



Kenia Vazquez, left, and Paul Carro pose in one of the movements in the dance they perform.



Cecilia Mendez, left, and Marco Flores pose in their 'Catrines' costumes.



Mayra Cruz, right, and Noe Vazquez pose in their 'Catrines' costumes.

## A lawless Mexican region's explosively colorful carnival

As two armored military vehicles patrol the streets of Tlaxcala, workers unload a pick-up truck full of enormous traditional masks for this lawless Mexican region's explosively colorful carnival. Tlaxcala, which sits a two-hour drive east of Mexico City, is in the middle of a region that has become one of the Mexican authorities' biggest security headaches, controlled by criminal gangs that thrive on sex trafficking and stealing gasoline.

But it is also home to a thrillingly photogenic carnival, where revelers famously sport towering traditional head-dresses as they party through the night. "The carnival was introduced by the Spanish in the 17th century," said the head of cultural programs at Tlaxcala town hall, Dario Lemus

Tlapale. "But the authorities back then insisted we couldn't make fun of public figures." Blending indigenous Mexican and Spanish traditions, the carnival evolved into an event where mocking the European colonizers was elevated to an art form. With its feather-topped masks that reach several meters tall, sumptuous hand-embroidered cloths decorated with small skulls, European-style costumes and elegant parasols, the carnival is a celebration of the cultural collisions that have shaped the region. "The costumes represent a fusion of European and pre-Hispanic cultures. The top part of every costume is inherited from pre-Hispanic culture, and the bottom part from European culture," Tlapale said.

The masks mostly sport beards resembling those of Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes. Others have a pencil-thin English-style mustache. "That was introduced to mock the English, who arrived later to install the railroad here," said Tlapale. There are 15 different types of costume in all. Carnival participants, who dance in pairs before the crowd, often completely redo their outfits each year. "I'm very proud to wear this costume," said Arturo, 23, a civil engineer.

But "it's very physical. These outfits can weigh 25 to 30 kilos (55 to 65 pounds)," Arturo said it takes "enthusiasm and will" to be a carnival dancer, since costumes can cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000. "I make my own every year," said Melani Mitchel, a 15-year-old dancer. "I make three models, one for each of my appearances."

### Hotbed of crime

Away from the festivities though, a more sordid reality rules in the region. In the nearby town of Tenancingo, girls the same age as Melani are forced into prostitution by gangs that specialize in sex trafficking. The ones who manage to escape often tell similar stories. "She meets a young man and falls in love. They get married, she has a child and then he forces her into prostitution by threatening to beat the baby," said a local woman, who asked that her name not be used for fear of reprisals.

Tenancingo's sex trafficking gangs have been known to



German Carrillo poses in his 'Charro' costume.

send their victims as far away as the United States and even New Zealand, according to investigators.

Then there is the "red triangle," near the town of Tepeaca, where two criminal gangs with ties to drug cartels are thriving on the business of stealing fuel from state oil company Pemex's pipelines. Puncturing the pipelines is a



Melanie Perez, left, and Arturo Beristain pose in their costumes for the carnival in Tlaxcala, Mexico. — AFP photos

risky but lucrative affair: "picadores," or pipeline-tappers, make an estimated \$10,000 a month. Holding the siphon in broad daylight through black-market dealers and sometimes even regular gas stations. Pemex estimated last year it had lost some \$2.4 billion to fuel thieves since 2010. A local culture celebrating the exploits of the "huachicoleros" has sprung up, with songs and even a saint dedicated to them—the latter represented with a plastic jug and tube in his hands. But that is one culture that has not been incorporated into the Tlaxcala carnival.—AFP



Vanessa Calderon, left, and Bladimir Mejia pose in their costumes.

