

# Day of the Dead

By Jane Runyon

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It may seem rather strange to some people to have a day for dead people. It isn't strange at all to people of Hispanic heritage. You should know that this celebration started hundreds of years ago with the Aztecs. They devoted a whole month to the "Lady of the Dead." It took place during what is now the last half of July and the first half of August. It was a time when they remembered the children who had died.

When Spanish priests came to Mexico, they tried to make changes in this celebration. The first thing they did was to cut the ritual down to two days. They tried to move the days to the same time as All Hallows Eve. You might recognize this day as Halloween. The Mexican natives weren't too thrilled about turning their celebration into a Catholic celebration. A compromise was reached and Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, is now celebrated on the first two days of November.



The celebration has combined a bit of the early traditions with some of the Christian features the priests were teaching. Mexicans do not treat this day as a sad day. They use it as a way to celebrate the lives of those who have left them.

There are generally two kinds of celebrations held. One day may be spent at the cemetery where their loved one is buried. Picnic lunches are packed. The family sets to work cleaning up the gravesites of their relatives. They socialize with other family members and members of the community. They tell stories about the departed family member. They spread their picnic lunches out over the ground. Meat dishes with spicy sauces and chocolate beverages are a special favorite. Best of all are the cookies. These cookies are shaped like bones and skulls. They are decorated in bright colored icing. There is a special bread called *pan de muerto*. The gravesite is then decorated with large, bright flowers. Gifts to show how he or she is missed are left. Religious tokens and food are common gifts. Everyone has a good time. It is felt that this is a good way to recognize the natural cycle of life and death.

A celebration is also held in the home. The spirits of departed family and friends are invited to attend. Family members decorate an altar which represents the departed member. Personal items which belonged to the dead person, photographs of the person, and clothing that belonged to the person are displayed. Flowers and food are displayed. The family hopes that what they put out will tempt the souls of the dead to return and celebrate with them.

Traditionally, the first day of November is used to remember the children who have died. The second day is used for remembering adults.

Today it seems that this celebration has been simplified in the larger cities. The smaller towns tend to have more of a full celebration. Bakeries in southern Mexico stop producing their regular baked goods to produce a special rounded loaf of bread. Inside the bread is a plastic skeleton. It is good luck to find the skeleton in your piece of bread. Cookies shaped like skeletons are a treat all children enjoy.

In the larger cities, Day of the Dead has become just another holiday on which to enjoy good food and parties. The smaller communities have held on to the religious traditions of the days. The Day of the Dead is a time for joy. It is a time to remember the good times those once living enjoyed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

Day of the Dead

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Day of the Dead is a scary holiday.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. How long did the ancient Aztec celebration for the dead last?
- A. Two weeks
  - B. Two days
  - C. One day
  - D. A month
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When did Catholic priests want native Mexicans to celebrate the dead?
- A. All Hallows Eve
  - B. December 6th
  - C. August
  - D. September
4. Why is the Day of the Dead celebrated?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
5. What has happened to the Day of the Dead celebrations in large cities?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. In what two places are displays of flowers and personal effects set up?
- A. Hospitals and schools
  - B. Museums and theaters
  - C. Stores and offices
  - D. Homes and cemeteries
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. What kinds of cookies do children like at these celebrations?
- A. Chocolate chip cookies
  - B. Peanut butter cookies
  - C. Sugar cookies shaped like trees
  - D. Cookies shaped like bones and skulls
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Large Day of the Dead celebrations occur mostly in southern Mexico.
- A. True
  - B. False

