



Day of the Dead, or Día de Muertos, is one of the most important celebrations in Mexico, with roots dating back thousands of years, long before Spanish settlers arrived. It has become a blend of Catholic tradition and Mexican mysticism, commemorating death as another element of life and as a way to remember and honor loved ones.

In bustling markets, stalls sell decorated skulls made of sugar or chocolate and sheets of tissue paper, cut into delicate shapes, adorn stores and restaurants. In houses all over the country, families carefully place photographs of their ancestors on an altar beside candles and a traditional Mexican pastry as incense fills the air. In flower shops, freshly cut marigolds line the storefronts.

Although the tradition has long been part of Mexican culture, the holiday has of late become an important tourist draw, with travelers visiting towns and cities across the country to witness the colorful displays of ofrendas, altars to invite the spirits of the dead back into the world of the living.

While the festivities have appeared in Oscar-winning movies and even commercials for major companies, for Mexicans it remains an intimate family tradition, a moment to remember and honor those we have lost, and allow them back into our homes, even just for an evening. And in a country where violence and tragedy have become pervasive, it is also a reminder of Mexico's ability to persevere and laugh at anything — even death.

Where did Day of the Dead originate?

The holiday has its origins in Indigenous cultures dating back thousands of years, particularly influenced by the Aztec or Mexica people. In Aztec culture, death was transitory, and the souls of the dead could return to visit the living. At least two important festivals in the fall would celebrate the dead and invite them back to the world of the living. After the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, those traditions were melded into the Catholic calendar, and are now celebrated to coincide with All Souls' Day.

What is pan de muerto?

[Pan de muerto](#), or bread of the dead, is a traditional Mexican pastry. Central to Day of the Dead celebrations, it is placed on the altar as an offering and also eaten as a tasty treat throughout October. Like much of the celebration, the pastry has its roots in Aztec culture of centuries past, when different kinds of traditional breads would be used as offerings. Round in shape, with a pair of crossed bones and a circle representing a skull made of pastry on top, the pan de muerto is similar in texture to challah, usually sprinkled with sugar or other toppings.