

Who started Day of the Dead?

Dia de los Muertos originated centuries ago in Mexico, where it is still widely celebrated to this day. The holiday is a blend of pre-Hispanic indigenous beliefs and Spanish Catholic beliefs.

Who celebrates Day of the Dead?

Dia de los Muertos is celebrated throughout Mexico. Many other countries around the world celebrate similar (or hybrid) versions of Day of the Dead as well, by having special days for honoring the dead. These celebrations occur in various countries in Central and South America, Europe and Asia, where they celebrate the holiday according to their own local customs.

Day of the Dead has also taken hold in areas with a high Mexican immigrant population, particularly in California, Texas, Arizona and other parts of the United States.

Many people around the world, even if they are not directly connected to Mexican culture, are drawn to the concept and imagery of Mexico's Day of the Dead, so the holiday seems to continually gain in popularity as more people learn about it.



Photo credit: [Randal Sheppard](#)

What is Dia de los Muertos?

Dia de los Muertos is a holiday for remembering and honoring those who have passed. It is a festive, joyous time of celebration. Day of the Dead is Mexico's most important holiday, which means they invest a lot of time and money into celebrating Dia de los Muertos, more so than any other holiday.

When is Day of the Dead?

The Day of the Dead falls on November 1 and 2 of each year, coinciding with the Catholic holidays All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

Although November 2nd is the official date for Day of the Dead, it is celebrated between October 31st and November 2nd. Usually the preparations (and some festivities) start even earlier than that. So really, the "Day" of the Dead can also be called the "Days" of the Dead, because the holiday spans more than one day. Traditionally, November 1 is the day for honoring dead children and infants, and November 2 is the day for honoring deceased adults.

Where is Day of the Dead celebrated?

The Day of the Dead is celebrated in both public and private spaces. It is most often celebrated in homes and graveyards.

- In homes, people create [altars](#) to honor their deceased loved ones. In some places it is common to allow guests to enter the house to view the altar.
- In graveyards, families [clean the graves](#) of their loved ones, which they then



Cleaning and decorating graves

Photo credit: [AlejandroLinaresGarcia](#)

decorate with flowers, photos, candles, foods and drinks. People stay up all night in the graveyards, socializing and [telling funny stories](#) about their dead ancestors. Musicians are hired to stroll through the graveyard, playing the favorite songs of the dead.

In the public sphere, Day of the Dead celebrations can also take the form of street parties, parades, and festivals on university campuses.

Why do people celebrate Day of the Dead?

People celebrate Dia de los Muertos to honor their deceased loved ones. It is a loving ritual, full of joy and remembrance.

For those who did not grow up in a culture that celebrates such a holiday, these practices and rituals might seem odd. But bear in mind that in the US, it is common for people to visit the graves of their family members and friends who have left this earth, to leave flowers and to reconnect with their loved ones. Dia de los Muertos is similar to this common American practice - so you can see that the Day of the Dead is not that unusual. Dia de los Muertos allows the dead to live again. During this time it is believed that the deceased return to their earthly homes to visit and rejoice with their loved ones.

The Days of the Dead are celebrated as a way of retaining connections with the unseen world a world we will all return to one day.

Most people celebrate Day of the Dead out of love and commitment to their loved ones, but some people celebrate this holiday out of fear! Mexico is rampant with folk tales that tell what happens if someone neglects their ancestors on Dia de los Muertos. If a spirit returns to find that no one has built an altar for them, or that their loved ones only left them paltry offerings, they will feel sad and angry... especially when they see what bounteous offerings other spirits received!

Neglected spirits may seek vengeance on those who have forgotten them. Additionally, many folk tales describe how those who ignore their deceased loved ones fall immediately ill and even meet their death shortly after the holiday. So you see, there are some people in Mexico who participate in Dia de los Muertos out of fear and superstition instead of love!

How do people celebrate Day of the Dead?

The most common ways of celebrating Day of the Dead in Mexico include:



All-night celebration in graveyard
Photo credit: [Thelmadatter](#)

Setting up an [altar](#) with offerings

- Cleaning and decorating graves
- Holding all-night graveside vigils
- Telling stories about the deceased
- [Making](#) (or purchasing) and exchanging [sugar skulls](#) and other sweets

Day of the Dead customs in Mexico vary from town to town, and when celebrated abroad it also takes on its own unique flair in each community. It is usually a combination of rituals and introspection that ultimately takes on a joyous tone.

