Posh travel makes comeback

REUTERS

"Flashpackers" and "Boardroom Backpackers" are driving a rise in business and first-class around-the-world flights, online flight specialists Round the World Experts said recently.

Sales of such tickets have leaped 166 per cent in the past six months, growing 55 per cent in the last three months alone, it has found.

The company puts the surge in demand down to cash-rich professionals taking a career break or those using the money they might have spent on a holiday home.

It said it had recently seen its biggest ever single round-the-world booking — a $78,130 first-class world tour which incorporated five-star stops in Asia and Australia, luxury yacht charter in the Whitsunday Islands and a place on the lead boat for the Sydney New Year's Eve flotilla.

"We're seeing the growth of a new, completely different type of round-the-world traveller with demand for business and first-class itineraries trebling in the last six months," said Round the World Experts Head of Marketing Paul Bondsfield in a statement.

The people going on these trips are mostly over-50s professionals who still have a burning ambition to see the world and experience new cultures, he said.

"They are inspired by younger travellers and are looking for similar experiences in the same destinations, but with an added element of comfort."

Bondsfield said the trend for graduates moving back into the family home is also encouraging parents to take big adventure trips as they know their homes are being looked after while they are away.

He said that for many adventurers, a major world holiday is a more attractive alternative to investing in overseas or holiday properties.

Tee time in Wales

POSTMEDIA NEWS

The Celtic Manor Resort — host of golf's 2010 Ryder Cup and located less than two hours west of London — is offering a Triple Tee stay-and-play golf package.

For prices starting at $447 per person (Monday through Thursday) or $460 on weekends (both based on double occupancy, and current exchange rates with the British pound), you get two nights accommodations at the five-star Resort Hotel with breakfast, 18 holes on the Twenty Ten Course (host of October's Ryder Cup matches), 18 holes on the Roman Road Course (designed by architect Robert Trent Jones), 18 holes on the Montgomerie Course (designed by Ryder Cup Team Europe's captain Colin Montgomerie) and complimentary use of the resort's Forum Health Club.

The 565-hectare resort, owned by Ottawa businessman Terry Matthews, is located by the River Usk in the rolling countryside of South Wales. It has two lavish hotels (the 330-room Resort Hotel and the 70-room Manor House), a country inn (Newbridge on Usk), six restaurants, two spas and a golf academy, and kilometres of hiking trails. The resort is an ideal "home base" from which to explore Wales. There is no booking deadline. For details, e-mail bookingsceltic-manor.com or call 877-354-2003 and ask for Sean Clancy, or visit www.celtic-manor.com.

Parties and parades kick off Mexico's Christmas season

For 12 nights revellers fete the Virgin Mary

WANDA ST. HILAIRE
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
PUERTO VALLARTA

It is December in Puerto Vallarta and my arrival has coincided with the most important Mexican celebration of the year: the Festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The number of miracles attributed to the Virgen Morena (dark-skinned virgin) are countless, and each December for 12 days, the people of Mexico honour her in astounding numbers.

On Dec. 9, 1531, a beautiful, dark-skinned woman appeared to Juan Diego, a simple peasant. Speaking to him in Nahuatl, his native language, she declared herself the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe and bore a message of love, compassion and a promise to help mankind. The skeptical Spanish bishop requested proof of Juan Diego's claim.

When Juan returned, the virgin advised him to pick roses from the nearby hill to bring to the bishop. As he dropped the bundle of flowers before the bishop, a perfect image of the virgin was emblazoned on Juan's tilma, a thin cloth made of cactus fibres. Today, the cloth still hangs in the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, perfectly preserved.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, one that has indigenous symbols interwoven into the traditional depiction of the Virgin Mary, is the most popular cultural and religious icon throughout Mexico. As with the Day of the Dead celebrations, there is a blend of Christian imagery and traditions and indigenous symbolism found in the rituals and costumes.

Beginning Dec. 1, Juarez Street is closed to traffic where processions begin before sunset and end with mass in the city's central cathedral. Shops, hotels, restaurants, airlines, schools, banks — even sailors — participate in the parade-like processions. Colourful floats with virgins and angels fill the street interspersed with wandering mariachis, indigenous dancers with colourfully painted bodies in great plumes of feathers, bands and candle-bearing singers chanting the festival's anthem, La Guadalupana.

Along the side streets and in the main square, locals bring out their best regional dishes. Tamales, tacos, tostadas and other savory delights are available in abundance. The freshly baked desserts are irresistibly delicious with a variety of flans, cakes and pies.

The piece de resistance is cocoa-flan, a cake with a caramel flan top and moist chocolate cake bottom.

