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SUNDAY TRAVEL

Mazatlan history worthy of opera

STORY SUMMARY | READ THE FULL STORY

Mazatlan, Mexico » Life moves smoothly along the shores of this Pacific coast resort town. Carefree sunbathers take their cue from the pelicans lazily coasting along inches above the waves while searching for a daytime snack.

Except for these distinctive birds, this "Golden Zone," as it's called, is not much different than a resort beach in Hawaii. But visitors who rouse themselves from the sand to take a trip downtown find something very different. There among the pastel-colored buildings, narrow streets and shaded plazas is a Mazatlan which still takes on the atmosphere of a Spanish colonial town.

One ancient square in particular evokes a compelling story of triumph and tragedy which took place there a century and a quarter ago.

— Robert W. Bone / Special to the Star-Bulletin

FULL STORY >>

By Robert W. Bone / Special to the Star-Bulletin

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 08, 2009

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Mazatlan, Mexico » The center of this city is an area that resident American expatriates like to call "Old Town," and it looks pretty much the same today as it has for two centuries or more. Many who wander here discover that the large central plaza, named

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the Plazuela Machado, served as the scene for a dramatic public appearance and heartbreaking death of one of the world's great operatic sopranos.



COURTESY ROBERT W. BONE

Valentino's castle-like structure is a dominant part of the beach landscape fronting the Playa Mazatlan hotel in the Golden Zone and is a popular night club.

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Born in 1845, Angela Peralta was not considered an attractive child, and she first worked in Mexico City as a servant girl. But it was soon discovered that she was blessed with considerable musical talent.

She learned the piano and the harp. But most of all, the Mexico City elite were impressed by Angela's truly angelic voice. They financed her studies in Italy, and while still a teenager, she drew enthusiastic crowds not only in her home country, but in the best operatic circles in the U.S. and Europe.

She became known abroad as the "Mexican nightingale" for her beautiful voice and feisty personality. At home in Mexico, she garnered award after award for her performances.

Angela Peralta left public life for a time during a brief, unhappy marriage. But her talent flowered anew when the young widow returned to the stage in 1871. She soon established her own opera company, aided by her manager and lawyer, Don Julian Montiel y Duarte.

In due course, Angela and Don Julian fell in love, and they began an affair which shocked conservative elements in Mexico City. The same audiences who had praised her now turned against her with a vengeance. When influential opera fans were unsuccessful at destroying her career, they even hired hecklers to interrupt her performances.

Angela continued to be adored by more tolerant elements elsewhere in Mexico, and she vowed never to sing in the capital again. At 38, she began what turned out to be her final tour. One of the company's first dates included a fateful performance in Mazatlan.

The ship carrying Angela, Don Julian and her entire opera company arrived at the port of Mazatlan on Aug. 22, 1883. Enthusiastic crowds gathered at the docks and then joyfully accompanied her and her troupe to the Plazuela Machado.

She gratefully rewarded her fans by appearing on her balcony at the Hotel

**Mazatlan**

*Mazatlan is located along the northern Pacific Coast, about 475 miles from the Arizona border. Local boosters call it is the closest major Mexican resort town to the U.S., and it features more than 15 miles of sandy beaches.*

» **Airways:** Mazatlan's international airport is reached by direct flights from nine major U.S. cities and two major Canadian cities. Most Americans fly in on U.S. Airways, Alaska Airlines, Aero-Mexico, or Mexicana Airlines. The airport is about 12 miles south of the city.

» **Ships:** Mazatlan is a popular port of call on many "Mexican Riviera" cruises by Princess, Carnival, and other lines sailing from Los Angeles and other U.S. ports. The cruise dock is within walking distance of "Old Town" Mazatlan.

» **Recommended hotels:** Several well-known hotels are in the Golden Zone of Mazatlan, including the new D'Gala Mazatlan, (800) 543-4203, [dgalamazatlan.com](http://dgalamazatlan.com); the venerable Playa Mazatlan (866) 385-0256, [hotelplaya.net](http://hotelplaya.net); El Cid Castilla Beach, (669) 913-3333, [elcid.com](http://elcid.com); Costa de Oro (866) 385-0256), [hotels.mazatlan.com/costa-de-oro](http://hotels.mazatlan.com/costa-de-oro). Most rooms are in the \$100-\$200 range for doubles, although some may have specials at lower rates during slow periods.

» **Dining:** In the "Old Town" (historical Mazatlan), some popular restaurants are lined up along the Plazuela Machado. They include Pedro & Lola, Altazor Arz Cafe, and the Cafe Pacifico.

In the Golden Zone, many good restaurants are in the major hotels.

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Iturbide overlooking the square. The crowd grew silent only when Angela raised her hand and began to sing.

The song which reverberated over the plaza was "La Paloma," the traditional refrain which is still popular today, and one whose Spanish lyrics celebrate the triumph of love over death. It proved to be a prophetic choice.

Unknown to anyone, a crew member of Angela's ship had come down with a case of the highly contagious Yellow Fever, and had spread the infection ashore in Mazatlan.

In the theater next door to the Angela's Hotel Iturbide, the opera company began to rehearse Verdi's *Il Travatore*, but it was destined never to be heard.

Before the performance, the Mexican Nightingale and nearly all members of her company, along with considerable number of townspeople, fell ill and died, a result of a sudden epidemic of the disease, for which neither cause nor cure was then known.

Among the survivors was Don Julian. The distraught manager quickly arranged to marry Angela on her deathbed in Room 10 of the Hotel Iturbide. Some said it was to preserve her good name. Others believed that it was simply to solidify his legal claim on her company.

Eyewitness accounts of the scene also vary somewhat, but when the time came for his bride to give her assent to the marriage, she was fully unconscious, and perhaps already dead. One of the surviving members of her opera company assisted with the "I do," by holding her head and gently nodding it when the question was asked. (Another version said the words were actually voiced by a woman hiding under the bed.)

Today, the Hotel Iturbide has been converted into the Municipal Center for the Arts. Next door is the stage where the diva was to have performed, now re-named in her honor as the Angela Peralta Theatre. The theater continues to play an active role in the cultural life of Mazatlan.

Walking tours of Old Town frequently include a visit to the theater, along with other historic sites, art galleries, and popular sidewalk cafes. One museum, the Casa Machado, provides a view overlooking the square. It also features photos and other mementos of Peralta, recalling Mazatlan's sad role in the final appearance of the Mexican Nightingale.

Travel writer **Robert W. Bone**, author of several guidebooks, including the "Maverick Guide to Hawaii," recently moved to California after 38 years in Kailua. Bone has often traveled to Mexico and recently revisited Mazatlan for this article. More of his photos may be seen at [robertbone.com/mazatlan](http://robertbone.com/mazatlan).

Locally popular also are Senor Frog's, the Shrimp Bucket, Casa Loma, Senor Pepper, La Taberna, and Soho Sushi.

» **Night life:** Mazatlan has plenty of after dark activity, with some action at the hotels, including folkloric shows. Valentino's, at the beach, is the best known of the independent discos. Some restaurants, such as the aforementioned Senor Frog's, also turn into discos for late-night fun.

» **Tourist information:** The Mazatlan Hotel Association maintains a Web site with general travel information on the city at [gomazatlan.com](http://gomazatlan.com). In the Old Town, you can call in at the tourism information office at Carnaval 1317, corner of Mariano Escobedo, one block from the Plazuela Machado. Walking tours of the historic neighborhood may be arranged here. (I especially enjoyed a tour led by Miguel Villanueva.)

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