

MEXICO CITY



...is one of the world's greatest cultural destinations. So what are you waiting for?

By Michael Gross
Photographs by Marcus Nilsson

Carlos Slim's four-year-old Museo Soumaya, designed by his son-in-law, Fernando Romero, is covered in 16,000 hexagonal aluminum tiles.

The turkey is indigenous to Mexico, so it's perhaps not as strange as it sounds that last fall, the Habita Group's Condesa df hotel, in Mexico City, hosted an all-American Thanksgiving. The hotel, housed in a triangular 1928 French neoclassical building that was transformed in 2005 into an urban forum, is named both for its neighborhood, Condesa, a verdant, gentrified residential district, and the sprawling megalopolis that surrounds it, the DF (officially Mexico DF), or Distrito Federal, the national capital.

Between bites of turkey and pecan-crusted yams prepared by chefs from France, America, and Japan, one of the hotel's owners, Rafael Micha, a third-generation Syrian Mexican, was giving thanks, too, seeing the night as symbolic of his city's emergence as not just the capital of Latin America but also a vibrant new center of cosmopolitanism, a melting pot just like its northern neighbor, and the hemisphere's most magnetic destination.

"It started brewing in 1997," Micha says, when the DF gained autonomy and elected its very first mayor, but "everything happened in 2000—that was a huge year." Director Alfonso Cuarón was completing *Y Tu Mamá También*; artist Gabriel Orozco and partners had just opened their Kurimanzutto gallery; Mexican chefs, like Enrique Olvera, were gaining international renown; and Habita was opening its first hotel. "All the planets aligned," Micha exults, but then he pauses. "Mexico has been incredibly sophisticated always," he sighs. "But it also has a perception problem." That goes back decades, even centuries, to when some wit coined the term *Moctezuma's revenge* for an apocryphal curse that the last Aztec ruler hurled at Westerners after his people were defeated and slaughtered by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés.

Nowadays, a little tummy trouble seems benign in comparison to the suffering of Mexico City since the 1980s, when its exploding population (which is about 9 million today but, including urban sprawl outside the city limits, has grown from 1.6 million in the 1940s to more than 21 million) experienced a series of crises that came to seem biblical, even existential. A huge garbage dump burned for eight days and nights, cloaking the city in a dense cloud. A deadly explosion tore through a petroleum distribution center. An earthquake registered 8.1 on the Richter scale, and likely killed tens of thousands, though the federal government, then as now led by the right-wing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), did its best to understate the death toll. That led to *Time* magazine's 1989 description of the megacity as "an ecological Hiroshima" and an "urban gas chamber." Twenty years later, an outbreak of swine flu caused a global panic.

Bad press. And lately reports of drug gang-related ultraviolence all over the country became a news-media staple. But against all odds, in the last 15 years, Mexico City has turned itself around—even if some fail to recognize or credit its renaissance.

Residents of Mexico City have long been disparaged as *Chilangos* by countrymen outside the city. Nowadays that word is more a source of pride than a slur. And to Rafael Micha, the tipping point came when Eugenio López, a fruit-juice heir, opened Museo Jumex, the permanent home of the largest private contemporary-art collection in Latin America, in November 2013. At the opening gala for the David Chipperfield-designed building, the who's who of international art gathered, Micha recalls. As he looked out on a crowd studded with names like Picasso, Schnabel, Niarchos, Santo Domingo, Soros, and Saxe-Coburg,



Inside the house studio of artist Pedro Friedeberg



he had a revelation. “We are not Mexicans anymore,” Micha thought. “We are citizens of the world in a super-happening place. A vortex of talent. A tempest!”

So what are you so afraid of?

