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## Classic Cars Down Mexico Way

**M**exico City isn't exactly the type of place most of us would associate with classic cars. But a surprisingly strong stable of vintage car devotees sure know how to put on a good show, as does a thriving auto museum.

There's a spicy affair going on south of the borders in Mexico City. No, it's not what you're thinking. It's a love affair between man and automobile and it's been going on for a long, long time. Motorcars first arrived in Mexico City in 1903 and by the end of the year there were 136 vehicles causing commuter chaos. By 1906 that number expanded to 800. And in 2008 Mexico City had more new cars enter their streets than there were new babies born. No-matter what you call it, this affair is muy caliente!

Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI), recently released a study on car use in the valley of Mexico (which encompasses Mexico City). It reported that between 2000-and-2007 car use doubled. The percentage of residents who used cars as a means of transportation jumped from 17 percent in 2000 to 33 percent in 2007! Having so many private, commercial and public vehicles on the roadways has translated into extremely high levels of air pollution.



*Check out the Horseless Carriage plates on this vintage Stanley Steamer  
© Ada Solis*

The government took steps early on to try and combat the situation by implementing a law called "Hoy no Circula" (which loosely translates into "Today your car does not circulate"). On a weekly basis, depending on the last digit of their license plates, 20 per cent of vehicles can't be driven on certain days. The bylaw became very popular but the test of time has shown it to be both inefficient and unsuccessful in curbing automobile use.

The political leaders in Mexico City, looking to combat the negative factors of air pollution and congestion, have dedicated a great amount of time, effort and money in trying to get Mexicans to embrace the idea of utilizing more ecofriendly or "green" vehicles. They are also working on improving public transportation options by pouring more funding into rapid transit.



*1920s Ford Model T police van © El Museo Del Automóvil*

The history of the automobile in Mexico really began to develop with the worldwide automotive industry expansion. In 1910 Renault and Mercedes-Benz opened small assembly plants where they built vehicles that were mostly used by the Mexican government. In 1924 Buick joined them and in

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1925 the Ford Motor Company arrived, stayed and in time has become longest operating name brand in the country. Volkswagen appeared in 1964, with the first beetle rolling off the assembly line in October of 1967.



*Dynamic mural provides a colorful backdrop © Ada Solis*

Mexicans' love affair with the automobile continues to putter along and nowhere is it more evident than in the charming little El Museo del Automóvil which is parked in the southern part of Mexico City. The museum has been showcasing around 110 lovingly-restored vintage-and-classic automobiles since 1991. Its collection features vehicles from 1904-to-2004 and includes American as well as European vehicles. All the vehicles have working steam, gas and diesel engines and are kept in pristine condition by museum staff.

A virtual who's who of the automotive world occupy its floors; Alfa Romeo, Buick, Cadillac, MG, Camaro, Mercedes Benz, Mustang, Pierce-Arrow, Corvette, Jaguar, Studebaker and the list goes on and on. There is also a one-of-a-kind Volkswagen Beetle that was made especially for the 1970 World Cup, which Mexico hosted. Some of the classic cars are available for rentals with the museum supplying the driver.

Margarita Nieves, the museum's educational services manager, notes that about 9,000 visitors stroll through the 4,900 square foot museum annually. "The museum houses the largest collection of classic vehicles in Latin America and is patterned after the Schlumpf National Automobile Museum in Mullhouse France." Some of the cars have been donated to the museum and others are on loan to them.



*A baby Fiat Coupe (1973) shines proudly with the big © Ada Solis*

All the vehicles have been lovingly restored by vintage and classic car owners and some are quite unique. There's a 1936 Packard Dietrich; a 1920 Stanley Steamer with a fully functioning steam engine; a 1919 Franklin with an air cooled engine and a 1904 carriage-shaped Oldsmobile. The museum has a fully operational restoration and repair shop onsite and the cars are rotated on-and-off the display floor.

"One of objectives of the museum is to showcase the advances in the automotive industry which are portrayed on our vibrant wall mural," says Nieves "we are also trying to promote a safer driving and-walking culture in our city."

On weekdays they play host to school groups, providing them with guided tours of the museum which also offers workshops on traffic-road culture to everyone. At the end of the visit there is a charming little gift shop for visitors to pick up those much-needed souvenirs. Occasionally, on weekends vintage and classic car buffs gather down the block from the museum to hold a show-and-shine. They get together to show off their vehicles, swap and sell parts, and to talk cars.

KENNETH E. SEATON

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El Museo del Automóvil is located on División del Norte 3572 in México City, México DF. To reach them by telephone call: (52) (55) 5617-0411 or visit them on the web at: <http://www.museodelautomovil.com.mx/main.html>

The museum is reachable by car or by the Metro; Mexico City's affordable and accessible subway system. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10AM to 6PM. Admission costs: \$30 pesos for adults and \$15 pesos for children up to 18 years old.



*A one-of-a-kind 1936 Packard © El Museo del Automóvil*

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