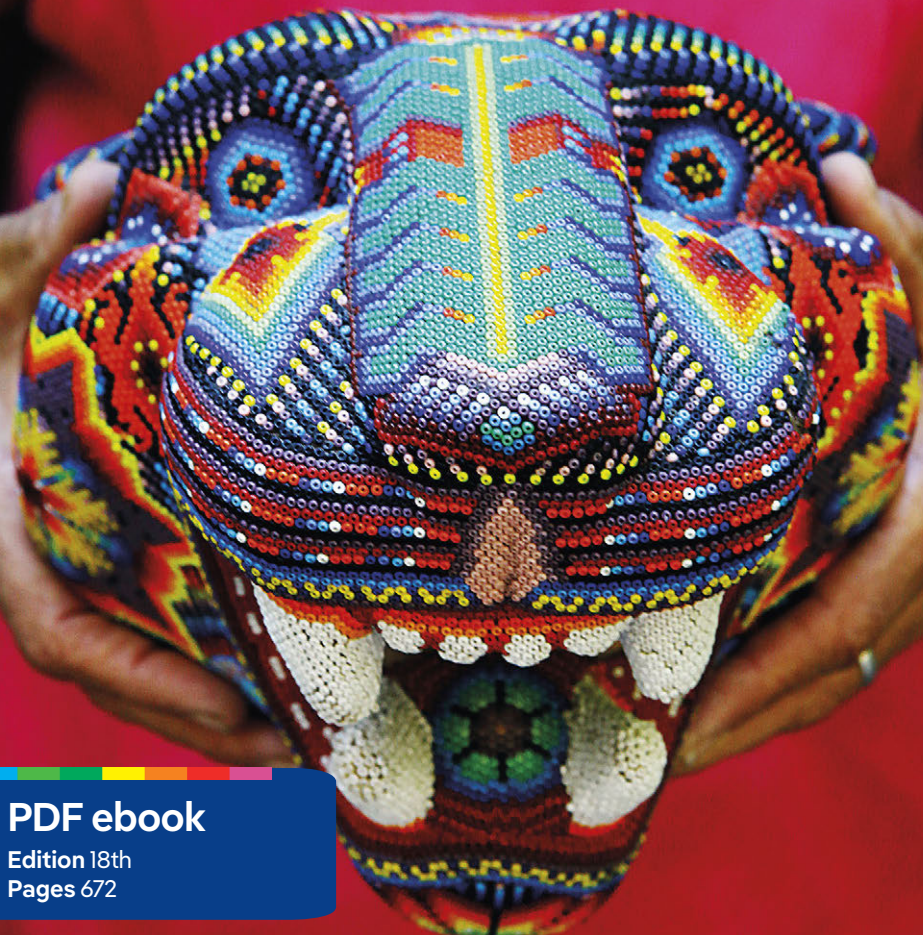


50 YEARS
lonely planet
OF TRAVEL

PDF

Mexico



PDF ebook

Edition 18th
Pages 672

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50 YEARS
lonely planet
OF TRAVEL

MEXICO



**Kate Armstrong, Joel Balsam, Ray Bartlett, John Hecht,
Nellie Huang, Anna Kaminski, Regis St Louis, Phillip Tang**

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MATTEO COLOMBO/GETTY IMAGES © TOP RIGHT BRENT HOACKEE/SHUTTERSTOCK © LORION LEFT © STIPANO/GETTY IMAGES ©



Mariachi band, Convento de San Antonio de Padua (p274)

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OCEANICWANDERER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mayan dancers, Guanajuato (p514)

MEXICO

THE JOURNEY BEGINS HERE

Guanajuato is my Mexican magnet. This highland city draws me back no matter where else in this wonderful, diverse country I venture. Guanajuato is Mexico: gritty, noisy, colorful, lively. Where residents, a mix of indigenous, locals and foreigners create their own fun through festivals, religious days, mariachi bands. Students entertain visitors, as they have since the 1960s on *callejoneadas* (see p515), street strolls with singing and story-telling. Guanajuato may not have the sophistication of Mexico City, nor the beaches of Quintana Roo, nor the jungles surrounding San Cristóbal de las Casas. Instead its appeal comes from elsewhere: the multicolored houses; the flavors of *enchiladas mineras*, the local dish; legends that stem from its torrid mining past; street food vendors. All this, plus a rich cultural scene – an orchestra and Cervantes Festival, plus performances in the neoclassical Teatro Juárez – guarantees visitors vow to return. As I have done for the last 15 years.

Kate Armstrong

@nomaditis

4

Kate is a travel journalist who is obsessed with Mexico, and covers it regularly.



Another favorite experience is

journeying through Chiapas' Lacandon Jungle (p311) to bird-watch, explore the Maya ruins and revel in the remoteness with the area's nature-loving locals.

WHO GOES WHERE

Our writers and experts choose the places which, for them, define Mexico.

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There are few natural wonders as majestic as the monarch butterfly migration at **Reserva Monarca Mariposa** (p496). Said to be souls returning for Día de Muertos, millions of tiny orange insects flutter from as far north as Canada to blanket fir trees at overwintering in Michoacán. Soon though, the astounding migration could be lost due to illegal logging and climate change.

Joel Balsam

[@joelbalsam](#)

Joel Balsam is a freelance journalist and guidebook author who has been published far and wide.

FREDERICK MILLETT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



The **Baja Peninsula** (p556) is one of the world's most unique, varied and beautiful landscapes, where a narrow finger of desert juts down into two of the world's most alluring bodies of water: the Pacific, and the Sea of Cortez. Its people, its land and its history are all waiting to be explored and enjoyed.

Ray Bartlett

[@kaisoradotcom](#)

Ray Bartlett is a travel writer, photographer and novelist.

Every now and then you discover a place that simply feels right. It might be the natural wonders, warm people, lifestyle, or all those things at once. In the remote Mixtec mountain village of **Santiago Apoala** (p396), among the misty waterfalls, turquoise lagoons and towering rock formations, you'll find no modern-day distractions, just nature in all its glory.

John Hecht

[@john_hecht](#)

John has contributed to dozens of books about Mexico throughout a travel writing career that has spanned more than two decades.



PLAN B VIAJERO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Monterrey (p621) is perhaps the biggest surprise that Mexico sprang on me. I did not expect to like the megapolis at all, but the multifaceted city somehow converted me. The rejuvenated Barrio Antiguo, the pruned and polished district of San Pedro, and the surrounding jagged mountain backdrop all come together to form a captivating city with so many stories to tell.

Nellie Huang

[@wildjunkt](#)

Nellie is a book author, adventurous mum and experienced travel writer obsessed with her adopted home, Mexico.



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Puerto Vallarta (p415) is a remarkable city in many ways. It manages to combine genuine respect for, and appreciation of, indigenous art with a stellar food and drink scene, some of Mexico's loveliest beaches and a wealth of marine life. Its welcoming attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community is second to none.

Anna Kaminski

[@ACKaminski](#)

Anna is a travel writer who specializes in the Spanish-speaking world, with a particular interest in pre-Hispanic cultures.



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The heart and soul of Mérida is **Plaza Grande** (p268), a tree-lined square in the old quarter. It's surrounded by some of the city's most important buildings. But attractions aside, the plaza is the city's most important gathering space: to ring in the new year, catch outdoor concerts and simply meet up with friends — just as people have been doing since the 16th century.

Regis St Louis

Regis is the author of over 100 travel guides, and has written extensively about culture, food and adventure in Mexico.

MARCOS ELIHU CASTILLO RAMIREZ/GETTY IMAGES ©



Eating tacos *al pastor* in **Mexico City** (p85) is a ritual. Pinched in your hand, the parcel of spiced pork does not move. No, you bow to its level, tilting your head as if listening to its regal history from overseas. A tale of migrants blending their spices into Mexico's recipes, then championed in the capital. Mexico City is fusion.

Phillip Tang

hellophillip.com; [@mrtangtangtang](https://twitter.com/mrtangtangtang)

Phillip has written for dozens of Lonely Planet travel guides while calling Mexico City home for over a decade.

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS



Ashley Harrell

[@where_smashley_went](https://twitter.com/where_smashley_went)

Ashley is a California-based freelance journalist who writes about travel and the outdoors. She's co-authored more than 50 Lonely Planet guidebooks across the Americas, Southeast Asia and Africa, and has often chosen assignments based on where she can go scuba diving.



Liza Prado

[@liza.prado](https://twitter.com/liza.prado)

Liza Prado has been a travel writer since 2004, when she switched from corporate lawyering to travel writing and never looked back. She's authored over 50 guidebooks and countless articles about the Americas.

Copper Canyon Railway

Hop aboard Mexico's most spectacular train journey (p602)

Guanajuato

Revel in the lively, picturesque university town (p514)

Espíritu Santo

Camp, snorkel and kayak to your heart's content (p576)

Land's End

Marvel at the stunning arch, sunsets and surf (p563)

Puerto Vallarta

Immerse yourself in extraordinary folk art (p415)

Reserva Mariposa Monarca

View millions of monarch butterflies migrating (p497)



Pacific Ocean

Reserva de la Biósfera Sierra Gorda

Enter magnificent cloud forest and mission churches (p549)

Teotihuacán

Traverse the fascinating pre-Hispanic pyramid complex (p138)

Chichén Itzá

Explore awe-inspiring Maya ruins (p287)

Pico de Orizaba

Climb Mexico's highest peak (p204)

Palenque

Get 'lost' in spectacular Maya architecture (p302)

Mexico City

Explore this massive, but fabulous, cultured metropolis (p59)

Oaxaca

Sip some of the country's best mezcal (p344)





ARTS AND CRAFTS

Mexicans' dexterity and passion for vibrancy, fun and tradition are translated into extraordinary *artesanías* (handicrafts). Many traditional techniques have been adapted from pre-Hispanic times and the country's indigenous peoples continue these important practices. Textiles lead the way, and are incorporated into the likes of garments, carpets and hammocks. Throughout different regions, you'll find ceramics, masks and beadwork, as well as lacquerware and woodwork, with techniques and decorations unique to particular places.



Tree of Life

Worth looking out for is the exquisite *árbol de la vida* (tree of life); these are the specialty of Metepec, but you can find them around the country.



Mask Meanings

For millennia, Mexicans have worn masks in dances, ceremonies and rites: the wearer becomes the person, creature or deity represented by the mask.

Craft Book

The beautiful (and very useful) full-color book, *The Crafts of Mexico* by Margarita de Orellana and Alberto Ruy Sánchez, covers the full gamut of Mexican crafts.

FROM LEFT: MARCO ORTIZ/MOF/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, SSANTIAGO CASTILLO CHOMEL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, LUNAMARINA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





BEST ARTS & CRAFTS EXPERIENCES

Circle **1** **Lago de Pátzcuaro** and shop-hop your way through the *pueblos hospitales*, historic art towns of the indigenous Purépecha nation. (p498)

Stock up on the authentic item: Mexico's famous and distinct tin-glazed tile, the *talavera*, which originated in **2** **Puebla**. (p150)

Explore Oaxaca's rustic workshops for black pottery and *alebrijes* in **3** **Valle de Zimatlán** (p366) and visit **Teotitlán del Valle** (p368) for intricate Zapotec rugs and tapestries.

Enjoy the home and museum of Querétaro state's famous Lele doll at the quaint village of **4** **Amealco de Bonfil**. (p547)

Hone your textile knowledge at Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya in **5** **San Cristóbal de las Casas** (p317), and buy authentic *huipiles*, weavings and blankets from **Sna Jolobil** (p317).



Tlacolula market (p366)



MARKET LIFE

Markets are a way of life in Mexico. Food markets are the best place to throw yourself into the aromas and tastes of a local culture: think everything from fragrant mangoes to smoky ancho chilies. Craft markets and *tianguis* (outdoor bazaars) sell everything from artisanal goods to second-hand products to agricultural equipment.

To Bargain. Or Not.

Haggling is not common to all indigenous peoples, who often spend months crafting their wares; please bear in mind the skill and time when bargaining, especially about bulk buys.

Mercado Meals

Many Mexican markets have *comedor* sections where you sit on benches eating economical, home-style food cooked up on the spot.