Since the DF elected its first head of government—a founder of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in a country long ruled by the right—says Ana Zúñiga, a senior adviser to Miguel Mancera, the fourth consecutive long-term PRD mayor, the city “began to develop its own personality” or, at least, what can be referred to as the bubble has. The bubble contains the contiguous neighborhoods of Polanco, Nuevo Polanco, and San Miguel Chapultepec (the loose equivalent of New York’s Central Park and its south, east, and west fringes); Centro Reforma (Mexico City’s Midtown); Zona Rosa, Roma, and Condesa (its Chelsea and Soho); the Centro Histórico, (its historic center); and the arresting colonial Coyoacán (its Village).

Outside the bubble, particularly in places near the invisible line where the city ends and governance becomes the responsibility of the separate, surrounding state, things are different, but “we’re an oasis,” Zúñiga continues, over drinks in the Cesar Pelli–designed St. Regis hotel, on the Paseo de la Reforma, the city’s Champs-Élysées. “We’re really different from the nation. In Mexico City, you can do what you want. We can love who we want”—the city supports gay rights and allows abortion and euthanasia—“and not be judged.”

In concert with Carlos Slim Helú (a.k.a. the world’s second richest man), the second elected PRD mayor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, initiated the renewal of the Centro Histórico, devastated by the great earthquake of 1985, upgrading its infrastructure and clearing cobblestoned streets of illegal peddlers, prostitutes, and petty criminals and replacing them with pedestrian-only zones, lighting, and a sophisticated surveillance system. Obrador even hired New York’s former mayor Rudolph Giuliani as an adviser. All the while, Slim bought buildings—estimates range from 80 to 800; (his spokesman refused to engage)—and

THE DETAILS

EAT Hidden upstairs from the Porrúa bookstore is **El Mayor** (Calle República de Argentina 15; 52-55/5704-7580). Take in the ruins of the Templo Mayor archaeological site while snacking on ceviche and shredded duck. At the year-old food hall **Mercado Roma** (Calle Querétaro 225; 52-55/5564-1396), head to **Carbón** (52-55/5564-4332), a rotisserie restaurant on the second floor, for the guinea hen. Venture into any of the three outposts of **Azul** (azul.rest), where chef Ricardo Muñoz Zarita specializes in updated Mexican, like guacamole topped with grasshoppers. **Lalo!** (Zacatecas 173; 52-55/5564-3388), the latest from Maximo Bistrot chef Eduardo García, serves breakfast, pizzas, and pastas around a communal table. Mónica Patiño’s **Casa Virginia** (Ave. Monterrey 116; 52-55/5207-1813) and Martha Ortiz’s **Dulce Patria** (Anatole France 100; 52-55/3300-3999) create Mexican dishes that reflect the city’s sophisticated renaissance. **MeroToro** (Calle Amsterdam 204; 52-55/5564-7799) focuses on the cuisine of Baja. And, for a break from Mexican, try retro French-style **Casa Anis** (Anatole France 70; 52-55/5280-1405), which attracts the Mexican elite with octopus sashimi and steak frites.

STAY Grupo Habita’s hotel **Condesa DF** (rooms, from \$250; Ave. Veracruz 102; 866-978-7020; condesadf.com) is the work of Paris-based interior designer India Mahdavi (of London’s Coburg Bar, at the Connaught hotel). Its 40 rooms are spare and serene, with wooden headboards and white linens. Ask for the Terrace Suite or a corner room over Avenida Veracruz. (Avoid the patio-view rooms; they’re noisy.) Grupo’s other property to stay at is its newest, **Downtown Mexico** (rooms, from \$140; Isabel la Católica 30; 52-55/5130-6830; downtownmexico.com). Set inside a 17th-century baroque palace, the 17-room hotel makes use of earthy materials: handmade

cement tiles, volcanic rock walls, natural woods. Book the Independence Suite. The Cesar Pelli–designed **St. Regis Mexico City** (rooms, from \$545; Paseo de la Reforma 439; 52-55/5228-1818; starwoodhotels.com), in a 31-story tower on Paseo de la Reforma, has excellent views of the city. To note: Lots of events are held on the Reforma so ask for a quiet room, and don’t miss Jean-Georges’s **J & G Grill** (52-55/5228-1935), one of the city’s best.

