

Day of the Dead *is a Mexican national holiday, which focuses on gatherings of family and friends to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. The celebration takes place on November 1–2, in connection with the Catholic holidays of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.*

Traditions connected with the holiday include building private altars honouring the deceased using sugar skulls, marigolds, and the favourite foods and beverages of the departed and visiting graves with these as gifts.

Often on the Day of the Dead, you will see Mexican families head for the cemeteries to paint, decorate and otherwise tend the graves of their departed family members. In some towns this takes on a carnival atmosphere with sales of cotton candy and mariachi music.

The Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico can be traced back to the indigenous cultures. The festival that became the modern Day of the Dead fell in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar, about the beginning of August, and was celebrated for an entire month. The festivities were dedicated to the god known as the Lady of the Dead, corresponding to the modern Catrina.



Although the ritual has since been merged with Catholic tradition, it still maintains some basic principles of an Aztec ritual, such as the use of skulls. Skulls were kept and were used to symbolize death and rebirth and to honour the dead. The indigenous cultures believed that death was a continuation of life but in another world and was not something to be feared. So their use of skeletons and skulls during Day of the Dead was not meant to scare people, just to honour those who have passed on to the next world. Just before the Day of the Dead is celebrated, it is interesting to walk into a Mexican bakery and find skull cakes and skeleton designs on the sweets.