

ESSAY 03

Dogs welcome

Canine culture

In Mexico City, if you want to make friends with your neighbour, first you must make friends with their dog. Dogs here are more than just furry companions: they're cultural symbols.

*by Annick Weber,
writer*

In Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología, you'll find hundreds of dogs. Not living ones, of course, but canine sculptures and painted representations on antique vases, masks and walls.

Mesoamerican groups living throughout Mexico in the pre-Hispanic age, among them the Aztecs and Maya, worshipped dogs as loyal protectors against evil spirits. They were among the few domestic animals kept by these civilisations and played as vital a role in the rituals and myths around death as they did in life. In Aztec culture, sacred breeds such as the Xoloitzcuintli (Mexican hairless dog) were believed to guard the human soul on its journey to the underworld, so

they were regularly sacrificed and buried with the deceased alongside clay figurines and food offerings.

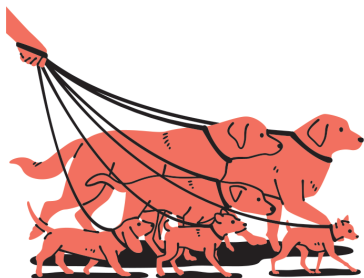
After centuries under Spanish colonisers who aimed to eradicate Xoloitzcuintlis, the Mexican hairless dog has become a proud symbol of pre-Hispanic times, brought back into fashion in the early 20th century by owners such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Today it's one of the most noble, sought-after breeds and a frequent sight in Mexico City's upmarket neighbourhoods, including Polanco, Condesa and Roma Norte. With its bald, brown body and comical mohawk, it may not be to everyone's taste but its popularity is emblematic

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of Mexico's ongoing love for pooches.

The Spanish word for pet is *mascota* – fitting in Mexico, where it seems that each dog is the mascot of

its owner, family or business. The bike cart of my favourite tamale seller comes with two baskets: the front one for the steamed maize snacks he sells, the back for his small terrier, whose friendly bark announces their arrival. Customers pay Coqui, his *mascota*, in cuddles before handing over a few pesos for the tamales. On moving to



Mexico City, I soon learned that the best way to connect with the locals is by bonding with their four-legged friends.

For one of the most populated, congested megalopolises, Mexico City is more dog-friendly than many more manageable towns. Uber launched a pet service for Mexico City in 2015; ice-cream parlours such as Don Paletto in the northwest are serving sugarless varieties for humans and canines to share; and even the humblest street market sells dog-grooming accessories, outfits and treats.

Urban-dwellers who don't have the luxury of a garden can still own a pooch because affordable dog walkers are abundant. On any given morning in Condesa's lush Parque México, passersby can see dog walkers who, like acrobats, skilfully handle up to 10 dogs at once. Despite all the stopping, sniffing and territory-marking, it's amazing how few leash tangles there are.

Each colonia of Mexico City seems to come with its own mascot dog: the coiffed poodles of wealthy,

residential San Ángel; the family-friendly labradors of leafy San Miguel Chapultepec; the French bulldogs of edgy Juárez; the tiny chihuahuas of middle-class Escandón. Even though the prestige (and often the size) of breeds tends to increase with neighbourhood wealth, adopted mongrels are popular everywhere; dog ownership here is not about class alone, it's about commitment and connecting with the country's cultural roots.

Just under half of all Mexican households today have a dog – and the growing demand for dog services and infrastructure means canine welfare is better than ever. Protection campaigns aim to reduce the number of abandoned or stray dogs, and dog-fighting was made illegal in Mexico in 2017.

If ever there were a single mascot for this dog-mad nation, perhaps it would be Frida, the goggle-wearing labrador from the Mexican navy's canine unit, who rescued more than 50 lives from the rubble in the aftermath of the September 2017 earthquake. A hero, faithful guide and devoted friend, she reached icon status overnight. If the Aztecs and Maya worshipped the canine, what you'll find today in Mexico City comes pretty close. — (M)



ABOUT THE WRITER: Luxembourg-born writer and editor Annick Weber swapped life in one of the world's smallest countries for the constant hustle of the Mexican megalopolis. She doesn't have a dog but dreams of owning a dalmatian.