

Day of the Dead Reading Comprehension

What is the Day of the Dead?

Day of the Dead or 'Día de Muertos' (or 'Día de los Muertos' in some countries) is the Mexican festivity dedicated to remembering family members and other loved ones that have died. It is a multi-day holiday celebrated throughout Mexico and is especially popular in the central and southern regions of the country. The holiday is also celebrated wherever Mexican people live, particularly in the United States. The celebration has captured the interest of many people around the world and celebrations using elements of the original Mexican holiday can now be found taking place in a number of countries.

When is Day of the Dead celebrated?

In Mexico, the celebration is always a public holiday. Before the colonization of Europeans in the 16th century, the festivities normally took place in the summer months. With the spread of Catholicism, the date changed to October 31st, November 1st and November 2nd to coincide with the Christian celebrations of All Hallows' Eve, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. In more recent times, October 31st has become associated with a time to remember children and infants that have died while November 1st is the day for remembering adults. These days are named 'Día de los Inocentes' (Day of the Innocents) and 'Día de los Muertos' (Day of the Dead) respectively.

What is the history of the celebration?

The celebration began in Mexico long before Christians from Spanish-speaking nations colonised Mexico in the 16th century. Scholars believe that the modern holiday

can be traced back to indigenous observances that may be up to 2500 to 3000 years old. The rituals designed to celebrate the deaths of ancestors became a festival dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl during the Aztec period. This festival fell in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar and was celebrated for an entire month. The goddess Mictecacihuatl or 'Lady of the Dead' was the focus of the ancient festival; the modern festival has its own female figure. She is called 'La Calavera Catrina' and her image is found on many Day of the Dead posters and figurines. 'Calavera' is simply the Spanish word for skeleton and refers to any of the animated skeleton figures that appear everywhere around this time of year in Mexico.

How do people celebrate Day of the Dead?

Day of the Dead is a multi-day celebration and different things are done on each of the days. Children will often



make a children's altar on October 31st to incite the 'angelitos' (spirits of dead children) to come back to visit. Adult spirits will visit on November 1st and on November 2nd (All Soul's Day), families go to the cemetery to clean and decorate the graves or tombs of their loved ones. Decorations may include temporary altars, known as 'ofrendas', covered in marigold flowers and containing pictures of the deceased. Marigolds are called 'Flor de Muerto' in Mexican Spanish, which means 'Flower of the Dead' and are thought to attract the souls of the dead to the offerings.

Relatives will often celebrate with a picnic held in the cemetery grounds where they take special food and beverages for the dead. These include bottles of tequila, mescal or pulque for the adults. Toys and the deceased's favourite candies or sweets can be taken for children. The intent of the decorations and food is to draw the dead to the family so that they can hear what is being said about them. The event will often be fun, with family members telling funny anecdotes about the departed. In some Mexican towns, families spend all night in the cemetery with their loved ones. Pillows and blankets might be left out so that the spirits may rest after their long journey to attend the festivities.

What other festivities are there?

Some families will create 'ofrendas' in their homes as well as at the graveside. These small shrines may have Christian crosses or statues/pictures of the Virgin Mary on them as well as pictures of the deceased relatives. There will often also be candles and food such as sugar skulls and candied pumpkin. A special bread 'pan de muerto' (bread



of the dead) is often baked for the occasion and drinks such as atole are left for the deceased. These displays are left out in the home during the course of the festivities so that the spirits will feel welcome. Some believe that the spirits of the dead eat the 'spiritual essence' of the food that is prepared and therefore the nutritional value is gone from the food when it is eaten by the living. Both public schools and government offices will usually have small altars (often without the religious symbolism). This is because the holiday is seen as an important part of Mexican cultural heritage.

Sometimes, short poems called 'calaveras' (skulls) are created which mock friends or public figures. These may describe interesting events or give funny anecdotes about the person. Sugar paste and ceramic images of skulls and skeletons are brought out as decorations and little 'retablos' or boxes may be filled with clay skeletons

involved in scenes of daily life. Cartoons of skeletons in the style of José Guadalupe Posada are often created as well. Posada was a designer, who created a famous figure he called 'La Calavera Catrina' or 'The Elegant Skull'. This was a female skeleton in the dress of an upper-class Mexican woman. The Mexican folk art of 'Papel Picado' or perforated paper is used to decorate the altars in homes with colourful paper cut-outs.

Does any other country celebrate the dead in a similar way?

The celebrating of dead relatives is not only a Mexican phenomenon. People all over the world have found ways to remember and celebrate the spirits of their ancestors. In many other Roman Catholic countries, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are celebrated in a similar way to the Mexican holiday. In Spain and Portugal, 'ofrendas' are made for the dead and people often take the day off work to visit cemeteries with flowers or candles. In Brazil, the public holiday of 'Finados' is very similar to Day of the Dead and is celebrated on November 2nd. People go to cemeteries and churches on this day to remember and honour the dead.

Other festivals that are celebrated at the same time as All Saints' and All Souls' include the North American and Western European festival of Halloween. This celebration uses customs borrowed from the Celtic festival of 'Samhain'. The Celts believed that at this time of year the spirits of those who had died the previous year returned to Earth. The living tried to protect themselves from the dead at this time by wearing masks to hide their faces. Scottish children may blacken their faces with soot and

are known as 'guisers' while in America, the tradition of trick or treating came from the custom of the poor asking for food and money at doorsteps on All Souls' Day.

The Bolivian celebration of 'Dia de las natitas' (or Day of the Skulls) is celebrated on November 9th. This festival comes from the pre-Columbian tradition of the Andeans, which was to spend a day with the bones of ancestors on the anniversary of the third year after burial. The Andeans believe that the body has seven souls and one of these stays with the bones of the departed. After the other souls have left the body, the skull is taken from the grave and kept at home. The skulls of the ancestors watch over the family and protect them throughout the year and, if not cared for, may bring bad luck on the family. On the offering day, the family will cover the skulls with fresh flowers and make offerings of cigarettes, coca leaves and alcohol as thanks for the protection they have given the family over the previous year. A special mass and blessing takes place





at the central cemetery in La Paz and many families take their ancestors' remains there for the blessing.

In Britain and the Commonwealth, the Armistice Day services held on November 11th (also known as Remembrance Day) are a way of remembering those who have died in the service of their country during wartime. This date was originally used since it signified the date hostilities ceased in the First World War. The laying of wreaths at cenotaphs and memorial plaques is common on this day and on the Sunday closest to it (2nd Sunday in November) is referred to as Remembrance Sunday in Britain and the Commonwealth.

However, festivities to celebrate the dead do not always take place in October or November. America has a similar celebration to Remembrance Day known as Memorial Day. This is held on the last Monday in May. Japanese Buddhists clean their homes and prepare special foods for 'Obon'. This is a three-day festival dedicated to dead ancestors that takes place in July. At this time, the spirits of the dead are believed to return to earth. Lanterns and bonfires are lit to show the dead the way home to their families.