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MEXICO: A COLONIAL GEM

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Most of the more than one million Canadians who visit Mexico each year head straight for the beach. Charter flights from across Canada take sun-starved tourists directly to resort cities such as Cancún and Puerto Vallarta. While the beaches certainly have their appeal, Mexico has much more to offer. A large, diverse country of more than 100 million people, no visit there is really complete without the exploration of some of its archaeological treasures and any number of colonial cities. Of its many colonial gems, the most captivating is arguably its capital, Mexico City.

Perhaps people cannot be blamed for avoiding Mexico City—a megalopolis of more than 20 million people, with a reputation for crime and pollution. But a few basic precautions, such as not hailing a cab in the street, can help make a stay in Mexico City much safer. Also, two decades of concerted efforts have reduced the pollution considerably.

Built on the site of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, what is today known as Mexico City has been a focal point of culture, commerce and community since long before Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of Mexico.

Despite the city's phenomenal growth, most of its neighbourhoods have retained their local charm. For example, in the south, San Ángel's cobblestone streets and colourful Saturday art market beckon. Nearby, Xochimilco gives a sense of how the original Aztec island city of Tenochtitlán used to be. This Venice of Latin America is still best explored by trajinera (a Mexican gondola) while sipping tequila and being serenaded by floating mariachi bands or marimba players.

Canada's embassy is centrally located in the Polanco district, adjacent to enormous Chapultepec Park. Most of the mission's 34 Canada-based staff also live in Polanco, which is known for its trendy restaurants, diverse shopping and upscale charm. It's a very pleasant place to live and is