of dough resembling bones. Also common are skulls and skeletons made of sugar or candy.

Tone of the Holiday

While Day of the Dead and Halloween are both related to All Saints' and All Souls' Days, their tones couldn't be more different. Halloween's images of skeletons and spirits are made to be spooky, gruesome, and scary.

People shudder and get scared at the thought of scary spirits threatening the living world.

On Day of the Dead, the focus isn't on scary spooks, it's on celebrating with one's family, both alive and dead, while also remembering those who are no longer alive. It's on seeing death as another stage following life, not something to be faced with fear.