BEST MARKET EXPERIENCES

Lose yourself in Latin America's largest indoor market, Mercado San Juan de Dios in **1 Guadalajara**. (p472)

Shop like a local at Mercado Medellín (p101), Mercado de Coyoacán (p128) or the outdoor bazaar (p109) in **2 Mexico City**.

Join the thousands at **3 Tlacolula**, one of Oaxaca's oldest markets and a gathering place for Zapotec villagers. (p366)

Market-hop through a trio of markets in **4 San Cristóbal de las Casas**. (p317)

Fill up on marlin tacos and deep-fried shrimp tortillas at Mercado Pino Suárez, in **5 Old Mazatlán**. (p410)



WONDERS OF WATER

Thanks to its rich jungle areas, huge watersheds and intense rainy season, Mexico features some extraordinary waterfalls, river rapids and cenotes – incredible water-filled sink holes. Getting to these through lush greenery, up remote roads and through small villages can be half the fun, and once there you'll see another surprising aspect to this diverse country.



BEST WATER-BASED EXPERIENCES

Plunge from one cenote into the next in the **1 Yucatán** and enjoy what makes each one so different and so unique, from rustic water holes to locations with spas. (p258)

The entire region of **2 La Huasteca Potosina** is dotted with waterfalls, water holes and water-based activities, from canoe trips to cascade-hopping. (p537)

For healing respite from Tequila, enjoy the relaxing **3 Cascada las Azules** and the springwater pools of **Balneario La Toma**. (p490)

Immerse yourself in **4 Creel**, where hot springs and cascades are all within a day's hike, ride or drive. (p606)

Frolic (with care) in the churning cascades, falls and pools of **5 Agua Azul** (p310) and **Misol-Há** (p309).



Seasonal Safety

Check the best time to visit inland water experiences. Rainy season makes these off limits due to high water levels and impassable roads in some locations.



Cenotes and Sunscreen

Try not to wear sunscreen when visiting cenotes; the oil collects on the surface and affects the water and experience.



Highest Waterfall

At 453m, Mexico's highest waterfall is the Piedra Volada in Chihuahua, although it only reaches such heights in wet season.



SPIRITED SIPS

While Mexico may be famous for tequila, it's mezcal that's hit the scene recently and *mezcalerías* are thriving, especially among the younger, hip drinking crowd. Both tequila and mezcal are spirits distilled from agave plants, but there are important differences (see p491). Meanwhile, Mexican wine has become a 'thing', particularly in the states of Guanajuato and Querétaro. Areas of these states are covered in grapevines, and visits to vineyards are a fun part of any visit.



Boozy Beverage

Just sayin': mezcal's alcohol content comes in at between 40% and 55%, while tequila measures slightly less. Sip with care!



Raicilla

Tequila and mezcal, sure – but *raicilla*? Another agave-based drink, *raicilla* was previously little known outside Jalisco, but it's the latest to hit the beverage scene (see p438).



Drinking Laws

Note that the blood alcohol limit varies by state, but is generally between 0.4 and 0.8. The legal drinking age is 18 years.

FROM LEFT: FABIAN MONTANO HERNANDEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK © DOUGLAS FEEBLES/GETTY IMAGES © MIKEL DABBAH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





BEST DRINKS-BASED EXPERIENCES

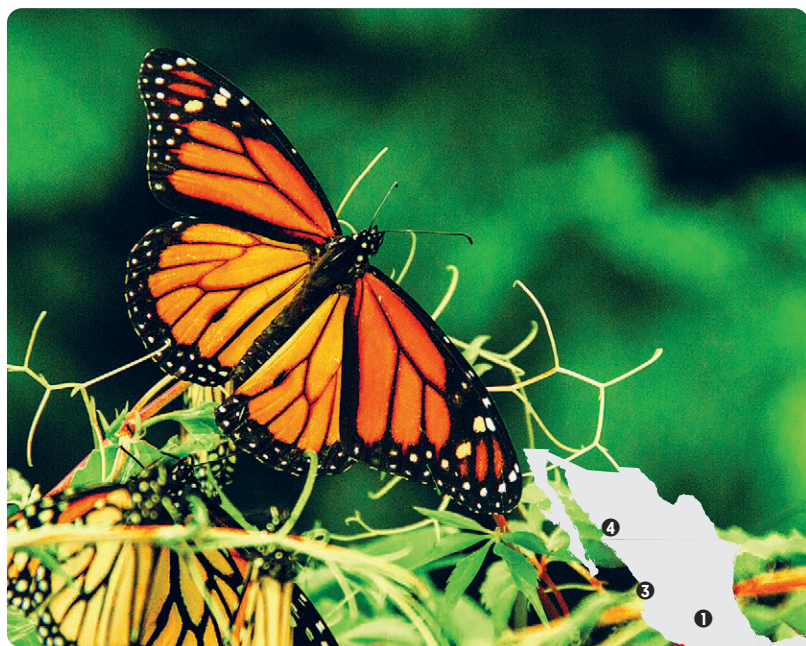
Belly up to some of the country's best *mezcalería* bars (and learn how to imbibe it properly) in **1 Oaxaca**. (p169)

Learn about and taste *raicilla*, the region's traditional agave-plant spirit, at top end *coctelerías* (cocktail bars) in **2 Jalisco**. (p486)

Jump aboard the Tequila Train, **3 Jose Cuervo Express**, in Guadalajara and tour a famous distillery, enjoy tastings and more. (p486)

Learn about grape-to-glass, view cutting-edge architectural feats, and enjoy some high-end cuisine at the wineries of **4 Guanajuato state**. (p586)

Spend a day with your nose in the glass at a wine tasting rooms of **Valle de 5 Guadalupe**. (p524)



Monarch butterfly, Reserva Mariposa Monarca (p496)



WILD WORLD

From whales in the Sea of Cortez and armies of turtles coming ashore for nesting, to fluttering butterflies in inland forests, Mexico has abundant wildlife. For the best viewing opportunities, be aware of the seasons for different animals, but don't worry – in such a nature-filled place, you only need to keep your eyes open to see something amazing.

Community-Run Turtle Projects

Many of the turtle protection projects are run by local communities. To learn about about the nesting program, visit their offices (sometimes small shelters) on the beach.

Spotting Birders

For birding guides, ask around villages or towns; often birding is not included on the activity lists but there are knowledgeable folk around.

BEST ANIMAL EXPERIENCES

Be wowed by millions of fluttering butterflies in the forest reserves of

1 Reserva Mariposa Monarca, Morelia. (p496)

Witness thousands of turtles coming ashore at **2 Playa Escobilla**, and help in the efforts to save them. (p382)

Birders flock to **3 San Blas** to spot the surrounding area's incredible 250 endemic species. (p437)

4 El Fuerte is another world-class birding spot, with common sightings of kingfishers, osprey and more. (p611)

Spot crocs, sea turtles and flocks of migratory birds on a community ecotour at **5 La Ventanilla.** (p387)



BELOW THE WAVES

Mexico is a tremendous destination for marine wildlife-watching, especially for humpbacks and whale sharks seen off the Pacific coast and the Baja Peninsula, as well as hammerheads in the Sea of Cortez. Licensed operators head out from some of the major towns, and in some cases, you might do some snorkeling along the way.



BEST WHALE AND SHARK EXPERIENCES

Head out on a boat charter to

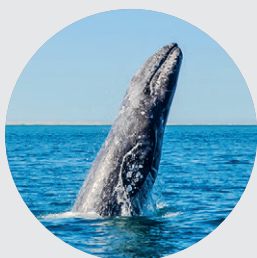
1 Islas Marietas, two uninhabited volcanic islands, a protected marine park that sees the seasonal migration of humpback whales. (p445)

Accompany a knowledgeable biologist and dive with the fascinating and gentle whale sharks in the ocean cove of **2 La Paz Bay**, Baja Peninsula. (p572)

Hop aboard a *panga* at **3 Guerrero Negro** and if you're lucky you might see migrating California gray whales that are heading south to give birth. (p589)

Head into the depths on a dive or spot humpback whales from the shore as they pass by the gorgeous, rugged bays of **4 Huatulco** around November to March. (p388)

Swim alongside fully grown whale sharks as they come to feed in the shallows at **5 Isla Holbox**. (p235).



Whale-Watching Season

Whale-watching season in Mexico is generally between late November and March (sometimes into April). Keep your eyes open as you cruise down the coast!



Whale Protection

A conscientious tour operator will not let you wear normal sunscreen, nor will you be able to touch, dive under, or otherwise molest the animals.



Other Wildlife Spottings

Besides marine birds, depending on where you are you might also spot sea lions, elephant seals and Guadalupe fur seals (endangered), especially in Baja California.



ONLY IN MEXICO

After unique traditions and places? Count on Mexico. Think the likes of *lucha libre* (wrestling) and cliff divers that plunge from heights. Encounter *charrería* (cowboy) culture and *callejoneadas* (street parties) where you follow musicians through the streets. See the world's fattest tree, surreal sculptures in a labyrinthine garden and visit an underground nightclub in a mine. There are plenty of opportunities to throw yourself in and learn about regional cultural practices (with a few quirky sites thrown in, too).



Set Prices

To visit Mexico's unique places, you'll generally pay a small fee or ticketing price; sights could be busy, as they are popular among Mexican locals and visitors, too.



The Roots of Lucha Libre

Lucha libre started in the 19th century, with Enrique Ugartechea, a Veracruzano, combining the moves of Olympic and Greco-Roman wrestling.

Off the Beaten Track

Those with travel smarts can experience some genuine cultural life by heading to the outskirts of Mexico City to view popular dance performances (p88).

FROM LEFT: ANDREI ROSTEV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, MARIO ANGUT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, NADARA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





BEST UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

Visit some weird yet wonderful museums – featuring the likes of shoes, medical instruments and rosary beads – in **1 Mexico City**. (p76)

Watch *luchadores* (wrestlers) ‘fight’ it out at a *lucha libre* performance in **2 Guadalajara** (p480) and **Mexico City** (p103).

Be dazzled by cowboys and their steeds at a *charrería*, Mexico’s national sport, in **3 Guadalajara**. (p479)

Hold your breath as you watch the cliff divers in **4 Acapulco** launch themselves off ridiculously high precipices. (p460)

Wander through the labyrinthine, jungle garden of **5 Las Pozas** and ponder over the stairs that lead nowhere and other surreal sculptures. (p540)



Playa Paraiso (p252), Tulum



SANDY SHORES

Mexico is up there with the best when it comes to beaches, from small bays packed to the gills with partying beachgoers to remote stretches with white, silky sand and green-blue bays. Families with children are better off sticking to beaches with lifeguards; water conditions can be unpredictable.

Pacific Rip Currents

Use extreme caution if you're swimming in the Pacific. Rip currents and rogue waves are common; even experienced surfers and swimmers have reported issues.

Lifeguards

Note that lifeguards are only present on village- or town-fronted beaches.

BEST BEACH EXPERIENCES

Grab a *lancha* to the islands off Veracruz, such as **1 Isla de Enmedio**. (p188)

Find your perfect spot in the sun while exploring the coastline of **2 Tulum**, famed for its white-sand beaches and cerulean Caribbean Sea. (p252)

Beach-hop to the many smaller azure bays with powder-white sand that extend from **3 La Paz**. (p570)

Enjoy sweeping beaches and colossal dunes at Playa Bamba and Playa Chipehua on the **4 Isthmus of Tehuantepec**. (p393)

Wriggle your toes in the confectioner-sugar sand of **5 Playa Holbox**. (p234)



TRAINS AND CABLE CARS

Mexico's national train network stopped functioning years ago, but there's still a wonderful rail journey taking you through a grand locale, the Copper Canyon, while three *teleféricos* take you on exciting, if slightly hair-raising, rides across towns. Another privately run tourist train option takes you from Guadalajara to a tequila farm.



BEST TRAIN AND TELEFÉRICO EXPERIENCES

Mexico's most famous train ride Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico **1** ('El Chepe'; Copper Canyon Railway) is an engineering marvel. The astonishing canyon views alone make a ride worthwhile. (p602)

A short but steep funicular ride in **2** Guanajuato city takes you to the famous statue of El Pípila, an independence hero. (p517)

Fly across the valley-framed, former mining city of **3** Zacatecas to La Bufa, an impressive rocky outcrop with museums, monuments and great vistas. (p440)

The rapid *teleférico* of **4** Orizaba rises 320m and transports you from a riverside base to Cerro del Borrego. (p204)

For smashing views of **5** Durango, take the Paseo Teleférico to the Mirador de los Remedios, and visit an historic church with an interesting, if controversial, past. (p635)



Maya Train

The controversial Tren Maya has broken ground, having already cleared swathes of jungle to link tourist sites including Palenque to sites around Chiapas and beyond.