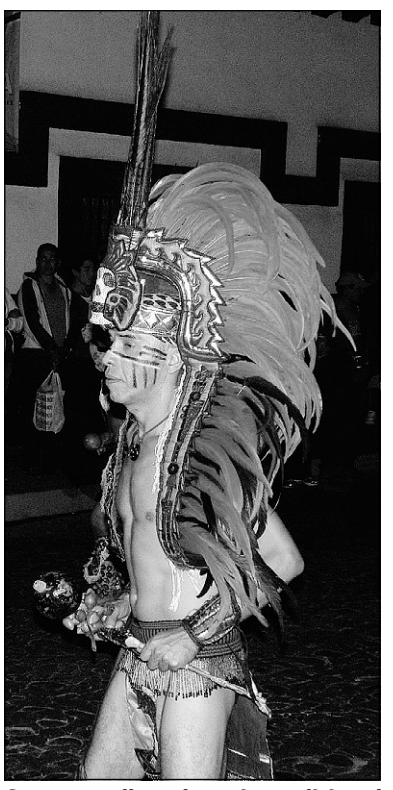
The prices are excellent and the dining is "safe," making it a great event for foreigners to experiment with Mexico's cuisine.

The climate this time of year is perfect for enjoying the festivities: warm in the daytime with temperatures hovering around 25 degrees and then cool evening breezes requiring only a sweater.

All ages come out in droves to partake in the festivities; however, the 12 days of the Festival of Guadalupe is a time for the children to shine. Tiny tots are proudly dressed in immaculate, traditional attire and are treated to a wide assortment of goodies and whirling and sparkling toys.

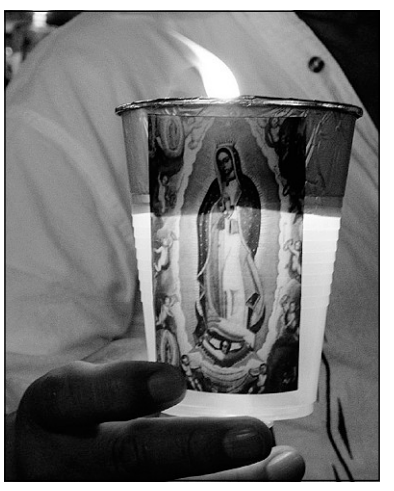
Photos Wanda St. Hilaire, for the Calgary Herald

The illuminated Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a landmark in Puerto Vallarta. The festival of the same name takes place for 12 days around Mexico with parades, parties and traditional food and drink.



Some revellers dress in traditional Indian garb.

Moms and tots dress up in colourful traditional Mexican clothing for the festival's evening parades.



Mexicans take part in candlelit parades for the 12 days leading up to the birthday of the Virgin Mary on Dec. 12.

The festival builds momentum on Dec. 11 with everyone gathering in and around the church at midnight to sing Las Mañanitas (the Mexican rendition of happy birthday) for the Virgin of Guadalupe's birthday.

On Dec. 12 the event culminates with the torchbearer's arrival from Mexico City. Eight runners take turns with the torch, which is lit at the basilica in Mexico City, for approximately 80 hours night and day.

The official Christmas season kicks off four days later on Dec. 16 with the first of the colourful and loud posadas (parties).

Festival food guide

■ Tamales are a corn masa dough filled with chicken, pork and cheese with green peppers, etc., wrapped in a corn husk and steamed. Tamales Oaxaqueños (from the region of Oaxaca, pronounced Wa-ha-ka) are larger, moister and prepared in a banana leaf, the most popular being chicken mole. Tamales dulces are sweet.

■ Mole is a thick, gravy-like sauce; the most common in this region is mole poblano. It is rich and dark brown, consisting of numerous ingredients that are ground and roasted including nuts, peppers, spices and chocolate. Delicious!

■ Pozole is a hardy, pre-Hispanic soup made with a base of various meats, large dried corn kernels, chilies, onions, garlic, tomatoes, cabbage and lime juice.

■ Tostadas are hard tacos (flat) loaded with chicken or beef with shredded cabbage, tomatoes and onion. The tostada can be topped with salsa, thick cream and crumbled queso fresco (cheese).

■ Authentic tacos are traditionally small, soft corn tortillas topped with a variety of diced, barbecued meats. You're offered a choice of toppings of onion and cilantro, green and red salsas, avocado salsa, and — for the brave — piquant hot salsas.

■ Elote is Mexican corn, commonly served shucked and mixed with melted butter, mayonnaise, cotija cheese and lime juice.

■ Carne asada is a tasty, marinated skirt steak (beef) that is barbecued.

■ Agua de Jamaica is a ruby red coloured drink made from hibiscus flowers. Rich in Vitamin C.

Tamales are a favourite food during the festival. Dough filled with cheese, chicken or pork is wrapped in a corn husk or banana leaf and steamed.

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