



A Warm Reception for Ice

Thousands Flock to Mexico City's Free Rink, a Palace of Sorts for the Poor

By Manuel Roig-Franzia
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MEXICO CITY -- It was a big idea. Huge, in fact.

The mayor of [Mexico](#) City wanted to build the world's biggest ice rink in one of the world's biggest squares in the middle of one of the world's biggest cities. The super-size idea became reality in early December when the city inaugurated a 34,000-square-foot ice rink, which officials here claim is the world's largest.

Even as it has become a national obsession, drawing 300,000 mostly novice skaters, the free, open-air rink has also shined a light on [Mexico](#) City's great class divide. Poor Mexicans line up for hours at the frozen, slippery magnet, hoping to glide for a few sparkling moments across the ice.

For most, ice rinks were once utterly unattainable, the glamorous domains of the people whose houses they cleaned. They'd seen ice dancers, beautiful in feathery costumes, make artful turns on television during the Olympics. But they couldn't imagine experiencing the same thrill themselves.

The few private rinks here are beyond the means of most residents, many of whom make less in a day

than it would cost just to rent skates. So, they are willing to wait six hours or more for their chance on the ice -- while few from the city's sizable upper classes, who can afford to pay for their fun, could be bothered. For a few minutes out on the rink, the poor can leave behind neighborhoods where the buses break down, the pipes are always bursting and life feels like a galaxy away from what they now find in the city square.

"There are places outside the city that don't even have running water, and down there in the center they've got this fancy block of frozen ice," said Felipe Godínez, a Mexico City taxi driver. "There's something wrong with this."

Vicente Jiménez has heard the griping. He's read the newspaper columns complaining about the high cost of the rink, and he's listened to the commentators poke fun at the long lines.

But as he caught his breath after smashing into the rink's wall one recent afternoon, Jiménez could do nothing but smile.

"Isn't this the greatest?" said Jiménez, a 75-year-old carpenter. "This is something for the people. They complain about how much this costs, but [Mexico](#) spends way more than this to take care of the corrupt ones, the oligarchs, the so-called influential ones."

The rink is the brainchild of Marcelo Ebrard, the populist mayor -- and a likely presidential candidate -- who has also built artificial public beaches and undertaken a massive renovation of the dilapidated city center. Some residents call downtown Mexico City "Ebrard's [Disneyland](#)." The rink, which is maintained by Ice Rink Events, a U.S.-based company, was built with \$1.5 million in private donations and opened Dec. 2 with fireworks and a performance by European figure skaters.

The ice covers much of the Zocalo, which trails only [Moscow's Red Square](#) and [Beijing's Tiananmen Square](#) on the list of largest city squares on Earth. When the gates open to the public each day, 1,200 skaters -- many inching forward while desperately clasp the rink's outer wall -- pour onto a space nearly the length of a U.S. football field. At more than 260 feet long and 131 feet wide, the rink is also nearly five times the size of the famed rink at [Rockefeller Plaza](#) in [New York](#).

Thousands stream into viewing stands to watch the shrieking and belly-flopping as hundreds of people who have never seen an ice rink or snow, let alone skated, try to stay upright. So many people come to gawk that ushers ask spectators to walk through the viewing area without stopping, so as not to create a backup.

Outside the rink, indigenous faith healers cleanse souls with clouds of incense, and the smell of roasting pork wafts out of taco stands.

Admission is free and skates can be borrowed at no charge -- a relief in a country where 40 percent of

the population lives on less than \$2 a day and the minimum wage is about 50 cents an hour. Mexico City rounded up more than 2,000 pairs of skates, lined up hundreds of instructors to give no-cost lessons and set up huge speakers that keep up a steady stream of ballads, salsa and bouncy Mexican Norteño dance songs.

One recent afternoon, the line of skaters snaked across the full length of the square. The rink gave off a pleasant chill, at least for those near the front of the line, but the sun beat down hard. Mexico City is enjoying an unseasonably warm winter, with temperatures routinely topping the mid-70s.

Electrical outages -- an almost daily annoyance here -- have been blamed for knocking out ice chillers and turning parts of the rink into a slushy lake at times. There was a shutdown on Christmas Day because pollution levels made outdoor activities unsafe, reminding the estimated 21 million dwellers of the metropolis that they breathe some of the world's foulest air.

"These are some of the toughest conditions I've ever worked under," Brian Stapp, who oversees the project for Ice Rink Events and has installed rinks in [Malaysia](#) and [Australia](#), said in an interview.

"You've got the altitude -- it's more than 3,000 feet above sea level -- so there's less oxygen, which we need to make ice. And then we've got that hot sun."

Across the rink from Stapp, Mireya Olvera licked a coconut popsicle and squinted while she waited to "see something incredible."

Olvera, who is unemployed, and her daughters, Jessica, 12, and Tanya, 10, joined the line at the rink at 8 in the morning. By 3:30 p.m. -- 7 1/2 hours later -- they were just a few steps from entering.

"They've been after me to bring them here for days," Olvera said. "This rink is all they show on TV. I have no idea what to expect."

Olvera and her daughters got an hour and 15 minutes on the ice, one of six sets of 1,200 skaters on this day. Wheelchairs stood ready at the far end of rink. Within minutes, a rescue crew was rolling out to the center to help a woman who had twisted her ankle. After she was lifted into one of the chairs, eight instructors slid her over to the first-aid tent.

"Happens all the time," a first-aid worker said.

Olvera and her daughters, who avoided injury, delighted in an open space that differed greatly from the cramped Cuajimalpa neighborhood where they live.

"Mexico City can be a cruel place in many ways," Enrique Krauze, a prominent Mexican historian, said in an interview. "It's crowded with millions of people, and there are few green places. It's important to have this rink. People don't have many open spaces to enjoy."