Meaning of Teleférico

Teleférico can mean both cable railway, like the one in Guanajuato, or cable car (hanging) as in Zacatecas and Orizaba, Veracruz.



The Demise of the Railway

Largely built in the late 19th century by controversial, long-term president Porfirio Díaz, by the 1980s Mexico's train services had largely disappeared after years of underinvestment and privatization.



THE BEAN SCENE

The chocolate plant has been grown in Mexico for thousands of years. The Olmec people first used it, and the Maya people followed by the Aztecs revered it. Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler, is believed to have consumed it as an aphrodisiac. Coffee plants were introduced to Mexico in the 18th century and are prolific. Little wonder then that you can indulge in chocolate and coffee-themed fun.



Chocolate and Coffee Tours

Many tour companies do specific chocolate and coffee experiences, or you can sniff these out on your own.



Unique Coffee Experience

For a more off the beaten path adventure, head to Pluma Hidalgo. Here you can stay on an actual coffee *finca* (p376).



Best of the Best

Chiapas is Mexico's biggest coffee producer. San Cristóbal de las Casas there has a good coffee scene, as do Mexico City, Guadalajara and San Miguel de Allende.

FROM LEFT: ARINA P HABIQH/SHUTTERSTOCK © MARI TERE/SHUTTERSTOCK © ANTON JMANOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





CHOCO-STORY

ECOPARQUE MUSEO DEL CHOCOLATE



BEST CHOCOLATE AND COFFEE EXPERIENCES

Crawl your way through mouthwateringly delicious mountains of local cacao and chocolate in **1 Oaxaca**. (p358)

Sip your way through organic coffees in third wave coffee spots in **2 San Cristóbal de las Casas**. (p319)

Tap your spoon on your coffee glass and let the fun begin: the quirky way to be served a coffee in **3 Veracruz**. (p185)

Learn about the different techniques of growing, roasting and brewing Arabica beans in **4 Coatepec**, Mexico's coffee capital. (p197)

Give in to temptation with the chocolate experience at **5 Choco-Story**, a chocolate museum near Uxmal. (p283)



Voladores (p207), Papantla



CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

The major distinction in Mexico's ethnic diversity is between *mestizos*, people of mixed ancestry and the *indígenas*, the indigenous descendants of Mexico's pre-Hispanic inhabitants. Some groups particularly welcome tourists and show them traditional practices, from cooking to weaving and more.

Land of Many Peoples

According to the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, 25.7 million people in Mexico are indigenous, covering groups speaking 63 recognized languages.

Direct Descendants

The approximately 1.5 million Maya on the Yucatán Peninsula are direct descendants of the ancient Maya, as are the Tzotzil and Tzeltal of Chiapas.

BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Be cleansed by a thousand-year-old Mesoamerican healing ritual while you're sweating it out in a temascal, a **1** shamanic sweat lodge. (p165)

View the incredible flying *voladores* ceremonial dance, along with rich Totonac traditions in **2** Papantla. (p207)

Visit traditional Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous villages near **3** San Cristóbal de las Casas. (p318)

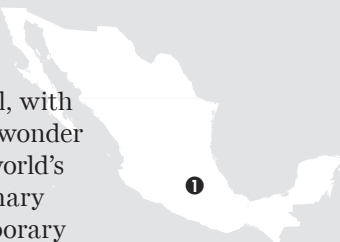
Take language classes in the local Zapotec language in **4** Oaxaca. (p358)

Gain insight into the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) people of the Copper Canyon in Creel's informative **5** Museo Tarahumara. (p606)



MEXICO CITY'S MUSEUMS

Given it's the massive sprawling capital, with a rich and fascinating history, it's little wonder that Mexico City, boasts some of the world's best museums, exhibiting extraordinary archaeology, folk art, murals, contemporary culture and everything in between. If you can, try to get to one of two of the following.



BEST MEXICO CITY MUSEUM EXPERIENCES

Relive the entire history of Mexico, from pre-Hispanic cultures to the modern age, through the fascinating and accessible exhibits at the **1 Museo Nacional de Antropología**. (p116)

Enjoy the legacy of renowned Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and tap into her creativity at her former home **1 Museo Frida Kahlo: La Casa Azul**. (p127)

Revel in the architecture and ponder the massive murals by world-famous Mexican artists in the immense **1 Palacio de Bellas Artes**. (p82)

Have fun at **1 Museo de Arte Popular**, where vibrant displays of Mexican folk art draw in the most ardent of museum skeptics. (p80)

Head to the central **1 Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso** to contemplate Diego Rivera's first ever mural and the extraordinary works of famous Mexican muralists. (p69)



Best Times to Visit

Get there early to beat the crowds and remember Sunday (free admission) is the busiest day, while museums are closed on Mondays.



For Museo Nacional de Antropología

If you're on a tight time frame, consider jumping straight into the Teotihuacán hall where models bring archaeological sites to life.



Short on Time?

Given traveling times between them, don't be too ambitious: limit yourself to one (or two) museums a day, and enjoy exploring their neighborhoods too.



SMELL THE ROSES

Mexico's botanic gardens are special for their history and plant types. Featuring everything from cacti to water features in reclaimed deserts and colonial properties, these gardens are delightful places to explore. Most of them propagate and display endemic species of their region; some cover plants from across the country. Mexico's fascinating ethnobotanical gardens explore the relationship between people and plants by illustrating how locals use them for food, medicine and artistic traditions.



Lather Up

Some gardens are in exposed areas, while others are in jungle settings.

Use environmentally friendly sunscreen and/or insect repellent, as many plants rely on insects for pollination.



Cacti Species

Mexico has the most species of cacti in the world. The tallest cactus species on record is the towering *Pachycereus pringlei* at 19.2m.

Visiting Times

Check with locals the best times to visit each garden to ensure your chances of spotting insects and birds, bonuses in such beautiful locales.

FROM LEFT FRANCISCO J RAMOS GALLEGO/SHUTTERSTOCK © DANITA DELIMONT/SHUTTERSTOCK © REISGRAF.CH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





BEST GARDEN EXPERIENCES

The ethnobotanic garden, **1 El Charco del Ingenio**, in San Miguel de Allende is an extraordinary example of environmentalism and community spirit. (p523)

The **2 Cosmovital Jardín Botánico** is a botanic garden with a twist: a massive greenhouse of stained-glass and glorious garden beds. (p174)

Oaxaca has more plant species than any other state in Mexico, as seen at the extraordinary **3 Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca**. (p362)

Be awed by bromeliads, orchids, agaves and more that set the scene for the jungle **4 Jardín Botánico de Vallarta**. (p423)

Immerse yourself in the lush, untamed **5 Jardín Botánico Dr Alfredo Barrera Marín** near Puerto Morelos. (p239)



La Huasteca Potosina (537)



JUNGLE ESCAPADES

Around 25% of Mexico – mainly in the east and south – is covered in jungle. The Lacandon Jungle, the country's largest swathe, runs from Chiapas south to Honduras, incorporating the southern portion of the Yucatán Peninsula. Journeys into these precious regions and the local communities are a privilege.

Maya Train Route

The 1500km Maya Train that's set to connect several of Mexico's tourist centres is hugely controversial for its environmental impact and massive destruction of jungle.

Go Prepared

Sure, you've heard it before but we can't stress it enough. Go prepared with water, sunscreen protection and insect repellent (except when swimming in cenotes).

BEST JUNGLE EXPERIENCES

Hike in the cloud forests of **1 Reserva de la Biósfera Sierra Gorda** before visiting its missions. (p549)

Venture deep into the **2 Selva Lacandona**, a remote territory where Lacandon Maya people live in small communities. (p311)

Drive through **3 La Huasteca Potosina**, a lush area with spectacular waterfalls and water-based fun. (p537)

Explore the awe-inspiring archaeological site of **4 Calakmul**, located deep in the jungle, miles from civilization. (p293)

Walk the jungle trail to reach **5 Altavista**, the best-preserved petroglyph site in Nayarit. (p435)



MEXICO CITY MUST-DOS

Mexico City can seem overwhelming for first-time visitors. But many of the sites are surprisingly accessible, especially if you stick to one or two neighborhoods where you can enjoy museums, plazas and markets, or simply people-watch from a sidewalk café. If you're not sure what to do, follow these top tips.



BEST (NON-MUSEUM) MEXICO CITY EXPERIENCES

Go on a **1** **taco crawl** in Roma (p97) and Condesa (p103) to find your favorite fillings, from *cochinita pibil* (slow-roasted pork) to *chapulines* (grasshoppers).

Grab a bar seat in a **1** **cantina** (or two) and be serenaded by mariachi as they belt out their ballads and play their trumpets – loudly. (p69)

Get your camera out and your 'river legs' ready and **1** **cruise the Aztec canals of Xochimilco**. (p131)

Secure seats at Mexico's top traditional dance spectacular, **1** **Ballet Folklórico de México**, and witness the different regional 'moves.' (p82)

Wander the cobblestone streets, her second studio-home, and design wonderland of Frida's other neighborhood, **1** **San Ángel**. (p119)



Mariachi Music

The easiest spot to catch mariachi bands in their silver-studded finery is in Plaza Garibaldi (p69).



Tickets to Ballet Folklórico de México

Tickets are often available on the day of the performance, and attending one of the troupe's shows is the only way to see Palacio de Bellas Artes' incredible theater.s



Useful Resource

Mexico's official federal government's tourist website, visit-mexico.mx, has some useful information about Mexico City and the country. Each state tends to have its own website, as do smaller municipalities.

REGIONS & CITIES

Find the places that check all your boxes.

The Baja Peninsula

DESERT, SURF AND SUNSHINE

One of the world's best road trips, the Baja Peninsula delights at every turn with stunning beaches, incredible desert vistas, unique wildlife and quirky local towns. Wine taste in the Valle de Guadalupe, go surfing in Cerritos or swim with whale sharks in La Paz.

p556

Baja
Peninsula
p556

Copper Canyon &
Northern Mexico
p595

Central Pacific Coast

SURF AND BEACH CITIES

Mexico's western side draws surfers with the country's wildest, least-developed coast, battered by Pacific rollers. It's punctuated by buzzy cities like Puerto Vallarta, with its superb art scene and terrific beaches. Inland, you're met by the cobbled streets and centuries-old architecture of colonial *pueblo mágico* (magical village) San Sebastián del Oeste.

p399

Copper Canyon & Northern Mexico

DRAMATIC MOUNTAINS AND DESERTS

Explore the ultimate frontier land on board the Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico (Chepe railway), an epic train journey that heads through the Barrancas del Cobre (Copper Canyon). Immerse yourself in *norteño* culture in Chihuahua and Durango, and enjoy the museums, parks and more of cosmopolitan Monterrey.

p595

Central
Pacific
Coast
p399

Western
Central
Highlands
p464

Western Central Highlands

GUADALAJARA, TEQUILA AND BUTTERFLIES

Mexico's second-biggest city, Guadalajara, is where many Mexican traditions and foods were born. It's a short jump to Tequila, home to the country's prized booze, and several more *pueblos mágicos*. Central Michoacán is home to millions of monarch butterflies and towns renowned for their artisanship.

p464

Around Mexico City

PYRAMIDS, HISTORICAL TOWNS AND NATURAL CHARM

Small-town charm awaits in every direction outside the capital. A day trip to Teotihuacán is a must for its pyramid complex. The ancient ruins of Tula, Malinalco and Tepoztlán offer historical mysteries. Fresh air is plentiful in Mineral del Chico, Valle de Bravo and Cuetzalan, while colonial Cuernavaca, Taxco and Puebla are mere hours away.

p132

Northern Central Highlands

COLONIAL TOWNS, DESERTS AND BIOSPHERE RESERVES

From vast deserts to cloud forest, cobbled lanes to modern cities, street food to chic eats, Mexico's Northern Central Highlands have it all. Wander through historic San Miguel de Allende, hike in extraordinary forests in the Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda, or plunge in waterfalls in La Huasteca Potosina.