Day of the Dead celebrations now also include:

- community festivals
- parades
- street parties

Dia de los Muertos History



Gravestone in shape of Aztec skull rack
Photo © [Thelmadatter](#)

To study Dia de los Muertos history is to step back in time 4000 years. These days we think of Dia de los Muertos as a "Mexican holiday", but the origins of the Day of the Dead can actually be traced back several *millennia* before Mexico even existed as a country.

Are you ready to jump back in time?

The Spanish invaded Mexico in 1519 - but we need to step back *even further* to understand Dia de los Muertos history.

Before the Spanish invasion, many indigenous cultures rose and fell in the land now known as Mexico: the Olmecs, the Mayans, and the Aztecs were just some of these **Mesoamerican civilizations** that flourished for nearly 40 centuries.

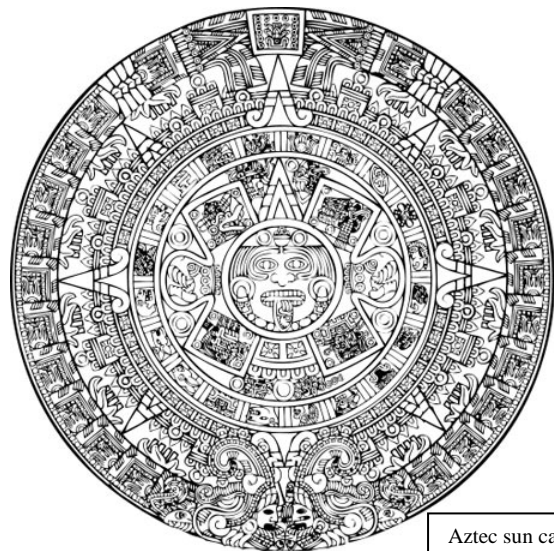
Although there were several different civilizations rising and falling over those 4000 years, they all shared a common thread: **a belief in the afterlife**. When people died, they didn't cease to exist instead, their soul carried on to the afterworld.

The belief in the cyclical nature of life and death resulted in a **celebration of death**, rather than a fear of death. **Death was simply a continuance of life**, just on another plane of existence. Dia de los Muertos history can be traced back to these indigenous beliefs of the afterlife.



Statue of Catrina,
Lady of the Dead

Once a year the Aztecs held a festival celebrating the death of their ancestors, while honoring the goddess **Mictecacihuatl**, Queen of the Underworld, or Lady of the Dead. The Aztecs believed that the deceased preferred to be celebrated, rather than mourned, so during the festival they first honored *los angelitos*, the deceased children, then those who passed away as adults. The Mictecacihuatl festival lasted for an entire month, starting around the end of July to mid-August (the 9th month on the Aztec calendar), during the time of corn harvests.



Aztec sun calendar

After the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs in 1521, they tried to make the Aztecs adopt their Catholic beliefs. They didn't understand the Aztec belief system and didn't try to. As Catholics, they thought that the Aztecs were pagan barbarians and tried their best to squash the old Aztec rituals and fully convert the indigenous people over to their Catholic beliefs but they failed.

What they accomplished was more like a compromise; a blend of beliefs. The Spanish conquerors succeeding in shortening the length of the Mictecacihuatl festival to two days that conveniently corresponded with two of their own Catholic holidays: *All Saints' Day* and *All Souls' Day*, which take place on **November 1 and 2** of each year.

This change was a key point in Dia de los Muertos history.

The Spanish convinced the indigenous people to attend special masses on those two days to commemorate the dead, as they tried to shift the original Dia de los Muertos history and meaning to suit their own Catholic purpose. However, **the native folk customs and traditions prevailed**. Over the centuries, these traditions transformed into the present Day of the Dead, bestowing Dia de los Muertos with the color, flavor, and fervor that has made it a world-famous holiday.

Even the old Aztec Goddess [Mictecacihuatl](#) found a new identity as the modern "*Catrina*" female figure (shown left) bedecked in sumptuous clothing and giant ornate hats, who serves as a reminder that death is a fate that even the rich can't avoid.

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What next?

As a holiday, **Day of the Dead continues to evolve**. With the spread of Mexicans into other countries, such as the US and Canada, many more communities are adopting the Day of the Dead, so that it now contains even more multicultural overtones. Thanks to the Internet, many more people are able to learn about this holiday and celebrate Day of the Dead in their own way, inspired by Mexican traditions.

This brief study of **Dia de los Muertos history** shows the transformation and adaptability of Mexico's most famous national holiday. A glimpse into Dia de los Muertos history shows how the holiday has survived throughout centuries of changes, which perhaps stands as proof of the holiday's cultural, and personal, importance.