SEE In Roma, gallery-hop, stopping by **Galería OMR** (Plaza Río de Janeiro 54; galeriaomr.com), **Fifty24MX Galería** (Colima 184; fifty24mx.com), and especially **Galería Casa Lamm** (Ave. Álvaro Obregón 99; galeriacasalamm.com.mx), a cultural center and gallery with a sculpture garden. Split an afternoon between the side-by-side museums-cum-architectural statements **Museo Jumex** and **Museo Soumaya** (Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra 303; fundacionjumex.org; soumaya.com.mx) in Nuevo Polanco. In the Centro Histórico, wander into the **Palacio de Bellas Artes** (Ave. Juárez; palacio.bellasartes.gob.mx) for the Diego Rivera murals. Nearby is an active archaeological dig, the **Templo Mayor** (Seminario 8; templo mayor.inah.gob.mx). If you can’t do **Teotihuacan** (Teotihuacan km. 46), the ruins of a pre-Columbian city 30 miles to the northeast, Templo Mayor is a must. So, too, the **Museo Nacional de Antropología** (Ave. Paseo de la Reforma at Calzada Gandhi S/N; 52-55/4040-5300), where the history of Mexico unfolds in dramatic galleries. Though worth a day by itself, it is a short walk from the Museo Rufino Tamayo and the Museo de Arte Moderno. Make time to visit to the **Museo Anahuacalli** (Museo 150; 52-55/5617-3797) and the **Museo Casa de León Trotsky** (Río Churubusco 410; 52-55/5658-8732), the home-turned-museum of exiled Russian leader Leon Trotsky.

restored and rented them, doing good for himself, for sure, but also for his city. Others followed, including Carlos Sacal, a paper-products magnate who developed downtown, a complex of shops, restaurants, and one of Habita’s latest hotels, all set inside the baroque 17th-century Palacio de los Condes de Miravalle, once the home of Spanish nobility. Sacal also built Mercado Roma, a magnetic food hall in the arty Roma district.

The penultimate PRD mayor renovated more public spaces, stretching from downtown to the city’s center, and instituted EcoBici, a bike-sharing program. Mayor Mancera enlisted another former New York mayor via the non-profit Bloomberg Associates to advise the city and formed units to develop its social media presence and apps to make the city more transparent to residents and visitors alike. “My administration is dedicated to making Mexico City a modern, open forward-thinking and progressive destination that welcomes people and business from all walks of life and all parts of the world,” Mancera says.

But Zúñiga thinks the credit should go to its citizens. “We chose, we voted,” she says. “We decided to maintain this momentum. The party is following the Chilangos.” She even sees recent mass protests over the disappearance of 43 students in the state of Guerrero, a center of narco-trafficking, as a positive. “It’s a catharsis,” Zúñiga says. “The people are trying to prove a point, not with violence but with belief. We’re not comfortable with what we see. We’re not that anymore.”

This is hardly Mexico City’s first moment in the sun, and its grand attractions are the permanent record of millennia of greatness. An hour’s drive outside of town are the ruins of Teotihuacán, the pre-Aztec city; built between the first and seventh centuries, still an active archaeological site. Climbing its considerable monuments, the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, are the first stations of the cross of any visit to the Mexican capital. The next is the Templo Mayor—the ruins of the 14th-century Aztec predecessor to the DF, Tenochtitlán—visible in the Centro Histórico, near



Hamachi sashimi with shiitake mushrooms and a soy yuzu dressing from Jean-Georges’s J&G Grill at the St. Regis hotel.