p509

Veracruz

COFFEE TOWNS, HIGHLANDS AND COAST

Running alongside Mexico's central Gulf coast, this versatile state is perfect for those seeking the offbeat. You can embrace the art deco architecture of Veracruz city, the coffee plantations and giant Olmec stone heads of Xalapa, and the country's highest mountain, Pico de Orizaba.

p177

Mexico City

RISING COSMOPOLITAN METROPOLIS

Mexico City showcases the verve of Mexican culture everywhere from designer museums to Frida Kahlo's house and street art. Its tranquil neighborhoods of Condesa, Roma and Coyoacán surprise with their cool converted mansions. Taste delicious street tacos or get dressed up for the world's finest *mole*, then follow up with mezcál cocktails.

p59

Yucatán Peninsula

MAYA SITES, BEACHES AND HISTORIC TOWNS

The Yucatán is the gateway to astonishing wonders made by human hands and Mother Nature alike. Bask on Caribbean beaches near Cancún, Tulum and Cozumel, then head inland to staggering ancient Maya sites like Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. You'll also find colorful towns packed with history: Mérida, Valladolid and Campeche.

p218

Oaxaca

ANCIENT CUSTOMS, CULTURE AND SUBLIME BEACHES

Pre-Hispanic traditions and absorbing modern art thrive in and around culturally rich Oaxaca City, as do the age-old practices in nearby mezcál country. Divine beaches and biodiverse wetlands hug Oaxaca's southern coast, while the misty mountains of the Sierra Norte provide enthralling wilderness escapes.

p344

Chiapas & Tabasco

WILD RUINS AND WATERFALLS

Mexico's southernmost states lure adventure-seekers to their jungle-clad ancient sites (such as extraordinary Yaxchilán), dreamy cascades and remote, pine-fringed lakes. Explore the amazing ruins of Palenque, learn about indigenous culture in San Cristóbal de las Casas, and then retreat to the wonderful water worlds of El Chiflón and Lagos de Montebello.

p297





GARYRIB/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Whale-watching, Cabo San Lucas (p565)

ITINERARIES

Baja Road Trip



Allow: 1 week **Distance:** 1200km


Driving the 1200km along Hwy 1 from Tijuana to Los Cabos is a classic Mexican road trip, passing deserts, dramatic coastlines, rock canyons and a number of colonial towns. Along the way, you might spot whales, go diving with whale sharks, sample wines, taste extraordinarily good fish tacos and try out the area's favorite activity: surfing.



1 2

TIJUANA TO ENSENADA ⌚ 1 DAY

From **Tijuana** (p590) head for **Valle de Guadalupe** (p584) for some wine tasting and a lunch of charcuterie. Savor the fish tacos (and more wines) of **Ensenada** (p582) and the surf of **San Miguel**, slightly north of here.

 **Detour:** From Ensenada, wind your way up to the Sierra de San Pedro Mártir, to experience a beautiful conifer forest and dense alpine scrub. ⌚ 2-hour drive



3

GUERRERO NEGRO ⌚ 1 DAY

Keep heading southwards via the Carretera Transpeninsular's spectacular desert scenery to the salt production center, **Guerrero Negro** (p589), which sits about halfway down Baja on the Pacific side. If you're here between February and March, look out for the California gray whales migrating south to give birth to calves in the nearby Laguna Ojo de Liebre.



4 LORETO 1 DAY

Cross the Desierto de San Ignacio to the leafy oases of San Ignacio, a date palm center with a Jesuit mission; Santa Rosalía, where the Iglesia de Santa Bárbara was designed by Gustave Eiffel; and Mulegé that has (confusingly) Mission Santa Rosalía. Once you hit **Loreto** (p578), you can explore some of the other missions that remain in the area, as well as artisan shops and historic architecture.



5 LA PAZ & AROUND 2 DAYS

You'll pass several stunning beaches before heading back inland and southeast towards **La Paz** (p570), the most 'Mexican' of Baja's cities. Spend a day or two enjoying the laid-back *malecón* (beach promenade), or hike in the nearby Sierra de la Laguna. Spend a day kayaking, swimming or snorkeling near the island of **Espíritu Santo** (p576), just north of La Paz, or visit its local sea lion colony.



6 LOS CABOS & AROUND 2 DAYS

Feel the spiritual energy of **Todos Santos** (p568). Head to **Cabo San Lucas** (p562) for action-packed beach activities. Sedate **San José del Cabo** (p562) has art galleries, dining options and cafes. Or plunge underwater at **Cabo Pulmo** (p569), the often forgotten third cape.

Detour: Head out on a water taxi or glass-bottomed boat to Land's End for a magical stone arch and sea lion colony. 2-hour boat ride



NAT.OTL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cascada de Tamul (p538), La Huasteca Potosina

ITINERARIES

Colonial Cities & Highland Forests

Allow: 10 days **Distance:** 1050km

This itinerary incorporates much of Mexico's 'cradle of independence' route, and takes into account the historic legacies of indigenous people as well as the struggle for independence with stops at monuments, museums, nature reserves and archaeological sites.



1
SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE
 ⌚ 2 DAYS

Start in **San Miguel de Allende** (p521), exploring the city's center, art galleries, boutiques and fabulous restaurants and rooftop bars. Spend a day in the surrounding hot springs (p527) or wineries (p528) or allow a half-day at **Cañada de la Virgen** (p528), all within one hour of town. Use San Miguel de Allende as a base for the next two days.



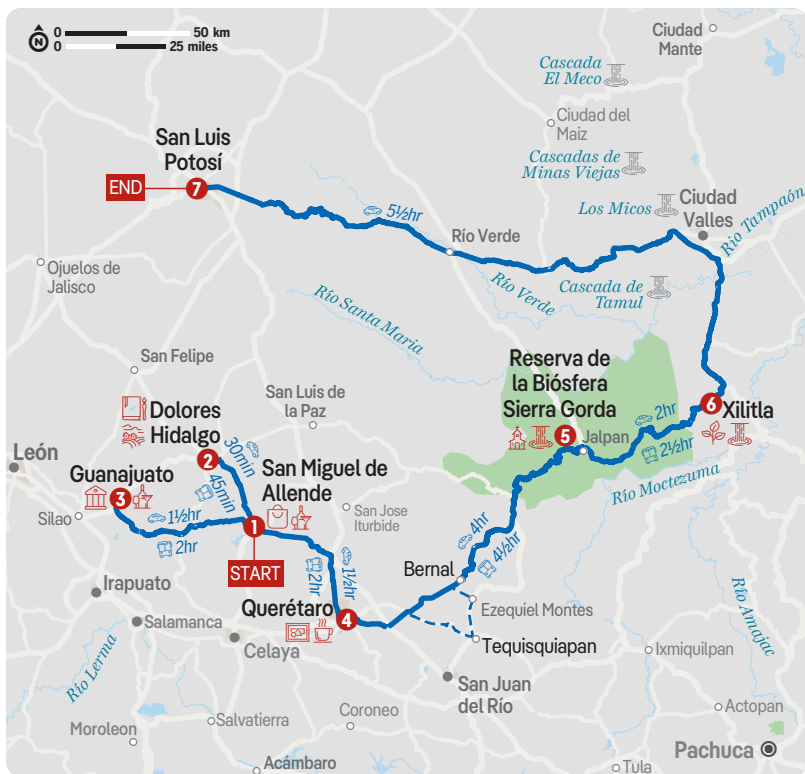
2
DOLORES HIDALGO ⌚ 1 DAY

Visit the lovely Mexican town of **Dolores Hidalgo** (p519), the central focus of Mexico's independence where Padre Hidalgo rallied the locals by launching his famous El Grito (The Cry) for independence. Visit the independence museums, grab a famous ice cream, shop for local ceramics and enjoy the ambience of a very genuine, small-town setting.



3
GUANAJUATO ⌚ 1 DAY

Guanajuato (p514), with its colonial center, pedestrian alleyways and colorful houses, is an ideal side trip or overnight from San Miguel de Allende. You can happily spend the day wandering from one museum to another, and heading up on the *teleférico* to El Pipila for sweeping views. Watch the sunset over a cocktail on a rooftop bar.



4 QUERÉTARO ⌚ 2 DAYS

Head next to **Querétaro** (p541) and spend a day and a half absorbing the independence past and amazing art galleries, aqueduct and coffee scene. On the second day do a side trip to **Tequisquiapan** and **Bernal** (p546), an easy one-hour (or so) drive, or do a formal tour on the **wine and cheese route** (p547).



5 RESERVA DE LA BIÓSFERA SIERRA GORDA ⌚ 2 DAYS

Brace yourself for the long and winding drive to **Jalpan** in La Biósfera Sierra Gorda (p549). Once there, visit at least one of the local missions. The following day explore the area's many waterfalls, rivers and cloud forest hikes or choose just one of the longer walks. Those who want to stay longer can visit the **Sótano del Barro** (p551).



6 7 XILITLA & SAN LUIS POTOSÍ ⌚ 3 DAYS

Head early to the jungle-strewn town of **Xilitla**, home to Las Pozas (p542). Descend the mountain via either **Sótano de las Golondrinas** or **Sótano de las Huahuas** and into the region of La Huasteca Potosina. If you have an extra two days, explore the region's waterfalls. If not, it's a 5½-hour drive to **San Luis Potosí** (p530), your final stop, from where you can catch a bus to San Miguel.



LEONID ANDRONOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Teotihuacán (p138)

ITINERARIES

Beaches & Temples

Allow: 1 month **Distance:** approx. 3700km

This classic journey from Mexico's heartland to its glorious Caribbean beaches offers superb cultural, natural and R&R experiences. You can cherry-pick your way through Mexico City's highlights, as well as ancient pyramids, cosmopolitan colonial cities, handicraft centers and jungles. Plus it allows for plenty of beach time.



1 MEXICO CITY ⌚ 4 DAYS

Explore exciting **Mexico City** (p59), especially its *centro histórico*, its anthropological Museum and art museums, and **Palacio de Bellas Artes**. Tuck into the street food and high-class restaurants, admire art deco architecture and wander beautiful neighborhoods with the ghosts of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and other noteworthy figures. Take a side trip to **Teotihuacán**, capital of ancient Mexico's biggest empire.



2 3 VERACRUZ & OAXACA ⌚ 6 DAYS

Travel to the fun-loving port city of **Veracruz** (p177) to embrace the art deco architecture and the country's highest mountain, **Pico de Orizaba**. It's a six-hour drive (or a 3½-hour flight) across the mountains to **Oaxaca** (p350). Spend a day visiting this cultured colonial city, another day at the ancient Zapotec capital, **Monte Albán**, and a day centered around a very long lunch.



4 5 OAXACA COAST & SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS ⌚ 3 DAYS

It's worth the long drive from Oaxaca (or flight via Mexico City) to one of the relaxed beach spots on the Pacific coast: **Puerto Escondido** (p377), **Mazunte**, **Zipolite** (p383) or **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chachahua** (p381). Enjoy the sun, surf and sand (plus other activities inland) before heading east to the mountain city of **San Cristóbal de las Casas** (p313).



6 7

PALENQUE & MÉRIDA

⌚ 6 DAYS

Palenque (p302) is one of the most stunning of the ancient Maya cities. Head into the **Lacandón Jungle** to visit local communities plus **Yaxchilán**. From **Palenque**, it's a five-hour drive to **Campeche** (p290), where you should spend a night. The next day, it's an easy 2½-hour drive to **Mérida** (p266), the best base to access the amazing ruins of Uxmal and sites along the **Ruta Puuc**.



8 9

CHICHÉN ITZÁ & TULUM

⌚ 5 DAYS

From **Mérida**, enjoy a full day at **Chichén Itzá** (p287), the most celebrated of all the Yucatán's Maya sites, a mere two-hour drive away. Then it's on to **Tulum** (p249), and its waterfront Maya ruin with spectacular vistas and a large hilltop castle. Hang out on Tulum's beaches. If you can drag yourself away, head northward along the **Riviera Maya** to **Isla Cozumel** (p244) for world-class snorkeling and diving.



