



Western Central Highlands

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Why Go?

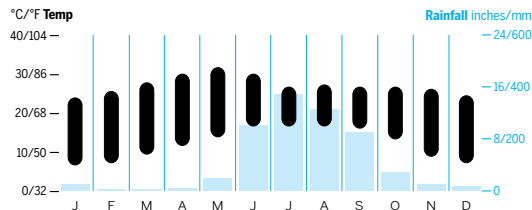
Welcome to the Mexico of your dreams. Many elements that define the global image of Mexico originated in the western central highlands amid snoozing volcanoes, sun-baked avocado plantations, and some of the finest pre-Hispanic ruins that no one's ever heard of. Resort escapees can sip the world's best tequila amid a sea of blue agave, listen to mariachi music in the region of its conception, or have a religious experience contemplating the magnificence of Morelia cathedral.

Less obvious (and less visited) is Lago de Pátzcuaro, where the indigenous Purépecha display dexterous craft-making skills and hold some of the most spine-tingling Day of the Dead celebrations in the nation.

Two icons stud the natural world. Volcán Parícutín is a climbable volcano that burst out of a maize field in 1943, while the Reserva Mariposa Monarca is a swath of coniferous highlands invaded annually by millions of fluttering butterflies.

When to Go

Guadalajara



Feb Flutter with the monarch butterflies in the Reserva Mariposa Monarca.

Nov Commune with the dead on Día de Muertos in the villages around Pátzcuaro.

Mar Join the stars of cinema at Guadalajara's Festival Internacional del Cine.

History

The western central highlands were too far from the Maya and Aztecs to fall under their influence, but during the 14th to 16th centuries the Tarascos in northern Michoacán developed a robust pre-Hispanic civilization. When the Aztecs took attack, the Tarascos were able to hold strong thanks to their copper blades. West of the Tarascos was their rival, Chimalhuacán – a confederation of four indigenous kingdoms that spread through parts of present-day Jalisco, Colima and Nayarit states. To the north were the Chichimecs.

Colima, the leading Chimalhuacán kingdom, was conquered by the Spanish in 1523. The whole region, however, was not brought under Spanish control until the notorious campaigns of Nuño de Guzmán. Between 1529 and 1536 he tortured, killed and enslaved indigenous people from Michoacán to Sinaloa. His grizzly victories made him rich and famous and won him governorship of his conquered lands, until news of his war crimes leaked out. He was sent back to Spain and imprisoned for life in 1538.

This fertile ranching and agricultural region developed gradually and Guadalajara (established in 1542 and always one of Mexico's biggest cities) became the 'capital of the west.' The church, with help from the enlightened Bishop Vasco de Quiroga, fostered small industries and handicraft traditions around the villages of Lago de Pátzcuaro in its effort to ease the continuing poverty of the indigenous people.

In the 1920s the region's two major states, Michoacán and Jalisco, were hotbeds of the Cristero rebellion by Catholics against government antichurch policies. Lázaro Cárdenas of Michoacán, as state governor (1928–32) and then as Mexican president (1934–40), instituted reforms that did much to abate antigovernment sentiments.

Today Jalisco and Michoacán hold many of Mexico's natural resources – especially timber, minerals, livestock and agriculture – and Jalisco has a thriving tech industry. In the past both states have seen large segments of their population head to the USA for work. Michoacán reportedly lost almost half its population to emigrations, and money sent home regularly exceeds US\$2 billion. But with the economic slowdown in the USA, the flow north slowed and these days many have decided to return to Mexico and open up businesses on their home soil.

GUADALAJARA

☐ 33 / POP 1.5 MILLION / ELEV 1550M

Mexico's second largest metropolis is actually a confederation of three cities – Zapopan, Tlaquepaque and Guadalajara proper – each with its own airs and idiosyncrasies. Together they form a culturally compelling whole, a blended cocktail not unlike one of the locally concocted margaritas – sharp, potent and remarkably well-balanced.

If you're intimidated by the size and intensity of Mexico City, Guadalajara delivers a less frenetic alternative. Many of the clichéd images recognized as Mexican have roots here: mariachi music, wide-brimmed sombreros, the Mexican hat dance and *charreadas* (rodeos). But, Guadalajara is as much a vanguard of the new Mexico as it is a guardian of the old. Chapultepec hipsters drive the cultural life forward, fusion chefs have sharpened the edges of an already legendary culinary scene (famed for its tender stews and 'drowned' sandwiches), while foresighted local planners are doing their damndest to tackle the traffic and congestion (a bike-sharing scheme is the latest wild card).

With over four million inhabitants in its broader metro area, Guadalajara can't match the intimacy and architectural homogeneity of smaller colonial cities, though its historic core is handsome enough, anchored by the twin wonders of the cathedral and the Instituto Cultural de Cabañas, the latter a Unesco World Heritage site. Modern and spread-out, the Chapultepec neighborhood is sprinkled with fashionable restaurants, coffeehouses and nightclubs. Mellow suburbs Tlaquepaque (upscale) and Tonalá (grassroots) are a folk-art shopper's dream destinations. Zapopan has some interesting colonial sites and is known somewhat euphemistically as Guadalajara's Beverly Hills.

History

Guadalajara weathered some false starts. In 1532 Nuño de Guzmán and a few dozen Spanish families founded the first Guadalajara near Nochistlán, naming it after Guzmán's home city in Spain. Water was scarce, the land was dry and unyielding, and the indigenous people were understandably hostile. So, in 1533 the humbled settlers moved to the village of Tonalá (today a part of Guadalajara). Guzmán disliked Tonalá, however, and two years later had the settlement moved to Tlacotán. In 1541 this site was attacked and decimated by a confederation