Centro Histórico's grandiose Palacio de Bellas Artes, the most important of Mexico City's cultural sights; Grupo Habita's co-owner Rafael Micha (far left).

the central square called the Zócalo and the Palacio Nacional, which Cortés built of recycled stone from a palace dating back to Moctezuma II. One of the best vantage points in the city is at El Mayor, a restaurant on the roof of the Porrúa bookstore, which overlooks all those sites, as well as buildings from every succeeding era of local architecture, a métier that Mexicans revere and at which they excel. A few blocks away, next to Alameda Park, is another kind of temple, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, home of early-20th-century murals by painters like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, commissioned and painted to educate and uplift the local citizenry. But the DF has many museums—"more than New York," says Patrick Charpenel, the director of Museo Jumex, "the most incredible concentration of museums in the world."

In his office on a late November afternoon, Charpenel tells me that Ecatepec (the home of the original Jumex gallery, inside the López family's juice factory), a city full of favelas just north of the DF, was "one of the most insecure areas of the country, designed for chaos. But that was our tradition: social contradiction." Eugenio López made that the central narrative of his art collection. "Mexico City is a place where different voices and perspectives are actively expressing themselves," says Charpenel. But López realized that a factory gallery, however suitably placed, would not do the job; it needed to be in the center of the city to express the power of marginality.

Meanwhile, Carlos Slim's alliance with Mayor Obrador had hit a rough patch after the politician lost a presidential race in 2006. The international recession followed, and Slim expanded his focus from the Centro Histórico to Nuevo Polanco, once home to a huge General Motors factory, where he made big land investments and created Plaza Carso, a \$1.4 billion mixed-use project centered around his Soumaya Museum, a warped-funnel-shaped building covered in hexagons of aluminum mesh that holds his personal art collection, which is a celebration of quantity over quality. But there are delights among the dross, and the Soumaya is justifiably praised for staying open for free seven days a week.

Under construction, the Soumaya got a compelling neighbor after Slim sold Eugenio López's father the land on which the quieter, more elegant Jumex would open four years later. "It's not trying to say, 'Here I am,'" says Charpenel, adding quickly, "I'm not talking about anyone."

Plaza Carso notwithstanding, all roads lead back to Roma, the district adopted by the arty and fashionable after the cost of real estate in next-door Condesa soared. But that same Thanksgiving weekend, the two neighborhoods hosted the 13th Corredor Cultural Roma Condesa, a festival of art, design, and food started in the '90s and recently rebooted to celebrate the central city's restaurants, galleries, and stores. "It was cultural activism to recover the city," says organizer Ana Elena Mallet, who revived the Corredor after realizing that "this had to be about experiencing the city, about appropriating public spaces."

"It would take six months to show you everything I've discovered in the last seven years," said Christophe von Hohenberg, a New York photographer who lives half the year in the DF documenting its resurgence. He spent that Saturday loping through the city, pointing out favorite spots like Camino Silvestre, a tear-downish colonial-era building transformed into a cooperative for furniture and design dealers, who sell everything from antiques to hummingbird tchotchkes, a Mexican trope ever since Aztec warriors were said to be reincarnated into the birds when they died.

Wandering past organic food stalls on the median of the neighbor-

hood's main drag, Álvaro Obregón, Hohenberg passes into Roma, ducking into Casa Lamm, a cultural center with a lushly landscaped sculpture garden. Then he dips from high art to low, photographing a street-art mural—one of many in the area—at the corner of Guanaajuato and Orizaba, and zips through a custom tattoo parlor next door to Fifty24MX, the gallery that sponsored the outdoor murals, before asking, “Do you want to see a really special church?”

A few blocks on, Hohenberg turns down a narrow alley. “This used to be so dangerous,” he says. “Oh my god, addicts and criminals.” Just then, the street widens, revealing children playing in the tiny Plaza Romita (the center of a 16th-century neighborhood), and Hohenberg opens the door of the Rectoría de San Francisco Javier-La Romita, where porcelain saints preside from glass vitrines, small porcelain mice skittering at their feet.

