



Around Mexico City

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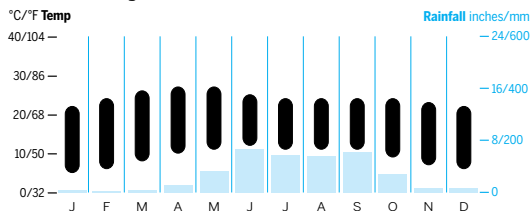
Why Go?

With its daunting size and seemingly endless sprawl, the megalopolis of Mexico City might seem like a challenge to escape from, but even if you're in Mexico's capital for only a week, the ancient ruins, *pueblos mágicos* (magical villages) and stunning mountain landscape of the surrounding area should not be missed. Mexico City – like many capitals – has little in common with even its closest neighbors.

While many visitors to the region take a day trip to the awe-inspiring archaeological complex at Teotihuacán, the area offers much more – from the captivating colonial cities of Taxco, Puebla and Cuernavaca, to the eccentric small towns of Valle de Bravo and Tepoztlán. For those eager to taste some crisp, particulate-free mountain air, there are *pueblitos* (small towns) such as Cuetzalan and Real del Monte, the volcanic giants of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, and the lesser-known ruins of Xochicalco and Cantona to visit.

When to Go

Puebla City



May–Oct Rainy season; afternoon showers wash the air clean and bring the wild mushrooms to the forests.

Sep The weeks before Independence Day are the time to taste the seasonal specialty *chiles en nogada*.

Nov–Apr Drier months; nominally cooler, making for pleasant daytime city exploration and casual hikes.

History

Long a cultural and economic crossroads, the region around present-day Mexico City has hosted a succession of important indigenous civilizations (notably the Teotihuacán, Toltec and Aztec). By the late 15th century, the Aztecs had managed to dominate all but one of central Mexico's states. Many archaeological sites and museums preserve remnants of this pre-Hispanic history – Puebla's Museo Amparo provides an excellent overview of the region's history and cultures.

Post-conquest, the Spanish transformed central Mexico, establishing ceramic industries at Puebla, mines at Taxco and Pachuca, and haciendas producing wheat, sugar and cattle throughout the region. The Catholic Church used the region as a base for its missionary activities and left a series of imposing churches and fortified monasteries. Today, most towns retain a central plaza surrounded by colonial buildings.

Getting There & Around

The cities, towns and (to a lesser extent) even the villages around Mexico City enjoy excellent, often 1st-class, bus links to both the capital and each other. Even the very smallest backwaters have comfortable daily services to Mexico City and to the closest transportation hub. While airports also serve Puebla, Toluca, Cuernavaca and Pachuca, it's nearly always cheaper and easier to fly to Mexico City and travel onward from there. For all but the most obscure sights, traveling by bus is the easiest and most affordable option.

NORTH OF MEXICO CITY

The biggest attraction north of Mexico City is the extraordinary complex at Teotihuacán, once the largest metropolis in the Americas and one of Mexico's most spectacular pre-Hispanic sights. Further north, the well-preserved stone statues at Tula also draw visitors.

Far less visited, but equally impressive, are Parque Nacional El Chico and the mining village of Mineral del Chico – the perfect escape from the big city, with stunning views, wide-open spaces and friendly locals.

Pachuca, the fast-growing capital of dynamic Hidalgo state, has brightly painted houses, an attractive colonial center and a great line in Cornish pasties. From Pa-

chuca, well-paved routes snake east and north to the Gulf coast, through spectacular country such as the fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range and the coastal plain.



Tepotztlán

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This *pueblo mágico* is an easy day trip from Mexico City, but feels far from the chaotic streets of the capital, despite the fact that urban sprawl creeps closer to Tepotztlán's colonial center every year.

Sights

Museo Nacional del Virreinato MUSEUM

(National Museum of the Viceregal Period;  55-5876-0245; www.virreinato.inah.gob.mx; Plaza Hidalgo 99; M\$55;  9am-6pm Tue-Sun) There's a very simple reason to visit this wonderful museum comprising the restored Jesuit **Iglesia de San Francisco Javier** and an adjacent **monastery**. Much of the folk art and fine art on display – silver chalices, pictures created from inlaid wood, porcelain, furniture and religious paintings and statues – comes from Mexico City cathedral's large collection, and the standard is very high.


Once a Jesuit college of indigenous languages, the complex dates from 1606. Diverse additions were made over the following 150 years, creating a showcase for the developing architectural styles of Nueva España.

Don't miss the **Capilla Doméstica**, with a Churrigueresque main altarpiece that boasts more mirrors than a carnival fun house. The facade is a phantasmagoric array of carved saints, angels, plants and people, while the interior walls and the Camarín del Virgen adjacent to the altar are swathed with gilded ornamentation.

Festivals & Events

Pastorelas

RELIGIOUS

Tepotztlán's highly regarded *pastorelas* (nativity plays) are performed inside the former monastery in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Tickets, which include Christmas dinner and piñata smashing, can be purchased at La Hostería del Convento de Tepotztlán after November 1 or via Ticketmaster ( 55-5325-9000; www.ticketmaster.com.mx).