## HOW FASHION, SHOES AND ACCESSORIES ENABLE THE DISABLED

Fashion photographer Jerris Madison thought his titanium rod leg spelled the end of his glamour days when doctors amputated his leg four years ago in a battle with bone cancer. But in 2016 designers Alleles, a small Canadian company, spotted a photo of him wearing his prosthetic on Instagram and sent him their latest product for him to try out: one of their dazzling, colorful array of prosthetic covers.

"When I opened the box, I felt like it was Christmas," 45-year-old, Los Angeles-based Madison said. "Having that leg cover really boosted my self-esteem," he said. Walking around in just a bare titanium rod used to make him feel self-conscious. "People would stare



A MagnaReady magnetic shirt is displayed.

and know I was an amputee. Now, they look at me as a walking piece of art." Madison isn't the only person with a disability who has seen their daily life improve thanks to a growing market of products designed to make things easier, but also look chic and stylish at the same time.

From now until September an exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt design museum in New York is showcasing some of these new products, from the low- to the high-tech. "In the last few years there has been a proliferation of new design, very functional and esthetically desirable products for people with all sort of disabilities," says Cara McCarty, curator of the exhibition.

Besides the tattooed-style covers made by

Alleles, which start at \$375, the exhibition shows Nike "FlyEase" sneakers, first made for a student with cerebral palsy, with a wraparound zipper and adjustable strap to make getting them on and off easier. There is also a walking stick, made in the color of your choice, which can be propped up easily against a wall without falling over, on sale for around \$100.

### For everyone

A hearing aid looks like a giant earring. A bracelet connected to a smart-phone GPS app which guides the blind and tracks obstacles above the knee. Another item is a jacket, included in a new clothing line for disabled children carried by Target, that comes apart at both sides making for easy wear. The key to success for lots of these products, says Caroline Baumann, director of the museum, is that they are so practical.

When Target designers conceived of the jacket "they were thinking about the child on the autism spectrum that might have difficulty putting on their jacket, but what they are finding is that people of all abilities are buying that jacket," she said. "I would love that jacket for my three-year-old because it's a fight every morning to put him in his parka," Baumann laughed.

Keith Kirkland, a former designer at Calvin Klein who co-conceived the vibrating GPS "Wayband" bracelet, agrees. If the bracelet was

tested on the blind, the idea in launching it for sale later this year, is that "anyone" can pick it up "to figure out which way to go." More cross-board appeal also means products can be more affordable. "A lot of times the reason the product is so expensive is because you have to amortize that cost over a much smaller market," Kirkland said.

### Breaking down stigma

Designers are also eyeing an aging population, which brings their own disabilities, as another source for market expansion. "One out of three people from the age of 62 has some kind of visual impairment and that aging population is supposed to double by 2060," says Kirkland. Matt Kroeker, whose small Canadian firm Top & Derby created the non-falling walking stick, says the idea is to create products that aren't simply practical but which people enjoy using.

"It's just like glasses who were utilitarian until the late '40s and became more fashionable after that," said the entrepreneur, who has also designed a range of compression socks in more exciting colors than the usual black and brown. But if these products are sexy, few are widely available in retail outlets.

Most are sold solely online. "The biggest barrier right now is people want to buy these products but the companies responsible for distributing or selling to the end user are very



Bedazzled and Bejeweled Earring Aids, making a fashion statement, are displayed.



A group of prosthetic leg covers are displayed.

apprehensive," Kroeker explained.

"There is a mentality that people don't really care about well-designed, thoughtfully-designed home healthcare products and we are trying to change that," he said.

Madison also hopes to help change attitudes by giving his prosthetic leg cover its own Instagram account.

"It is about breaking down that stigma, so you are no longer hiding a hearing aid or hiding a prosthetic leg. You are saying 'I am more able with this tool that has been designed so well, and I am not embarrassed about it'," says Baumann. — AFP



A of Men's Zoom Soldier IX FlyEase is displayed.



A Joy for All Companion Pet, Dog and a Simple Music Player are displayed as part of the Access+Ability exhibit at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. — AFP photos