A 10-minute walk beyond, halfway to the historic center, Hohenberg enters the Biblioteca de Mexico, a late-18th-century tobacco factory on seven acres. It was converted into an arsenal and then a library that was recently restored by a distinguished cast of local architects, each of whom designed a discrete space, including courtyards, loggias, and galleries holding the personal libraries of Mexican intellectuals and dignitaries. Hohenberg's tour ends in the Plaza de la Ciudadela, facing the library, where crowds of Chilangos of all ages, dressed to the nines, eat, drink, and dance away their weekends. “I come and watch these people for hours,” he says, whipping out his camera.

When we arrived eight years ago, it was different, very quiet,” says Gustavo Arróniz, a second-generation art dealer and the head of Arróniz Arte Contemporáneo, on the elegant Plaza Río de Janeiro in the center of bohemian Roma. “We came because of Galería OMR”—which opened shortly before the 1985 earthquake and was a bellwether for both its environs and the city's contemporary-art scene—“now there are 13 galleries all around here.” Many moved from Condesa as it became “too commercial, too popular,” says Arróniz, who fears that the same inevitability will eventually drive him away.

Though there's been a contemporary-art scene in Mexico City since the Galería de Arte Mexicano opened in 1935, dealing works by Rivera and Frida Kahlo, it was operating in a bubble of its own. When Patricia Ortiz Monasterio and Jaime Riestra bought the eccentric leaning building that houses OMR shortly after the earthquake, few foresaw what would follow. “Mexico is not just cheap labor, drugs, and killings,” says Monasterio, who believed both in Roma and in the then-unknown artists that she and her husband sold. “It's also culture and talent. Our anthropological museum opened in the 19th century. This didn't happen out of the blue. It has a backbone.” But she admits that for 15 years, they felt “quite alone.” Then, like Micha, she saw “a new energy” in the new century, “and soon it began spreading out.”

Her clients became the new bellwethers—the first to shed their fear of the DF. Says Monasterio, “I drive and walk by myself all the time. I wouldn't walk into a dark alley anywhere. There are killings in New York. There are killings in Ferguson.” She allows a little smile as she adds, “Even a bit of danger is a bit daring.”

Admiration for the city's innovations isn't universal. Francisco Goldman, author of *The Interior Circuit: A Mexico City Chronicle*, a memoir of life in today's DF, describes himself as “an unabashed cheerleader” for the city he calls “an independent, scrappy, energetic, progressive, and worldly place.” But he feels it's far from perfect. In

the wake of the murders in Guerrero, Goldman adds, “the whole world can see now that Mexico still has an inept, corrupt, gangster government.”

Pedro Friedeberg, a 79-year-old surrealist painter, can't contain his disdain either. “We're a corruptible people,” he says. “We are Aztec and Spanish, two corrupt ascendants. Every government has been corrupt.” Initiatives like bikes, monuments, and pedestrian streets? “In part it's very good, but in part it's terrible,” he says, pointing to a tower celebrating Mexico's bicentennial just up the Reforma from the St. Regis that reportedly cost \$79 million. “It looks like a wafer cookie!” Friedeberg says. “Everything in the city would cost one 10th as much if not for corruption. It's fun to live here and see all the corruption, but it's not so nice for the 18 million poor people. So in a way, it's a paradise, and in a way, it's an inferno.”

Nonetheless, Mexico City has never been a better place to visit. “Before, gastronomy in Mexico City was appalling,” says Corredor organizer Mallet. “You had really expensive restaurants with not very good food.” And big, charmless hotels. “Now,” she says, “you have extraordinary restaurants”—superstar chefs working in a wide variety of styles from traditional Mexican to haute cuisine and an array of hotels from the quirky and affordable to the lavishly deluxe.

