



# THOR ADVANTAGE

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## End 2020 With a Mountain Getaway

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# Mexico City

## Offers the Perfect Blend of Old and New

By Doreen Pendgracs

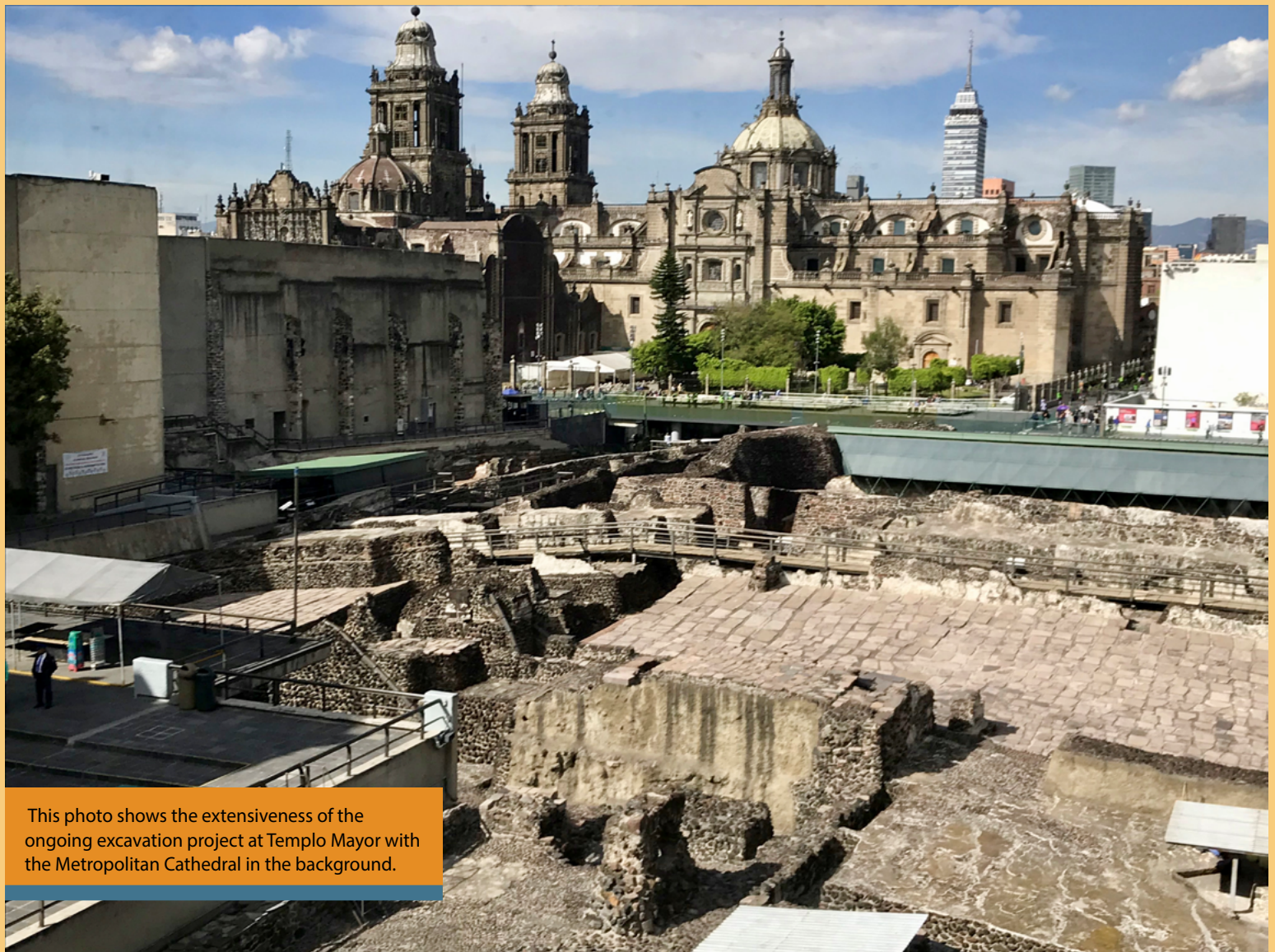
I've been visiting Mexico for nearly 40 years and until five years ago, most of my visits had been to beach destinations on coasts of the Pacific or Gulf of Mexico. They've all been fabulous, but what a glorious experience it has been discovering some of the gems of this vast country's interior, such as Oaxaca, Puebla, Guadalajara, and Mexico City.

The capital and largest city in Mexico, Mexico City has a population of just under nine million people within the city itself and a whopping 19.2 million in the metropolitan region—making it the most highly populated city in all of North America. That means a lot of noise and traffic. But it also means that Mexico City is an excellent place in which to immerse yourself in the diversities of Mexican culture—a blend of contemporary, colonial, and Hispanic influences.