10

CANCÚN & AROUND

⌚ 3 DAYS

Head northwards for two hours to the unabashed coastal resort of **Cancún** (p224), and end the journey with a party-style bang. If the all-inclusive nature of the place is too much, explore the surrounding cenotes and Maya sites, or bypass this entirely for **Isla Mujeres** or **Isla Holbox**, a 40-minute flight or a two-hour drive from Cancún, plus a short boat trip.



NANA/ISTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Copper Canyon (p600)

ITINERARIES

The Coast & Copper Canyon

Allow: 2–3 weeks **Distance:** approx. 1790km

This itinerary is for adventurous folks who are happy with unconventional routes (you can easily do the trip in reverse). The journey starts in Guadalajara, then heads west to the Pacific coast, and north to Mazatlán. It's a long journey to Los Mochis, but worth it for El Chepe and a week's adventure through the incredible Copper Canyon.



1 GUADALAJARA ⌚ 3 DAYS

Start in **Guadalajara** (p470), Mexico's second-biggest city, where the upgraded airport has good local and international connections. Discover the world of mariachi music, *charros* (Mexican cowboys) and excellent cuisine. Spend a day or two exploring the pastel-colored *pueblo mágico* of Tlaquepaque and hip Colonia Americana then travel beyond the city to Tequila (p487) and the Guachimontones pyramids (p485).



2 3 SAYULITA OR PUERTO VALLARTA ⌚ 2 DAYS

From Guadalajara it's a 4½ hour drive to Sayulita (p430); alternatively, you could head to the larger resort town of **Puerto Vallarta** (p415) further south. Catch some rays and waves for a couple of days or beach-hop your way along the coast both north and south of here, using one of the two towns as your base. These are great places to relax before a busier week ahead.



4 MAZATLÁN ⌚ 2 DAYS

Explore the much-revived **Mazatlán** (p404) and restore your energy over delicious grub at one of the town's excellent food markets, plus check out the ancient petroglyphs, just an hour's drive north. Shop 'til you drop for Mexican art and high-quality crafts in Old Mazatlán and grab a bike to cycle along the town's *malecón*.



5 LOS MOCHIS ⌚ 1 DAY

Los Mochis, a 4½-hour drive north, is the western transport hub for the unforgettable train ride on **El Chepe** (p602). There's not a huge amount to see here, though the seafood is said to be the best in northern Mexico. If you have time to kill, pop into the Museo Regional del Valle del Fuerte and the Jardín Botánico Benjamin Francis Johnston. But don't miss the train!



6 COPPER CANYON ⌚ 1 WEEK

A direct journey on El Chepe (without any stops, ending in Chihuahua) only takes 10 hours, but you won't get the chance to get off the train and explore the **Copper Canyon** (p600). If you allow one week, you can alight at some lovely places (and dive deep into local villages and the countryside) along the way: El Fuerte, Bahuichivo, Divisadero, Creel and the final stop, **Chihuahua**.

WHEN TO GO

Given its varied topography and its beaches, deserts and jungles, there's always a perfect time to visit *somewhere* in Mexico.

Although there are seasons in Mexico, for visitors it's more about whether it's a rainy or dry period. Given its enormously diverse topography and geography, Mexico will be dry, wet, cold or warm in different parts of the country. Do your research during planning stages. Rainy season kicks in June to August, bringing luscious green and flowering plants to the highlands and making some jungle areas inaccessible. January is a good time to hit the coast, though Christmas to New Year (and Semana Santa in March or April) sees locals on the road and coastal places packed. February is dry everywhere. May ushers in low season but also humidity in the south. August brings crowds from North America and Europe, and September is hurricane season on the Yucatán Peninsula. November is an ideal time to be anywhere (if cooler in the north). December sees the Christmas crowds, both local and foreign.

Worth Reserving

Outside of the usual tourist resorts, it's worth reserving ahead in Semana Santa, Mexico's Easter week, and the Christmas to New Year period, when Mexicans take their breaks with families very seriously. Prices will be considerably higher during these times. Festivals usually mean higher rates, too. Beyond these, rates may vary around the country according to different seasons.



I LIVE HERE

FALL DELIGHTS

Guide Alberto Hernández de Lago
Favorite 'secret' locations in Mexico City. (mexico-secretoquiado.com)

'My favorite season to be in Mexico City is autumn: around October to December. Even though the temperature hardly changes here throughout the year, during this time it drops a few degrees. I love this. This is a time of festivities. In October, there are many festivals here. I especially enjoy the flower festival when the neighborhood of Polanco is covered with flowers. The Christmas preparations are beautiful, too.'

WATER TEMPERATURES IN QUINTANA ROO

August sees the warmest waters in Quintana Roo beaches, with an average around 85°F (29°C). The coldest month is January, but even then the average water temperature is a balmy 77°F (25°C).



Tulum ruins (p250)

Weather Through the Year



JANUARY

Ave. daytime max: **71.6°F / 22°C**

Rainfall: 0.4 inches / 10ml

FEBRUARY

Ave. daytime max: **73.4°F / 23°C**

Rainfall: 0.2 inches / 5ml

MARCH

Ave. daytime max: **78.8°F / 26°C**

Rainfall: 0.5 inches / 14ml

APRIL

Ave. daytime max: **78.8°F / 26°C**

Rainfall: 0.5 inches / 14ml

MAY

Ave. daytime max: **71.6°F / 27°C**

Rainfall: 0.9 inches / 24 ml

JUNE

Ave. daytime max: **78.8°F / 26°C**

Rainfall: 2.4 inches / 61ml



DRY MONTHS

Sure, it's winter in the northern hemisphere, but December to April are Mexico's driest months. While the average daytime temperature typically ranges between 50°F and 90°F (10°C to 32°C), don't be fooled. Temperatures can drop significantly at night; check your destination and be sure to pack layers.

Party time! Festival (and Fiesta) Fun

Semana Santa (Easter week) sees church services, solemn processions and age-old rituals. Enormous crowds attend a very 'real' re-enactment of the Crucifixion in Iztapalapa, Mexico City.

April

All of Mexico commemorates **Día de Muertos**, the country's All Souls' and All Saints' Days, with altars, marigolds, and sugar skulls. See p55 for the best places to celebrate.

November

Everyone from community organizations to school children celebrate **Día de la Revolución** (Revolution Day); think groups of mini Pancho Villas (with hat and moustache). 📅 **November**

Over nine nights of **Las Posadas**, locals recreate the journey of Joseph and Mary. Followed by the community, the crowd ends at the local church where a mass is given. It culminates with the birth of Jesus at Christmas followed by a midnight feast in people's homes. 📅 **December**

Quirkier Parties Worth Coming For

Chiapa de Corzo (p326) celebrates the **Fiesta de Enero**, a 12-day festival with regional food, music, and the famous Parachico masked dance. It honors local patron saints (St Sebastian, the Black Christ of Esquipulas, and St Anthony Abbot). 📅 **January**

Visitors mob Chichén Itzá (p287) for the **spring and autumnal equinoxes**, when shadows on El Castillo resemble a serpent. It continues for a week preceding and following each equinox.

March and September

Feria Huamantla (p158) features parades, cyclists and music. On the final evening, La Noche Que Nadie Duerme ('The Night That Nobody Sleeps'), locals blanket the town's streets with elaborate flower and sawdust *tapetes*, 'carpets'. 📅 **August**

Mariachis head to Guadalajara (p470) to jam and 'battle' with their trumpets, guitars and voices at the noisy **Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi** festival. 📅 **Late August to early September**

I LIVE HERE

SEASONAL SENSATIONS

Giovanna Navarro is the hotel manager at Pug Seal Allan Poe in Polanco, Mexico City. @haurieya

'I love the rainy season in Mexico City. It's never cold as the sun always appears at some stage. I love how the rain hits the city. When a downpour stops and you go outside, everything glistens and places such as the National Palace and the Zócolo look amazing. Rain brings the architecture alive and because of this you can feel the history.

After the rain, the city sounds different, too.'



Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi



COLD WIND

You'll know when it arrives and the locals will mumble: 'el Norte.'

It's when a freezing north-easterly wind, originating in the Gulf of Mexico, hits the states along the Gulf: Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, and Yucatán.



JULY

Ave. daytime max: **75.2°F / 24°C**

Rainfall: 2.7 inches / 70ml



AUGUST

Ave. daytime max: **77°F / 25°C**

Rainfall: 2.2 inches / 55ml



SEPTEMBER

Ave. daytime max: **77°F / 25°C**

Rainfall: 1.5 inches / 38ml



OCTOBER

Ave. daytime max: **75.2°F / 24°C**

Rainfall: 0.7 inches / 18ml



NOVEMBER

Ave. daytime max: **73.4°F / 23°C**

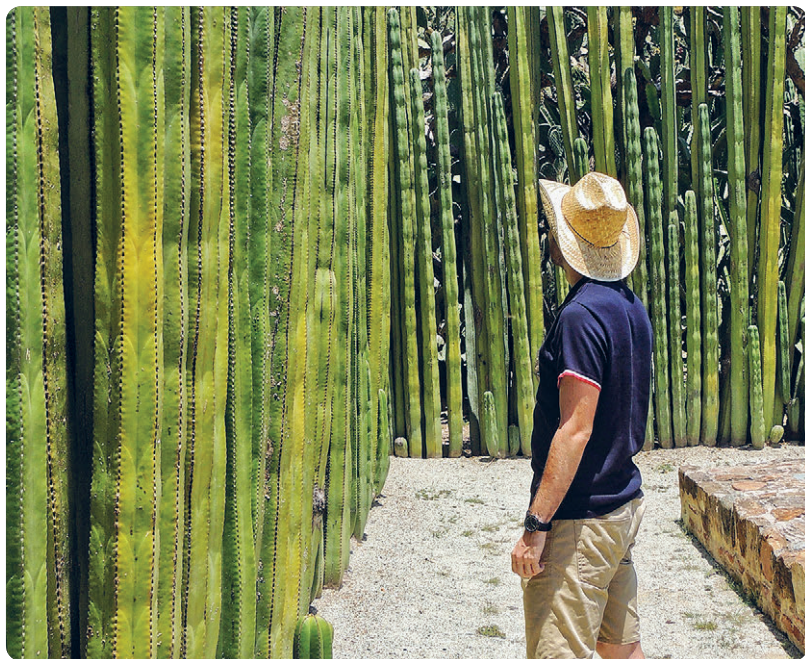
Rainfall: 0.1 inches / 2ml



DECEMBER

Ave. daytime max: **73.4°F / 23°C**

Rainfall: 0.1 inches / 2ml



LEFT: OLIGALLEGO/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: CINEMATIC COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca, (p362)

GET PREPARED FOR MEXICO

Useful things to load in your bag, your ears; and your brain

Clothes

Layers The weather varies around Mexico so do your homework. For Gulf beaches, from May to October it's hot and humid: pack cotton layers and quick-dry items. A rain jacket is a must anywhere in Mexico during rainy season. If you're traveling anywhere beyond the coast between May to October, take a warm jacket or sweater for evenings.

Shoes For coastal areas, water shoes are very useful. Beyond this, sturdy walking shoes are a good idea; high heels are problematic in most places outside large cities, due to uneven sidewalks.

Hats The sun is extremely strong all over Mexico: a hat (and sunscreen) are obligatory. Don't even think of going to a

Manners

Greeting others ('*buenos días/tardes*') including strangers, is usual.

Use señor or señora/señorita, especially when requesting something.

In restaurants, it's common to **receive and initiate** a '*buen provecho*' ('enjoy your meal'; also used at the table before you eat with others).

It's common for Mexicans to touch when greeting or being introduced: they shake hands or kiss on one cheek.

historic site or a beach without one. The highlands (think higher altitude) can be punishing, too.



Like Water for Chocolate (Laura Esquivel, 1992) Nothing captures the flavors of both love and Mexican cooking like this book (and movie).



Mañana Forever: Mexico and the Mexicans (2012, Jorge Castañeda) A former foreign minister's hefty take on the complexities of Mexican culture and politics.



American Dirt (Jeanine Cummins, 2020) A fictional account that chronicles the journey of a Mexican woman and her son to reach the United States.



The Labyrinth of Solitude (Octavio Paz, 1950) A book-length essay by the Mexican Nobel-laureate poet; looks at Mexico's identity, or rather, search for it.

