Why Mexicans Celebrate the Day of the Dead?

The Day of the Dead is an ancient festivity that has been transformed through the years, but was intended in pre-hispanic Mexico to celebrate children and the dead. Hence, the best way to describe this Mexican holiday is to say that it is a time when Mexican families remember their dead, and the continuity of life.

The original celebration can be dedicated to children and the dead. This ritual fell roughly at the end of the month of July and the beginning of August, but in the post-conquest era it was moved by Spanish priests so that it coincided with the Christian holiday of All Hallows Eve in a vain effort to transform this from a "profane" to a Christian celebration. The result is that Mexicans now celebrate the day of the dead during the first two days of November, rather than at the beginning of summer, but they still remember the dead, and the modern festivity is characterized by the traditional Mexican blend of ancient Christian features.

The day's activities consist of visits by families to the graves of their close kin. At the gravesites family members engage in sprucing up the gravesite, decorating it with flowers, setting out and enjoying a picnic, and interacting socially with other family and community members who gather at the cemetery. Families remember the departed by telling stories about them. The meals prepared for these picnics are delicious, usually featuring meat dishes in spicy sauces, a special egg-batter bread, cookies, chocolate, and sugary confections in a variety of animal or skull shapes. Gravesites or family altars are decorated with flowers (primarily large, bright flowers such as marigolds and crysanthemums), and adorned with religious amulets and (in smaller villages) with offerings of food, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Because of this warm social environment, the colorful setting, and the abundance of food, drink and good company this commemoration of the dead has pleasant overtones for most observers, in spite of the open fatalism exhibited by all participants, whose festive interaction with living and dead in an important social ritual is a way of recognizing the cycle of life and death that is human existence.

The traditional observance calls for a feast during the early morning hours of November the 2nd, the Day of the Dead proper, though modern urban Mexican families
usually observe the Day of the Dead with only a special family supper featuring the "Bread of the Dead." It is good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each rounded loaf. Friends and family members give one another gifts consisting of sugar skeletons or other items with a death motif, and the gift is more prized if the skull or skeleton is embossed with one's own name.

Two important things to know about the Mexican Day of the Dead are:

--It is a holiday with a complex history, and therefore its observance varies quite a bit by region and by degree of urbanization.

--It is not a morbid occasion, but rather a festive time.

The Day of the Dead can range from a very important cultural event, with definite social and economic responsibilities for participants to a religious observance featuring actual worship of the dead, to simply a uniquely Mexican holiday characterized by special foods and confections.

In general, the more urban the setting within Mexico the less religious and cultural importance is retained by observants', while the more rural and Indian the locality the greater the religious and economic import of the holiday. Because of this, this observance is usually of greater social importance in southern Mexico than in the northern part of the country.