This makes for an enthralling visit, so be sure to give yourself a minimum of a week to at least see the highlights of Mexico City. My first visit had been a delicious two-day stopover focusing on my niche of chocolate travel. My second visit was a three-day immersion into the historical highlights of this (nearly) 700-year-old UNESCO World Heritage Site. And when the opportunity arises for a third visit, I'll still need a full week to explore and enjoy the dynamic arts scene and contemporary culture of Mexico City.

Known to locals as CDMX (*Ciudad de México*) or more informally as the "D.F." (short for *Distrito Federal*) Mexico City has a long and rich history. Our enthusiastic group of travelers was amazed by the archaeological excavations going on right in the center of Mexico City at *Templo Mayor* (the Great Temple.) These massive ruins were considered to be the religious hub of the Aztec people. Initial construction of *Templo Mayor* began in 1325, but it had been rebuilt six times over the years, with changes or expansions each time a new Aztec emperor was named. Aztec legend tells us that this highly spiritual site was considered to be the 'center of the universe'





This photo shows the extensiveness of the ongoing excavation project at Templo Mayor with the Metropolitan Cathedral in the background.

and was therefore of utmost importance to the Aztecs. It is therefore no surprise that Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés burned *Templo Mayor* to the ground in 1521 as a sign of power.

Construction of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary on this same sacred site began in 1573 to serve the Spanish colonialists and settlers who followed. A good portion of the cathedral was destroyed by fire in 1967. When restoration activities took place to rebuild, small archaeological artifacts were discovered. But it wasn't until 1978 that signs of something truly spectacular were discovered by workmen at the site.

Excavation immediately began at that time through 1982, during which time 13 contemporary buildings were destroyed in order to proceed with excavation of the treasured ruins and artifacts that were buried below. We've included a few photos of the *Templo Mayor* site to whet your appetite for future travels.

Also in the heart of Mexico City and just one block from the *Templo Mayor* historical site and museum, you'll find the *Plaza de la Constitución*. A public square more commonly called *Plaza del Zócalo* (or just *Zócalo*) the site of this plaza was previously used by the Aztecs as the main ceremonial center of their city called *Tenochtitlan*. The *Zócalo* continues to be a place for many public ceremonies and events and is a great place for people watching. At a whopping size of nine square kilometers, it's the largest public square in Latin America and can hold close to 100,000 people (not socially distancing!)

Another must-visit site for history, culture, and art lovers is the *Palacio Nacional* (National Palace) located right on the *Zócalo*. The murals by Mexican artist Diego Rivera are remarkable and depict



There are magnificent works of excavated art on display in the Templo Mayor Museum.



the progression of Aztec, Spanish, and Mexican culture through the centuries. Rivera died in 1957 at age 70 and is credited for establishing Mexico's extensive network of murals and helping put Mexico on the stage as being a country of note in the production of world class international art. The intricacies of these massive murals had me mesmerized!

For a look at more contemporary culture in Mexico City, consider visiting some of the neighborhoods outside of the downtown. The Federal District of Mexico City is massive, encompassing more than 570 square miles (about 1,480 square kilometers) and each of its many neighborhoods have personalities of their own.

I've stayed in the Polanco neighborhood at a beautiful boutique hotel and enjoyed the vibe and chic feeling of this upscale neighborhood. My Polanco stay offered me the opportunity to meet Mexico's top chocolate chef, Jose Ramon Castillo, the founder of *Que Bo! Chocolatería Mexicana Evolutiva*, who guided me through a tasting of his amazing chocolate creations in his Polanco shop and explained how Mexican chocolate has evolved from a coarse gritty substance to a luscious, smooth, and silky world class product.

Another great neighborhood for chocolate lovers to visit is Juarez, as that is where you'll find the *Museo del Chocolate* (Chocolate Museum.) This is not just a museum! It is also a gallery of chocolate art, a place where you can take chocolate tasting and making classes, and a chocolate shop where you purchase some incredibly tasty souvenirs.

The neighborhood of Zona Rosa borders Juarez. I stayed in a larger hotel catering to the needs of business travelers in Zona Rosa. It was fun exploring the busy streets of Zona Rosa and discovering the *Palacia de Bellas Artes*, a funky artisan plaza located just a block from our hotel. Imagine our surprise when we found this family of donkeys for sale in an antique and curio shop! Check the most recent schedule, but when we were there, you could enjoy live performances every Sunday afternoon and evening at *Palacia de Bellas Artes*.

I hope I've inspired you to consider visiting Mexico City at your earliest opportunity. There are many more interesting neighborhoods to explore, and as one of my travelling companions put it, "Mexico City is a cosmopolitan destination that offers incredible architecture old and new, and with every turn of a corner, brings new wonders." I couldn't agree more. ✎

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*Doreen Pendgracs is a frequent contributor to THOR Advantage who loves combining her passions of chocolate and travel. You can read more posts about Mexico City and the sites mentioned on Doreen's blog at [chocolatour.net](http://chocolatour.net).*



One of the Diego Rivera murals inside the National Palace





Chef Jose Ramon Castillo of Que Bo! is Mexico City's finest chocolatier



It would be quite the challenge to get some of these pieces (seen at Palacia de Bellas Artes) home!