Words

Hola (*oh-lah*) is how you say 'hello' in Mexico

Por favor or 'please' comes in very handy, even if you point to something in a store.

Gracias is 'thank you,' usually used (and always appreciated) in Mexico

Ayúdame means 'help (me)'

La cuenta por favor means 'the check (bill), please,' something you need to do in Mexican restaurants; a server does not initiate this.

No muy picoso, por favor is useful if you don't want too much of a spicy kick in your cuisine.

No entiendo means 'I don't understand.'

Habla inglés, por favor? is the most polite way of asking if someone speaks English

Cuanto cuesta? for 'how much is it/does it cost?'

Tiene cambio? The perplexing shortage of small change means you might be asked this if you hand over large notes (the change-giver wanting smaller notes or coins).

Puedo verlo? is a polite way of asking if you can look at something at a market stall or in a store.

Soy vegetariano/a (masculine/feminine) or **soy vegano/a** or even **no como carne**. Non-meat eaters will need to use one of these to make clear that you're a vegetarian or vegan. Nevertheless, it might be assumed you eat chicken and fish in which case you add **ni pollo, ni pescado** (nor chicken, nor fish).

📺 WATCH



Amores Perros (Alejandro González Iñárritu; 2000) A gritty, interlinked story that put the Mexican director on the map.

Roma (Alejandro González Iñárritu; 2018) Follows the life of a Mixteco (indigenous Mesoamerican) housekeeper.

Coco (Lee Unkrich; 2017) A humorous and touching children's animation and fantasy based on Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead).

Y Tu Mamá También (pictured above; Alfonso Cuarón; 2001) A coming-of-age road trip movie about two teenagers from Mexico City and set in 1999.

🎧 LISTEN

Mexico Matters (CSIS; csis.org/podcasts/mexico-matters) An interesting, intellectual podcast covering the full gamut of Mexican foreign policy, economics, trade and security.

Lo mejor de José Alfredo Jiménez (José Alfredo Jiménez; 1990) Much-loved José Alfredo Jiménez is still considered the King of Ranchero (Mexican country music).

Error (The Warning; 2022) The Warning, a trio of Mexican sisters from Monterrey, have hit the ratings sticks in the hard rock/metallica scene since 2013.

Vestido de Etiqueta por Eduardo Magallanes (Juan Gabriel; 2016) Mexico's beloved pop icon released this weeks before his death. His music covers everything from *rancheras* to disco.



LUNAMARINA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

cochinita pibil (slow-cooked pork)

THE FOOD SCENE

From scrumptious street tacos to six-course tasting menus, Mexico has one of the world's most diverse and exciting cuisine scenes.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Mexicans live for their food. Preparing and enjoying meals are important parts of the day, and local ingredients are integral to their preparations. There are three staple ingredients of Mexican cuisine: beans, chilies and corn. These were all grown before the Spanish arrived and continue to form the basis for many dishes, even in the fanciest of restaurants. That doesn't mean the flavors and meals are the same throughout Mexico. Each region has its own variations on dishes, such as seafood (coastal areas), enchiladas (with different fillings, depending where you are), and *pozoles* (stew-like soups). Location specialties are common too, including the likes of *moles* (Oaxaca and inland) and *cochinita pibil* (slow-cooked pork in Yucatán, for example).

Dishes aside, food is a means of communication for Mexicans. The book and movie title, *Like Water for Chocolate*, encapsulates this beautifully. In Mexico, food gives comfort and shows love. Whatever your foodie preferences, you'll leave here very satiated.

Moiles

For many Mexicans, *mole* – a rich, thick sauce prepared with a chili base, nuts and spices – defines Mexican cuisine. Traditionally, it smothers a plate of chicken, turkey or pork, though for many, *mole* (the sauce) is the dish. Many visitors hear about chocolate *mole*, one of the ingredients of *mole poblano* from Puebla (see p150). But Mexicans agree that Oaxaca is 'where it's at' for *moiles*. Known as 'the Land of Seven Moiles,' Oaxaca's signatures include *mole*

Best Mexican dishes

COCHINITA PIBIL

Yucatán's marinated, slow-roasted pork (like pulled pork) served on tacos with trimmings.

TACO DE PESCADO

Fried or grilled fish tacos are a specialty of oceanside Baja California.

BIRRIA

Braised kid-goat stew from Jalisco, served with herb-filled tomato broth.

negro (think a hint of chocolate), *mole amarillo*, *mole verde*, *mole colorado*, *mole rojo*, *manch manteles* and *chichilo negro*.

Spice Up Your Life (or Not)

Contrary to belief, not all Mexican food is spicy. Sure, some dishes have a kick, especially those in Yucatán that favor habanero chilies, one of the world's spiciest peppers. But when cooked, they are usually milder. Even chili dishes, such as the delicious stuffed *chile enogada*, are generally soaked to lose their 'kick'. Note, however: salsas (sauces or relishes) tend to comprise raw peppers and can be *hot*. They're placed in the middle of a table and are used at the diner's discretion, just as some cultures use salt and pepper.

Vegetarians & Vegans

In much of Mexico, '*vegetariano*' is simply not in the eating lexicon. As for *vegano*? Think Mars. In larger cities such as Mexico City or tourist-oriented San Miguel de Allende, vegan equals hip and you'll find specialty restaurants (see p110). In any restaurant, vegetarians can request common ingredients – eggs, rice, cheese and avocado – with staples of corn, beans and chilis. Wrap these in a fresh, warm tortilla

and you have yourself a tasty bite. Many traditional Mexican snacks are vegetarian: *quesadillas* are stuffed with the likes of *nopales* (cactus-leaf), *huitlacoche* (corn fungus) and zucchini flowers. *Arroz a la mexicana* (Mexican-style rice) is another tasty option. Be aware that some dishes are prepared using meat broths or animal fats, such as *manteca* (lard).



FOOD & WINE FESTIVALS

Feria del Ponche, Pan y Café (pictured above; p507) In April, Colima celebrates all good things: punch, bread and coffee! (Arrive hungry.)

Festival del Mole Poblano (<https://feriadelosmole.com>) Each June, Puebla celebrates its famous contribution to Mexican delights, the chocolate-infused *mole poblano* sauce.

Catando (<https://catando-mexico.com>) Held in late November in Guanajuato City, wine growers from all over the country gather to showcase their finest creations; you can wander or buy a ticket for tastings.

Festival Gourmet International (<https://festivalgourmet.com.mx/en>) In November, guest chefs descend on Puerto Vallarta for a 10-day 'feast-athon' of culinary arts.

Feria del Queso y Vino (www.feriadelquesoyvino.com.mx/) Around May or June, the *pueblo mágico* (magical village) of Tequisquiapan hosts local wine and cheese producers.



Tlayuda

HUACHINANGO A LA VERACRUZANA

Marinated red snapper cooked in a sauce with olives and capers.

TLAYUDA

A massive Oaxacan corn tortilla with beans and accompanied by meat.

SOPA DE LIMA

Traditional soup from Yucatán, with turkey or chicken in a delicious lime-enhanced broth.

ARROZ A LA TUMBADA

The traditional seafood rice of Veracruz, prepared in a clay pot.

CABRITO

Monterrey's specialty: brined baby goat trussed and slow-cooked over coals.

Local Specialities

Mexican cuisine is made up of local specialities. Wherever you visit, ask what the local dish, snack or delicacy is. Specialities worth looking out for include the following.

Dare to Try

Tacos de ojos (Cow's eye tacos) Eyeballs from a cow, chopped, steamed and used as a taco filling.

Ahuatlle (water-fly eggs) A pre-Hispanic food comprising insect eggs and water-fly larvae.

Escamoles Ant larvae that resembles rice.

Chapulines Grasshoppers that are dried, smoked or fried in lime and chili powder.

Snacks & Street Food

Tamale A corn mixture that's steamed in a corn husk (or banana leaf) and filled with cheese, meats or chili.

Gordita A masa (corn dough) pocket cooked on a comal and stuffed with fillings.

Quesadilla A tortilla stuffed with cheese, folded into a moon shape, and fried.

Churros Fried dough sticks, sometimes filled with a chocolate or dulce de leche sauce.



Chapulines

Drinks

Pulque, a pre-Hispanic beverage made from sap (aguamiel) of fermented agave, is one of Mexico's most popular alcoholic drinks alongside tequila and mezcal, and is the oldest of the three. Whilst tequila used to be the most familiar to visitors, *pulque* and mezcal have hit the market big time as the hip drink among younger drinkers. See p491 for a rundown of mezcal and tequila.

MEALS OF A LIFETIME

Máximo (p98) Brainchild of Eduardo García, the fresh ingredients, innovative and ever-changing menu are simply marvellous.

Rosetta This restaurant (not the also-wonderful bakery on p101) in Mexico City sees a nouveau twist to traditional Mexican dishes.

Alcade (<https://alcalde.com.mx>) This gem of Guadalajara receives world and Latin America accolades. Don't miss the tasting menu.

Casa Oaxaca (p353) Chef Alejandro Ruiz continues to delight with his upscale take on traditional Oaxacan.

Ku'uk (www.kuukrestaurant.com) Set in one of Mérida's grand, historic mansions, it serves a modern, beautifully presented take on Yucatecan cuisine.

Áperi (<https://doscasas.com.mx/aperi>) This performance piece holds its own in San Miguel de Allende.

THE YEAR IN FOOD



MAR-APR

Given this is the lead-up to Semana Santa (Easter week), Lent menus incorporate meatless ingredients such as *romeritos* (seepweed, a wild plant) that's served in a *mole* sauce.



MAY-OCT

Huitlacoche, the grey-colored fungus that grows on corn cobs, follows the corn season; the nearest thing to a 'truffle', its mild taste is the perfect addition to a tortilla.



AUG-SEP

Walnuts and pomegranates are in season; they form part of a dish of stuffed *chile en nogada* whose ingredients match the colors of the Mexican flag, perfect for Independence Day (September 16).



OCT-DEC

Pan de muertos (bread of the dead) and *calaveras de azúcar* (sugar skulls) hit the streets for Day of the Dead, while turkey and *bacalao* (dried codfish) form the basis of a Mexican Christmas feast.

TOP: FANFO/SHUTTERSTOCK © BOTTOM: STOCKCREATIONS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Top: *Huachinango a la veracruzana* (p187); Bottom: *Quesadillas*



ANDREA IZZOTTI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Kayaking, El Arco (p563)

THE OUTDOORS

Mexico is an awesome destination for those after fresh air, hiking, water adventures, horseback riding, bird-watching and much more.

With its wide ranging topography, jungles and cloud forests, Mexico's range of outdoor activities is a boon to fresh-air fiends and adventure enthusiasts. Adrenaline seekers can conquer tall peaks and ride serious waves or white water. Mellow adventurers can explore bottomless sinkholes and wander through forests. Those yearning to get off the beaten track can ride horses across deserts or enjoy bird-watching in the jungle. Then there's whale-watching, kitesurfing and canyon trips. You name outdoor fun and Mexico is bound to have it.

Surfing

With 7000 miles of coastline, it's not surprising that Mexico's up there when it comes

to rolling waves... and surfing. The country's best surfing is found primarily along the Pacific coast, with Puerto Escondido, Mazatlán, Sayulita, La Saladita, La Ticla and Troncones among the hot spots. Oaxaca's largely unspoiled Pacific coast hides many surprisingly under-the-radar spots, too. The Pacific coast's Baja Peninsula is another favorite, with relatively uncrowded waves in San Miguel, near Ensenada, and many beaches south with more of the same. Cerritos and Zippers both have big swells and big crowds.

There's a decent range of conditions and a good variety of left and right breaks for all surfing standards, from rookies to advanced. Generally (though this varies depending where you are), waves are at peak

More Outdoor Options

HORSEBACK RIDING

Ride into the desert among the cacti with local horse whisperers in **Real de Catorce, p535**.

BIRD-WATCHING

Grab some prime bird-watching opportunities in motorboats on **Laguna de Manialtepec (p380)**, a mangrove-filled lagoon near Puerto Escondido.

WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

Winter trade winds pull in the windsurfers, kiteboarders and foil surfers to **La Ventana, p577**.

FAMILY ADVENTURES

Reserva Mariposa Monarca (p496) Be wowed by millions of fluttering butterflies in this forest reserve before it's too late (they are sadly in decline).

