

Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)

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The Day of the Dead (el Día de los Muertos), is a Mexican holiday where families welcome back the souls of their deceased relatives for a brief reunion that includes food, drink and celebration.

A blend of Mesoamerican ritual, European religion and Spanish culture, the holiday is celebrated each year from October 31-November 2. While October 31 is Halloween, November 1-2 is All Souls Day or the Day of the Dead. According to tradition, the gates of heaven are opened at midnight on October 31 and the spirits of children can rejoin their families for 24 hours. The spirits of adults can do the same on November 2.

Origins of Day of the Dead

The roots of the Day of the Dead—celebrated in contemporary Mexico and among those of Mexican heritage in the United States and around the world—go back some 3,000 years to the rituals honoring the dead in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The Aztecs and other Nahua peoples living in what is now central Mexico held a cyclical view of the universe and saw death as an integral, ever-present part of life.

Upon dying, a person was believed to travel to *Chicunamictlán*, the Land of the Dead. Only after getting through nine challenging levels, a journey of several years, could the person's soul finally reach *Mictlán*, the final resting place. In Nahua rituals honoring the dead, traditionally held in August, family members offered food, water and tools to aid the deceased on this difficult journey. This inspired the modern Day of the Dead practice of

leaving food and other offerings on loved ones' graves or setting them on makeshift home altars, called *ofrendas*.

Day of the Dead vs. All Souls Day

In ancient Europe, pagan celebrations of the dead also took place in the fall and featured bonfires, dancing and feasting. Some of these customs survived after the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, which informally absorbed them into its observances of two holy days—All Saints Day and All Souls Day—celebrated on the first two days of November.

In medieval Spain, people would bring wine and *pan de ánimas* (spirit bread) to the graves of loved ones on All Souls Day. They also covered graves with flowers and lit candles to guide the souls of the dead back to their homes on Earth. In the 16th century, Spanish conquistadors carried these traditions to the New World, along with a darker view of death shaped by the devastation of the bubonic plague.

How Is the Day of the Dead Celebrated?

El Día de los Muertos is not, as is commonly thought, a Mexican version of Halloween, though the two holidays do share some traditions, including costumes and parades. On the Day of the Dead, it's believed that the border between the spirit world and the physical world dissolves. During this brief period, the souls of the dead awaken and return to feast, drink, dance and play music with their loved ones. In turn, the living treat the deceased as honored guests, leaving their favorite foods and other offerings at gravesites or on *ofrendas* built in their homes. *Ofrendas* are often decorated with candles, bright marigolds called *cempasúchil*, and red cock's combs, along with foods such as tortillas and fruit.

The most prominent symbols of the Day of the Dead are *calacas* (skeletons) and *calaveras* (skulls). In the early 20th century, printer and cartoonist José Guadalupe Posada featured skeletal figures in his artwork to mock politicians and comment on revolutionary politics. His best-known work, *La Calavera Catrina* ("Elegant Skull"), depicts a female skeleton with makeup and dressed in elegant clothing. The 1910 etching was meant as a critique of Mexicans adopting European fashions over their own heritage and traditions. *La Calavera Catrina* later became one of the most recognizable icons of the Day of the Dead.

During modern Day of the Dead celebrations, people often wear skull masks and eat sugar candies shaped like skulls. The *pan de ánimas* of Spain's All Souls Day rituals is echoed in *pan*

de muerto, the traditional sweet bread of today's Day of the Dead festivities. Other foods and drinks tied to the holiday—but enjoyed year-round—include spicy dark chocolate and the corn-based beverage *atole*. You can wish someone a happy Day of the Dead by saying, “Feliz Día de los Muertos.”

Movies Featuring Day of the Dead

Traditionally, the Day of the Dead was celebrated mostly in rural, Indigenous areas of Mexico, but beginning in the 1980s, it spread into the cities. UNESCO recognized the holiday's growing prominence in 2008 when it added Mexico's [“Indigenous festivity dedicated to the dead”](#) to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In recent years, the tradition has developed even more due to its visibility in pop culture and its growing popularity in the United States, where more than 68 million people identified as being of partial or full Mexican ancestry as of 2024, according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

Inspired by the 2015 James Bond film *Spectre*, which featured a large Day of the Dead parade, Mexico City held its first parade for the holiday in 2016. In 2017, several major U.S. cities—including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio and Fort Lauderdale—hosted Day of the Dead parades. That November, Disney and Pixar released the animated blockbuster *Coco*, a \$175 million homage to the Mexican tradition in which a young boy is transported to the Land of the Dead and reunites with his long-lost ancestors.

Though the customs and scale of Day of the Dead celebrations continue to evolve, the heart of the holiday has remained the same for thousands of years. It's a time to remember and celebrate those who have passed, while also portraying death more positively—as a natural part of the human experience.

SOURCES

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‘Coco’: How Pixar Brought its ‘Day of the Dead’ Story to Life
[Hollywood Reporter](#)

Día de los Muertos Comes to Life Across the Mexican Diaspora