



# Copper Canyon & Northern Mexico

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## Best Places to Eat

- Bonifacio's (p752)
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## Best Places to Stay

- Yeccan (p795)
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- Riverside Lodge (p771)

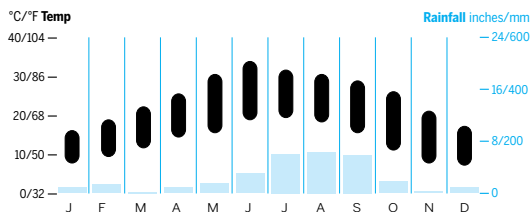
## Why Go?

Welcome to ultimate frontier land: Mexico's wild north has, for centuries, been frequented by revolutionaries, bandits, law-makers and law-breakers. Landscapes here suit such types: North America's second-largest desert and some of the world's deepest, most spectacular canyons make this perfect territory to hole up in. This is, indeed, quintessential rough-and-ready Wild West: Hollywood filmmakers used dramatic topography here to shoot many fabled Westerns.

Mexico also scatters its paradoxes most thickly in the north. There is the sensational alpine-to-subtropical switch unfolding in the region's set piece, the Copper Canyon, best traversed via Mexico's greatest train ride. The progressive, culturally rich city of Monterrey is here, as are some of its most non-Westernized indigenous peoples. It's a place where you may well find yourself lingering.

## When to Go

### Chihuahua



**Jun & Jul** Heavy rainfall. Key festivals such as Las Jornadas Villistas in Hidalgo del Parral.

**Late Sep–Oct** Pleasantly hot during the day. Good time to visit blooming Copper Canyon.

**Dec & Jan** Balmy, dry weather on the Pacific coast makes for a popular winter escape.

## History

Pre-Hispanic northern Mexico had more in common with the Anasazi and other cultures of the southwest USA than with central Mexico. The most important town here was Paquimé, a vital trading link between central Mexico and the dry north, before its destruction around AD 1340. Outlying Paquimé settlements such as Cuarenta Casas built their dwellings on cliffsides for protection against attack.

Spanish slavers and explorers, arriving chiefly in search of gold in the 16th century, had mixed fortunes in the north. In the northwest they encountered indigenous peoples including the Opata, Seri, Yaqui and Mayo. Rather than the fabled province of Cibola with its supposed seven cities of gold, the Spanish found silver and, conscripting indigenous people as slave miners, established prosperous mining cities such as Álamos. Spaniards also soon forged the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Royal Road of the Interior): a 2560km trade route from Mexico City to Santa Fe, New Mexico, which helped make towns en route (such as Durango) extremely wealthy. In the northeast, however, harsh conditions and attacks by indigenous Chichimecs and Apaches meant settlement and development came more slowly.

The Spanish never tightened control here sufficiently to quell revolts. In the fight for Mexican Independence (1810), the Mexican–American War of the 1840s and the Mexican Revolution (1910) the northern states necessarily played a key role. Frontiers radically changed with Mexico's loss of Texas and New Mexico (1830s–1850s): the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) that ended the Mexican–American War established today's frontier of the Río Bravo del Norte (Río Grande) between the two nations.

Glaring inequities of land ownership between the elite – grown wealthy from the mines – and the impoverished majority contributed to the unrest that made the north a Mexican Revolution hot spot. The revolutionary División del Norte, an army led by legendary Durango-born Pancho Villa, was in the forefront of several major battles. Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón, other main revolutionary figures, were, respectively, from the northern states of Coahuila and Sonora. All three were initially allies and subsequently enemies in the Revolution, which meant the division of allegiances in the north was acute.

Irrigation programs in the mid-20th century turned Sonora into the granary of Mexico, as well as a cattle-ranching center alongside neighboring Chihuahua. Discovery of petroleum, coal and natural gas and the arrival of the railroad also accelerated development from the late 19th century onward, and the region emerged as an industrial leader.

Today this is the most Americanized part of Mexico, with money and resources surging back and forth across the border and baseball the main sport in many towns. The Texan economy is particularly dependent on Mexican workers, and US investment is behind most *maquiladoras* (assembly-plant operations) that ring all the region's big cities.

Since 2006, drug-cartel violence has plagued northern Mexico as gangs complete for territory. Initially the border cities were worst affected, but the violence has since spread, affecting all the main population centers. Yet despite the headlines, the region's economy remains relatively prosperous, with steady growth rates (except the tourism sector, which has suffered).

## Information

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The vast majority of visitors to northern Mexico enjoy a safe, trouble-free trip. That said, the entire region is a transit area for illegal drugs, and narco-related violence is a fact of life.

Most towns and cities are affected to a degree, and trouble erupts as new transport routes are established and turf wars shift. Of the border towns, Ciudad Juárez is particularly notorious and should definitely be avoided. Additionally, Ciudad Acuña, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and Matamoros all witnessed violent incidents and gun battles in 2012 and 2013. The security situation in central Monterrey was very grim as recently as 2011, though things had calmed down by 2013. Tampico, Durango and Torreón have also had their share of incidents.

Most violence is gang-on-gang or between the cartels and the security forces. Foreign tourists without such connections are not targeted. There is a risk of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the chances of being caught up in a violent incident are actually very slim: tourists are statistically more likely to be involved in a traffic accident than a shoot-out. Consider avoiding bars, nightclubs and casinos in the this part of Mexico, where violent incidents can occur.

Web resources advising on local security situations are rarely that useful. Insight Crime ([www.insightcrime.org](http://www.insightcrime.org)) provides regular reports