Learn to surf (p430) Kids can learn to surf on gentle waves in Sayulita, Mazatlan and Puerto Escondido.

Museo Nacional de Antropología (p116) The museum's fascinating exhibits – skulls, statues and carvings – are a kids' paradise.

Playa Escobilla (p382) Watch an arribada, when thousands of turtles venture ashore to lay eggs in a mass-nesting event.

Pacific coast (p421) and Baja Peninsula (p581) Spot turtles, dolphins and whales on wildlife-spotting boat expeditions.

Creel (p606) The perfect base for exploring Copper Canyon on horseback, waterfall walks, zip lines and famous train ride.

between April and October. Be aware that hurricanes between July and October can bring in huge, and dangerous, swells.

Numerous surf schools offer classes for all skills levels.

Walking & Hiking

Walking and hiking comes in all forms in Mexico, from shorter, more straightforward strolls along rivers to waterfalls or archaeological sites in jungle forests, to steep mountain treks. Serious trekkers can head up the country's lofty volcanoes, and there are plenty of these to summit. The highest volcano is the 5636m Pico de Orizaba in Veracruz state, where you can also climb Volcán

San Martín, but you can also do the snow-capped Nevado de Colima, as well as Iztaccihuatl peak or Volcán Parícutín, the 'youngest' volcano in the Americas. While many take the train through the Copper Canyon, there's also some great canyon-rim hiking. Elsewhere, in Barranca de Huentitán in Guadalajara, you can hike up an old and ultra-steep rail track.

Diving & Snorkeling

Plunge into Mexico the watery way! The country's clear waters make for great diving and snorkeling and this extends way beyond the ocean. Cenotes, Yucatán's famous sinkholes, plus lakes in La Huasteca Potosina, provide for some extraordinary deep-water snorkeling and diving experiences. For ocean divers, the calmest diving conditions are found in the warm, clear waters of the Caribbean coast, off Quintana Roo and along the Yucatán Peninsula's Riviera Maya and Costa Maya. Baja Peninsula also offers excellent opportunities, especially the coral reef near Cabo Pulmo, plus Loreta and areas around La Paz. Huatulco in Oaxaca has 30-plus, fish-filled dive sites. The Gulf coast, too, has some great snorkeling spots, such as the beautiful sandbar of Cancun. In Isla Mujeres, Isla Holbox and Baja's La Paz you can dive with whale sharks.



Horseback riding, Real de Catorce (p535)

WHALE-WATCHING

Between mid-December and mid-March, head out to spot whales in **Puerto Escondido, p379**, and **Santa Cruz Huatulco, p390**.

RAFTING

Raft or kayak down the **Jalcomulco rapids, p200**, some of the country's best, for all levels of white-water enthusiasts.

BIKING

Copper Canyon, p606, is known for its train trip, but you can also cycle the nearby rock valleys, lakes and forests.

PLUNGE POOLS, RAPIDS & CASCADES

Plunge into inviting natural pools, tremendous falls and gushing rapids near **Palenque, p309**.

0 250 miles 500 km



Surfing

- 1 Sayulita (p430)
- 2 Troncones (p447)
- 3 La Saladita (p451)
- 4 Puerto Escondido (p378)
- 5 Cerritos (p568)
- 6 Zippers (p566)
- 7 San Miguel (p588)



Snorkeling & Diving

- 1 Cabo Pulmo (p569)
- 2 Loreto (p578)
- 3 Cancunco (p187)
- 4 Isla Mujeres (p231)
- 5 Akumal (p256)
- 6 Los Arcos National Park (p423)
- 7 Cenote dos Ojos (p260)



Volcano Walks & Hikes

- 1 Volcán Parícutín (p503)
- 2 Volcán Nevado de Colima (p506)
- 3 Volcán San Martín (p212)
- 4 Iztaccihuatl (p155)
- 5 Nevado de Toluca (p175)

ACTION AREAS

Where to find Mexico's best outdoor activities.



Walking/Hiking

- 1 Sierra Norte (p371)
- 2 Aqueduct Trail, Etla (p365)
- 3 Barranca de Huentitán (p480)
- 4 Parque Ecológico Chipinque (p628)
- 5 Sierra Madre (La Bufa p440; Cueva de Majahua p448)



National Parks

- 1 Cañón del Sumidero (p325)
- 2 Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua (p381)
- 3 Parque Nacional Iztaccíhuatl-Popocatepetl (p155)
- 4 Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda (p549)
- 5 Parque Nacional Lagunas de Montebello (p337)





Uxmal (p276)

TRIP PLANNER

EXPLORE ANCIENT RUINS

Pre-Hispanic sites are scattered across Mexico, mostly around the center, south and southeast of the country. Various options are nestled in lush jungles, while others are on high desert plains. Wherever they are, they are extraordinary for their settings and history and reveal much about the cultures and civilizations that built them.

How to Approach Mexico's Ancient Sites

SITE PRACTICALITIES

The most famous sites are often thronged with crowds, so arrive early before the buses. Other sites are hidden away on remote hilltops or shrouded in thick jungle (such as Calakmul). These can be the most thrilling and rewarding to visit for those with an adventurous spirit. Due to their remote locations and the effort it takes to get there, they tend to be less crowded, too.

Admission to archaeological sites costs from nothing to M\$500, depending on the site and its popularity. Guide costs vary according to the length of the tour and location; licensed guides at the sites tend to have a set fee while others are open to negotiation.

Go protected against the sun and insects, especially mosquitoes at the jungle sites. Take water; preferably in your own recyclable bottles. And bring some (eco-friendly) snacks – especially to little-known sites, which may have no amenities.

ACCESSIBILITY & LANGUAGE

Major sites are usually wheelchair accessible but lesser-known sites can have rudimentary pathways. At lesser-known sites you may be walking on rocky pathways or grassy areas with no track at all.

Explanatory signs are often in Spanish only, or occasionally in Spanish and English or a local indigenous language. Few, if any, have tactile signage for visually impaired visitors.

TOP 10 SITES

All sites are interesting for the context, history and locations (some are more remote than others, such as Yaxchilán that requires a one-hour boat trip along a river). The following are our top 10 recommendations, and the best time of year to visit them:

Teotihuacán, central Mexico. Year-round
Chichén Itzá, Yucatán Peninsula. September to November
Uxmal, Yucatán Peninsula. September to November
Palenque, Chiapas. October to May
Monte Albán, Oaxaca. October to May

Yaxchilán, Chiapas. October to May
Calakmul, Yucatán Peninsula. November to May
Tulum, Yucatán Peninsula. November to June
El Tajín, Veracruz. October to May
Templo Mayor, Mexico City. Year-round

GUIDES

Licensed guides gather around the ticketing offices at most sites. Many speak several languages and you can have a brief chat with them before deciding. A good guide can bring the site to life. Tours usually last between one and two hours after which time you can roam around the site. For remote sites, guided tours are often available from nearby towns.

LESSER-KNOWN SITES

Sites are being uncovered or excavated all the time, and some little-known gems are as worthy of a visit as the most famous locations. **Xihuacan** (p455) is said by some archaeologists to rival Teotihuacán or Chichén Itzá in importance.

Cañada de la Virgen (p528) is an extraordinary pre-Hispanic site with an impressive pyramid, while **Guachimontones** (p485), another site with pyramids, has an excellent museum.

For petroglyphs, **Altavista** (p435) is the best-preserved site in Nayarit, and **Las Labradas** (p413) has an intriguing selection believed to be tied to the summer solstice.



Monte Alban (p364)

MEXICO'S ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

Archaeologists have been uncovering Mexico's ancient ruins since the 19th century. Many impressive sites have been restored and made accessible to visitors, others have been explored in part only, and thousands others remain untouched, buried beneath the earth or hidden in forests. The major civilizations include:

- **Olmec** (1200 BCE to 400 BCE) Centered on the Gulf coast, Mexico's 'mother culture' is famed for the giant stone sculptures known as Olmec heads.
- **Teotihuacán** (first seven centuries CE) Located 50km from Mexico City, the huge pyramids are a legacy of the largest of all of ancient Mexican empires.
- **Maya** (250 CE and 900 CE) Located mainly in southeast Mexico and neighboring Guatemala and Belize, the Maya are famed for their exquisite temples and stone sculptures. (Maya culture lives on today among the indigenous populations in these regions).
- **Toltec** (750 CE to 1150 CE) A name for the culture of a number of central Mexican city-states. The warrior sculptures of Tula are the most celebrated.
- **Aztec** (1325 CE to 1521 CE) With their capital at Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), the Aztecs ruled most of central Mexico from the Gulf coast to the Pacific. The best known Aztec site is the Templo Mayor in Mexico.



R. M. NUÑEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Xantolo, Guanajuato

TRIP PLANNER

MEXICO'S DÍA DE MUERTOS

Few festivals reveal more about Mexican spirituality and understanding of death than Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), the remembrance and celebration of departed loved ones on November 1 and 2 (All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day in some religions around the world).

The Where, What & How

ORIGINS OF THE FESTIVAL

The tradition is a mash-up of 3000-year-old pre-Hispanic beliefs and Catholicism. According to Aztec lore, the dead reside in an underworld called Mictlán but on Día de Muertos, which was originally celebrated in August, they can return to their homes. The Catholic conquistadors, hoping to assimilate the holiday through their favored tactic of cultural *mestizaje* (mixing), moved it to coincide with All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2).

HOW IT'S CELEBRATED

By celebrating death, Mexicans salute life. And they do it the way they celebrate ev-

erything else – with food, drinks, music, friends, family and colorful decoration. In 2008, Unesco recognized the importance of Día de Muertos by adding the holiday to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

Among many indigenous communities, Día de Muertos is still very much a religious and spiritual event. For them, the observance might more appropriately be called Noche de Muertos (Night of the Dead), because families spend entire nights at the graveyard communing with the departed. Depending where you are, it can be a joyous affair involving drinking and live mariachi music. In other places, families pay their respects by cleaning the grave site, where

**Places with major parades,**

such as Mexico City and Patzcuaro, attract huge crowds. Plan ahead with accommodations and your spot on the parade route.

To gain greater insight into the nuances and traditions

of the festival, consider joining a guided tour such as those offered by Mexico City-based **Aztec Explorers** (aztecxplorers.com).

You don't need to be part of a parade; indeed, visiting altars (p75) can be more moving and

genuine an experience.

Even in locations with parades, have your face painted and wear costumes, but also recognize the festival's deep spiritual element. Be respectful of local customs.

it's a serious occasion and there's no partying (indeed, alcohol is not permitted in some cemeteries).

OFRENDA & CALAVERAS

The centerpiece of the celebrations is the *ofrenda* (altar) that is set up in a home or graveyard. It's decorated with orange and yellow *cempasúchil* (marigold) flowers to guide the dead back to their place of rest, along with plates of *tamales*, sugar-shaped skulls and *pan de muerto*, a sweet bread. There's always a container of water (to quench the thirst of the spirits) as well as the favorite foods or dishes of the deceased. Copal (tree-resin) incense may be burnt to purify the area around the altar.

Skeletons and *calaveras* (models of skulls) are other important elements. These were inspired by the images of artist José Guadalupe Posada, the artist-creator of La Catrina, the elaborately dressed 'personified' skeleton, who represents death and was a satirical take on society of the time.



**Día de Muertos parade,
Mexico City**

BEST PLACES TO CELEBRATE

- **Mexico City** Festivities include several major parades, the construction of *ofrendas* to deceased celebrities and worthies, the display of giant decorated skulls and *alebrijes* (animal figures) and *papel picado* (tissue paper decorations), along with face-painting and other events. p75
- **Oaxaca city** One of Mexico's premier Muertos destinations; costume processions, musical parades and candlelit vigils take place all over Oaxaca City and in nearby villages. p355
- **Lago de Pátzcuaro** Thanks to Pátzcuaro's various beautiful cultural traditions, some say this is the only place to witness this special day: expect *cempasúchil*, *pan de muerto*, candles and beverages to entice the souls, along with children parading as *Catrin*as and lit-up boats floating on the lake. p499
- **Mérida** (p266) The Paseo de las Ánimas is a magnet for visitors (though it's a new tradition to the city, having started in 2008). On the evening of October 31, participants dress up in traditional costume and have their faces painted in the style of La Catrina.
- **La Huasteca** In this region, which covers parts of the states of Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Puebla, Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato, the day is known as *Xantolo* (pronounced 'shantolo'). Parades here are noisy, day-long affairs with locals dressed up in hand-carved wooden masks and local traditional dress.