In the 20th century, many of the better restaurants in the city were French. “Mexicans, especially the elites, have always looked elsewhere for references, especially to France,” says Déborah Holtz, the founder of Trilce Editions, a publisher of art and poetry books. But Maximo Bistrot Local, the Roma restaurant where we ate lunch, is evidence of Mexico City's feeling now that anything is possible. The first time she ate there, Holtz rushed to the kitchen to tell its chef, Eduardo “Lalo” García, she was so impressed by his food that she wanted to publish a cookbook. Only then did she hear his story and decide it had to be a memoir, too.

“His knowledge of the earth comes from his childhood,” Holtz tells me. Lalo grew up an illegal child laborer who crossed the border dressed as a girl to find work on American farms picking fruit and washing dishes. He worked at Le Bernardin in New York, returned home to cook at Pujol with Enrique Olvera, and then set out on his own. He recently opened a second place, Lalo!, in a reclaimed garage across the street from Maximo; it serves breakfast and lunch at communal tables. “It's his life,” says Holtz. “And that's what happening in Mexico City in publishing, in art, in fashion.”

There's not one Mexico City, but many,” explains Jose Castillo, the architect of El Mayor restaurant as well as the Garcia Terres Library, in La Ciudadela, as he conducts a tour of the DF's recent history as told through luxury real estate. Echoing Friedeberg, Castillo, a Harvard graduate and professor, admits that the principal beneficiary of the DF bubble is “still an aristocratic society” as he drives through Lomas de Chapultepec, a century-old neighborhood that's 1,650 feet higher than the Zócalo and just west of the city proper, en route to a newer district, Santa Fe. Even higher and farther west, it was developed beginning in the '80s on former sand quarries with the encouragement of the PRI.

From a distance, Santa Fe is a sleek forest of modern residential and commercial towers, connected without apparent irony by a skein of bridges called the Puentes de los Poetas, or the Bridges of the Poets. It's where the Mexican elite escaped when the capital threatened to become uninhabitable. There are no sidewalks; most structures are gated and guarded. One development, Bosques de Santa Fe, can be accessed only



Seventy-nine-year-old surrealist painter Pedro Friedeberg in his studio.



MEXICO CITY

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through a guarded private tunnel. Even medians are gated “to prevent pedestrians from crossing the street,” Castillo says. The message: If you don’t live here, you’re not welcome. But nearby favelas are so close, the stark contrast between rich and poor is part of the scenery.

“All public life is privatized here,” says Castillo. “It’s perverse. It’s vile. The elite divide themselves from the social contract of living in the city. It’s fear of thinking, fear of facts, a reproduction of fake urbanity.” But it represents the condition that the PRD was supposedly determined to reverse when it took over.

Then Castillo drove back to Roma for lunch at Lalo!, and we took another walk around Roma. Demonstrating that the bubble is a village inside the megacity, we ran into the architect Jorge Ambrosi and the chef and culinary entrepreneur Mónica Patiño, whose latest restaurant, Casa Virginia, around the corner, is another of the gourmet landmarks of the new Mexico City.

When walking amid the Corredor crowds, it’s obvious that the rebranding of Mexico City will continue, and it seems inevitable that the city’s perception problem will fade into memory. But will the 18 million Chilangos outside the bubble ever benefit from its new urbanity? Tourism officials are now attempting a literal rebranding, advertising the letters *CDMX*, or Ciudad Mexico, “saying we’re not the federal district,” according to Dhyana Quintanar, who spearheaded EcoBici and now heads the Public Space Authority under Mayor Mancera. “We identify ourselves as Mexico City, not the DF.” She believes its benefits will spread outside the bubble to “people who live there but *live* here, work here. If you improve the environment, you improve the quality of life.”

Quintanar even finds a silver lining in her country’s worst troubles, because, she says, they “made Mexico City a haven, so that we attracted the best talent from the country and not only that, but the entire world. If you want to be somebody, you come to Mexico City. It has a legacy. We’re a city with a lot of layers. And in the end, we’re a culture with an extroverted way of life. Our favorite thing to do is watch the spectacle of the city.” Right now, it just may be the greatest show on earth. ♦

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