



What is Dia de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead)?

Day of the Dead is one of Mexico's most beloved holidays. Day of the Dead, **Dia de los Muertos** [DEE-ah day loh MWEHR-tohs], is a holiday celebrated on November 1st (All Saints Day) and November 2nd (All Souls Day) in Mexico, and in some parts of Central and South America. Day of the Dead is also celebrated by many Mexican Americans in the United States. The Mexican American population is one of the fastest growing groups in the United States, especially in California, Texas, and New York.

In Mexico, this festival is considered to be one of the most important holidays of the year. Although it is associated with the dead, the holiday is not portrayed or thought of as morbid or depressing, rather it is a joyous celebration reminding us to enjoy life while we can because death can catch us at any time. It is a time to celebrate and honor the lives of loved ones who have died. Death is not an end but rather a beginning to a new stage in life.



People celebrate Day of the Dead constructing and decorating **ofrendas** [OH-fren-dahs] or home altars, to honor loved ones who have died. Decorations may include **copal** incense, candles, gifts, bright flowers, **papel picado** [pah-PEHL pee-KAH-doh], pictures of saints, and photographs and offerings of the deceased's favorite food and drink. In rural areas of Mexico, tombs and gravestones in cemeteries are cleaned and freshly painted and on November 2nd, family members visit the gravesites of their loved ones. They decorate graves with flowers, and enjoy picnics consisting of favorite foods of the deceased. Most families will celebrate in the cemetery all night, picnicking, singing, laughing, and remembering their loved ones.

There are many special foods and decorations that are prepared especially during this time. Sweet breads called **Pan de Muerto** [PAHN DAY MWEHR-tohs] (bread of the dead)—a round bread decorated with shapes of skulls and crossbones—and **Mona bread** (doll bread)—shaped like a person lying with their arms folded across their chests—are baked. **Calacas** [kah-LAH-cahs] or skeletons made of papier-mâché, clay, wood or paper wear modern dress and depict subjects from everyday life such as bicycle riders, brides and grooms, musicians, even pets. These can be placed on ofrendas to depict what the deceased used to enjoy doing. Sweet skulls made of sugar, called **calaveras** [kah-lah-VAY-rahs] are given as gifts. It is common to find names of the dead, or even the living, painted on the sugar skulls as a funny gift. The traditional flower of Day of the Dead is the **marigold**, which is spread on paths and used to decorate ofrendas and the cemetery. The pleasant aromas of foods, copal incense, and marigolds help attract and guide the souls home.



OBJECTS:



Plastic Papel Picado (“perforated paper”) is the Mexican art of cutting paper into elaborate designs. The designs are commonly cut from tissue paper using a guide and small chisels, creating as many as forty banners at a time. They are commonly displayed for Easter, Christmas, and the Day of the Dead, as well as during weddings, quinceañeras, and christenings.



Day of the Dead Catrina Jose Posada created a famous print of a figure that he called the Calavera de la Catrina (Calavera of the Elegant Lady), as a parody of a Mexican upper class female. Posada’s image of the lady skeleton and large hat has become associated with the Day of the Dead, and Catrina figures often are a prominent part of modern Day of the Dead observances.



Jointed Papier-Mâché Skeleton A calaca is a figure of a skeleton used for decoration during Day of the Dead. It is common to find the names of the dead, or even the living, painted on the skull.



Papier-Mâché Skull Artistic representations of the skull are prominent decorations during Day of the Dead. This whimsical skull is smiling, as this is a happy holiday.



Copal Incense Copal incense is made from the dried resin of the copal tree. The incense is somewhat smoky when burned and has a pine like scent. The incense has been widely used since Pre-Columbian times (before the arrival of European influence in the 16th century). It is burned year round in Mexican churches and is popularly used on ofrendas during Day of the Dead to help attract the souls of the dead home. Please do not open or light the incense.



Paper Marigold Flowers Mexican Marigold flowers, known as cempasúchil [sem-pa-SOO-cheel], are often referred to as the Flower of the Dead. They are used extensively in alters for their pungent aroma. Throughout rural regions of Mexico, there will often be a trail of its petals from the main thoroughfare to the entrance of a home for the dead to follow home



Guadeloupe Votive Candle Candles are lit on the ofrenda in memory of the deceased. This candle features Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. Her image has become a symbol of Mexican identity.