

Día de los Muertos

The Mexican holiday of *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, takes place over the first two days of November. Its origins are a mixture of Native traditions and the Catholic faith.



While the holiday's observances include spending time in cemeteries, making shrines for the dead, and displaying artistic representations of skulls and skeletons, the occasion is festive, rather than scary or morbid. Death isn't seen as the end of one's life, but as a natural part of the life cycle. It is believed that the dead continue to exist much as they did in their lives and come back to visit the living every year.

It is generally believed that the souls of one's family return home to join in the Day of the Dead festivities. First those who died in infancy come home, then the older children, and finally those who died once they reached adulthood. Families set up altars (*ofrendas*) in their homes, festively decorated in bright colors and filled with the favorite foods of their dead. Typically, the altars contain photographs of the dead, representations of things they liked, and items representing the four elements: candles for fire, drinks for water, fruit for earth, and fluttering tissue-paper decorations for wind. The deceased family member takes in the essence of the food, which will later be eaten by the living.



In some areas, families go to the graveyard to celebrate through the night. They clean and decorate the graves, sometimes setting up *ofrendas* on the gravestones, as bells are rung.

The major feature of Day of the Dead decorations is skeletons, or *calacas*. Skeletons are everywhere, from tissue-paper scenes to tiny plastic toys, from cardboard puppets to ceramic sculptures, from posters to paper maché. These skeletons are usually cheerful and are designed to show the full range of activities and professions people perform. Farmers, barbers, secretaries, fire fighters... if somebody does it while alive, you can find an artistic rendering of a skeleton doing it while dead.

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This theme extends to the day's food and treats. The Day of the Dead feast typically includes a special egg-batter "bread of the dead," *pan de muerto*. While the form of this bread is different from region to region, it is often decorated with strips of dough resembling bones or made to resemble a dead body.



Also common are skulls and skeletons made of sugar or candy. Some people get sugar skulls made to resemble themselves, or with their names inscribed on them. Notice skull and skeleton symbols are happy and colorful, unlike the scary Halloween portrayals.

While Day of the Dead and Halloween both stem from All Saints' and All Souls' Days, their tones couldn't be more different. Halloween's images of skeletons and spirits emphasize the spooky, gruesome and frightening. People celebrating Halloween shudder at the thought of scary spirits threatening the living world. On Day of the Dead, however, the focus isn't scary at all. It's about celebrating with one's family, alive and dead, and remembering those who are no longer alive. It's also on seeing death as another stage following life, not something to be faced with fear.

