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## Mummies in Mexico: It's a living

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GUANAJUATO, Mexico - The mummified baby sits alone in a glass case, its blue sweater still buttoned against the chill of death, its pale hands resting on the disposable diaper it was buried in.

Across the room, three severed heads gaze at the wall. A little girl with the face of a zombie clutches a smiling doll, and an infant in a baptismal gown laces its gnarled fingers as if in prayer. All were evicted from the city cemetery after their families stopped paying the rent on their graves.

Feeling faint? Then read no further, because that's just the first room at the Guanajuato Mummy Museum in central Mexico, where a macabre collection of modern-day cadavers, mysteriously preserved by nature itself, nourishes Mexico's fascination with death.

It's the same spirit behind the Day of the Dead, which is on Wednesday but commonly celebrated today, too. It's a time when Mexicans worldwide eat skull-shaped candies, play with tiny skeletons and camp out in graveyards to pay homage to their ancestors.

"We Mexicans are accustomed to cohabitating with death," museum Director Felipe Macías said. "The tradition of our ancestors is that death is not the end but a way of progressing to something else."

Creepy though it may be, there are few places better for pondering mortality, especially on the Day of the Dead.

The Mexican holiday was originally an Aztec festival in which people remembered their ancestors and celebrated their passage to the afterlife. After the Spanish conquest, Roman Catholic missionaries moved the holiday to coincide with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, Nov. 1 and 2.

Here in Guanajuato, 170 miles northwest of Mexico City, that afterlife may involve being pulled out of your tomb and put on display if your family stops paying the city grave tax, currently about \$20 every five years.

The museum features 111 mummies resting on velvet pillows, all evictees from the adjacent Municipal Cemetery. The first mummy was pulled out in 1866, shortly after the cemetery was built, and new ones are added every few years. In October, the museum added two children who were buried in 1984.

"This place is creepy," said Lori Perry, an antiques dealer from Prescott. She and her husband, Will, a doctor, were debating the cause of death of a particularly gruesome cadaver.

The museum is full of horrible ways to die. One woman was poisoned, her body left twisted and stained by the toxin. In another display case, the body of a stabbing

victim clearly shows his chest wound.

Another woman was buried alive. Her body was found face-down, her head resting on her forearm, and she showed signs of suffocation. Her fingernails are broken, and there are scratches on her hands and head.

Forensic experts think she may have been buried accidentally after suffering an attack of catalepsy, a condition that temporarily paralyzes the body, Macías said.

There are three times as many women as men in the museum, along with 19 children, evidence of Mexico's high mortality rate for women and children over the decades. Most of the mummies have not been identified.

One of the women died while pregnant, and her child is visible as a bulge under her skin.

Another female mummy has a scar where she was cut open in an attempt to save a five-month-old fetus. The infant died and now occupies a separate display case marked "The Smallest Mummy in the World."

The dead include Chinese and French immigrants who came to Guanajuato during its heyday as a center for silver mining. There also is the owner of a plantation, dressed in fine clothes.

As if the real mummies aren't creepy enough, the \$5 admission includes a campy chamber of horrors called the Room of Death Worship, where museum workers have used real body parts to assemble skeletons of Count Dracula and other legendary undead.

The mummies have been a tourist attraction since the early 1900s, when cemetery workers began charging people a few pesos to enter the ossuary building where bones and mummies were stored. But business really took off after the 1970 movie *Santo Versus the Mummies of Guanajuato*, starring masked wrestler Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta.

The museum now attracts about 800,000 people a year, making it one of the most popular in Mexico. Ticket sales account for a big chunk of the city's budget.

"The purpose of this museum is to help maintain the entire city," Macías said. "It's a business by which the dead of Guanajuato are giving something back to their city."

Only about one in 100 corpses becomes mummified, and no one's exactly sure why it happens. Corpses in the cemetery are stored in above-ground compartments stacked seven high, so it apparently has nothing to do with the area's chalky soil.

Some credit the dry mountain air or high levels of calcium in the city's water. Cemetery Manager Enrique López Morales thinks the cement used to seal the tombs helps dry out the corpses and starve the flesh-eating bacteria of moisture.

Families can buy a permanent space in the cemetery for the equivalent of about \$80, or rent one for \$20 every five years. The, uh, deadbeats are removed periodically to make room for new bodies. Families have 10 years to claim the remains. After that, they become city property. If they've become mummified, they go on display.

"Everybody who comes to Guanajuato wants to see the mummies, so those dead people are supporting thousands of people in terms of jobs," said Roberto López

Morales, a gravestone cutter.

He waved a hand around at hundreds of mummies in the making, all boxed up in their tombs.

"Who knows, maybe I'll be a mummy, too," he said. "Maybe we'll all end up in a museum someday."

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