MEXICO

THE GUIDE



Chapters in this section are organised by hubs and their surrounding areas. We see the hub as your base in the destination, where you'll find unique experiences, local insights, insider tips and expert recommendations. It's also your gateway to the surrounding area, where you'll see what and how much you can do from there.

Cenote Suytun (p283), Yucatán Peninsula

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FERRENTINITE/GETTY IMAGES ©

Above: El Ángel (p94), Paseo de la Reforma ; Opposite: Museo Frida Kahlo (p127)

THE MAIN AREAS

CENTRO HISTÓRICO

Buzzing historic downtown. **p64**

ALAMEDA CENTRAL

Cultural outdoor plazas. **p78**

JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Gay bars and emerging cool. **p89**

ROMA

Hip stores in beautiful buildings. **p97**

MEXICO CITY



PALACES, TACOS, FRIDA AND COCKTAILS

The secret is out: the Mexican metropolis has glamour and grungy realness sorted. Mexico City is safer and oh so much cooler than you imagined.

In Mexico City, the whole breadth of Mexican arts and culture is ever alive. Layers of its storied history shimmer everywhere you look. Centuries-old forms of performing arts such as pre-Hispanic dances and mariachi music still play in public plazas. Vivacious parades, as seen on the Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), celebrate life and draw crowds. This is where

you can squint up at the sparkling ceiling of a mighty cathedral, and then venture underground to witness the foundations of Aztec temples that refuse to stay buried. Family recipes stretching from Oaxaca to the Yucatán are fashioned into the dishes of the country's most esteemed chefs in Polanco, or distilled into the sizzle of the street-food hot plate around the corner outside, where the staff really eat.

Nothing is austere. This city is the easiest place in the world in which to take a photo. In the plush green park of upmarket Condesa, street sellers parade their flocks of balloons while dog walkers march an

army of mismatched pups. It's an ongoing street spectacle best enjoyed with a *churro* or fresh tuna *tostada* from its many leafy restaurants, while in bohemian Roma, designer boutiques, fashionable cafes and Parisian mansions dazzle passersby. In recent years, these neighborhoods have kept a stream of digital creatives entranced enough to linger here.

This is the city of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, so art is sewn into its very fabric. World-class museums cover every era of Mexico's cultural history. But it's the murals, ingrained into the walls of public buildings, that are a picture book of the people's past, from Aztec times to colonial struggles.

Alongside them, the modern form springs to life in graffiti street murals, splashed throughout the city, while gleaming towers, the castle and the 'forest' of Chapultepec sit literally side by side. History is potent here and yet Mexico City is still hungry to embrace the future, and there is no better place to experience it.



MARKET/INRZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

CONDESA

Leafy and chic. [p105](#)

POLANCO & BOSQUE DE CHAPULTEPEC

Top museums and sprawling park. [p111](#)

SAN ÁNGEL

Cobblestone charm in the south. [p119](#)

COYOACÁN

Bohemian life around Frida's house. [p123](#)

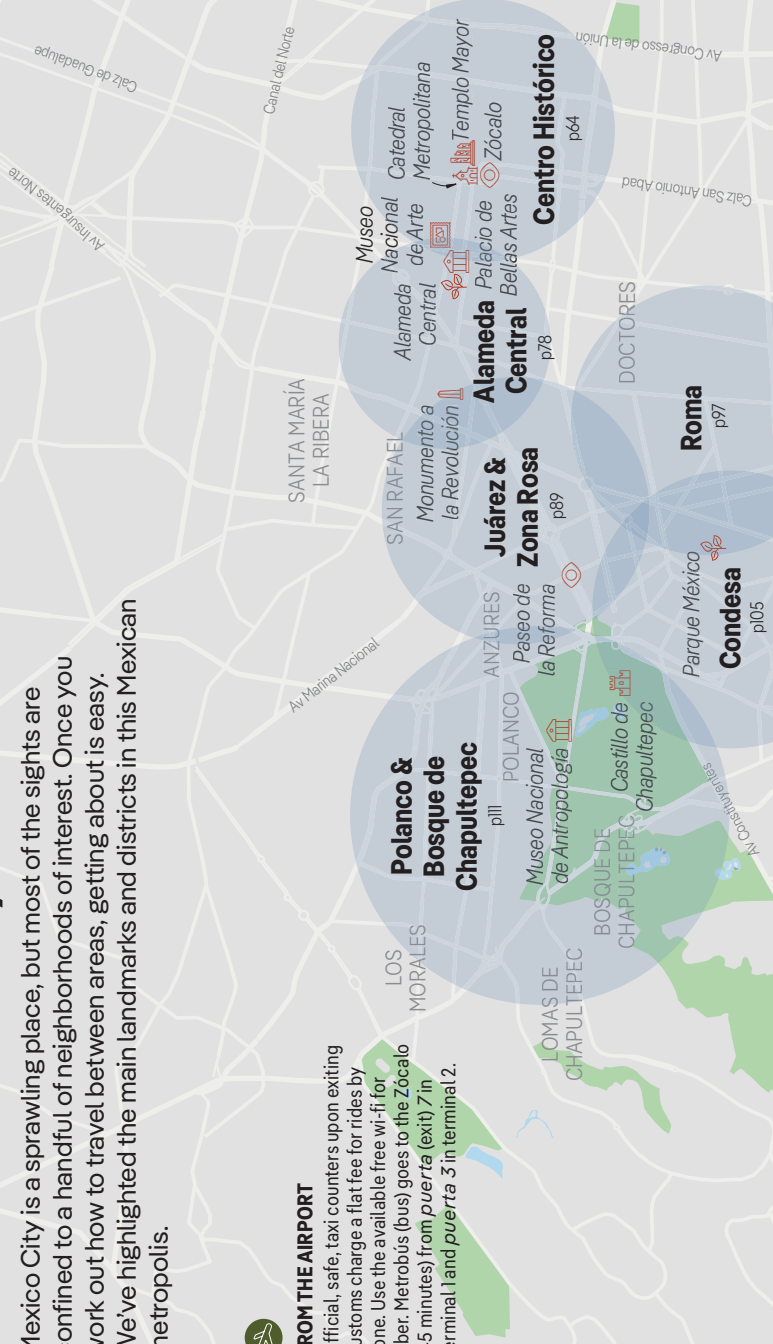
Find Your Way

Mexico City is a sprawling place, but most of the sights are confined to a handful of neighborhoods of interest. Once you work out how to travel between areas, getting about is easy. We've highlighted the main landmarks and districts in this Mexican metropolis.



FROM THE AIRPORT

Official, safe, taxi counters upon exiting customs charge a flat fee for rides by zone. Use the available free wi-fi for Uber. Metrobús (bus) goes to the Zócalo (45 minutes) from *puerta* (exit) 7 in terminal 1 and *puerta* 3 in terminal 2.



Basilica de
Guadalupe



WALK & CYCLE

The best way to explore individual neighborhoods is on foot, especially in leafy Condesa, Roma, Coyoacán or within Bosque de Chapultepec. Cycling is also pleasant in those areas and visitors can register for the city bike-rental scheme, Ecobici, with a credit card and ID.



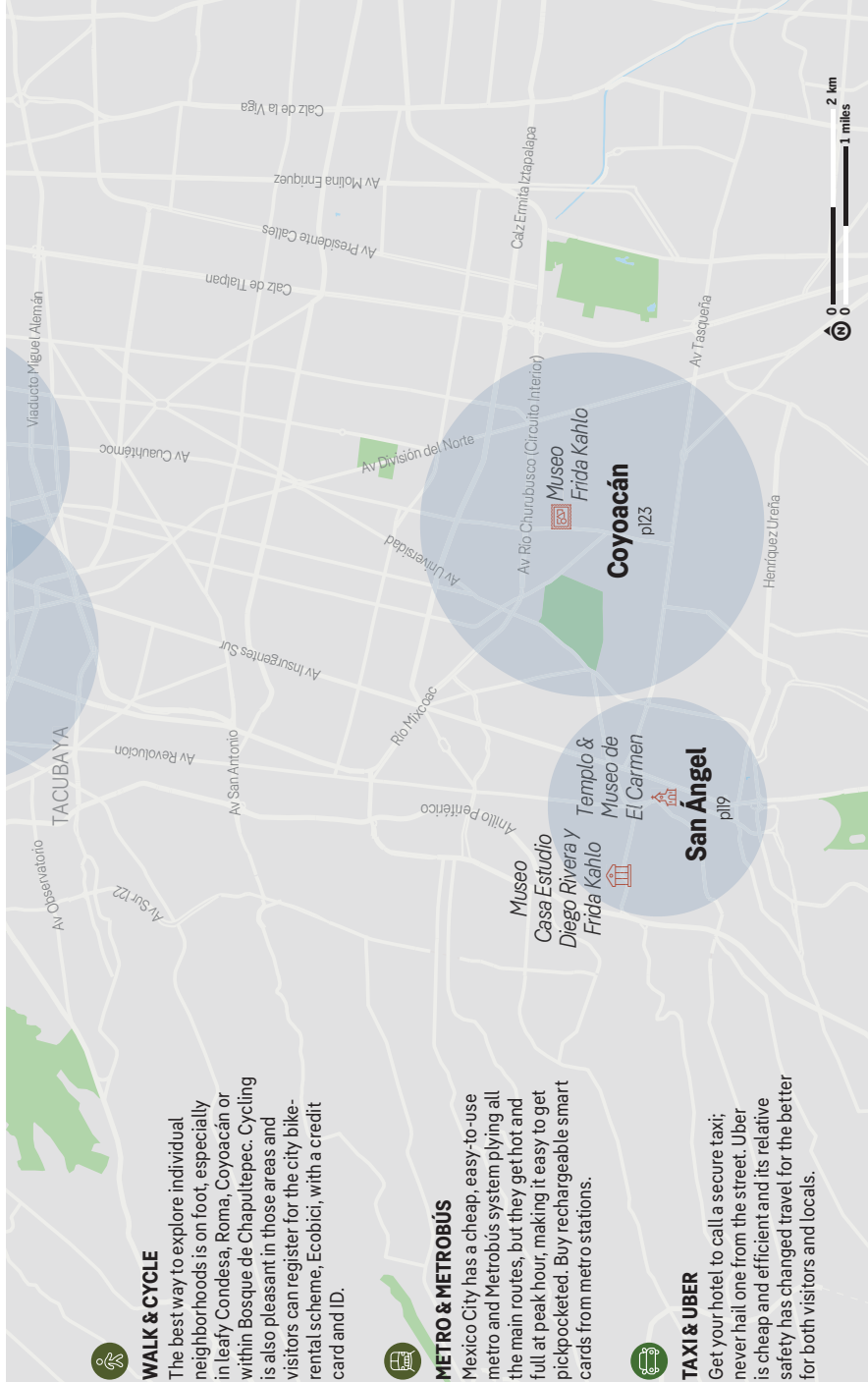
METRO & METROBÚS

Mexico City has a cheap, easy-to-use metro and Metrobús system plying all the main routes, but they get hot and full at peak hour, making it easy to get pick-pocketed. Buy rechargeable smart cards from metro stations.



TAXI & UBER

Get your hotel to call a secure taxi; never hail one from the street. Uber is cheap and efficient and its relative safety has changed travel for the better for both visitors and locals.



Plan Your Days

You could spend months exploring all the museums, monuments, plazas, colonial-era buildings, monasteries, murals, galleries, archaeological finds and religious relics that this encyclopedia of a city has to offer.



FRANCHEBELLA/UT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Templo Mayor (p66)



YOU'LL ALSO WANT TO...

Travel beyond downtown and Roma/Condesa to try tacos from an auto-mechanics and sniff mountains of blooms at a flower market.



SHOP FOR HANDICRAFTS

Drop by the **Centro de Artesanías La Ciudadela** (p81) for *artesanías* (handicrafts) made across Mexico at reasonable prices.



TRY PULQUE

Sample the mildly alcoholic Aztec brew *pulque* in its myriad flavors at no-nonsense dive bar **Pulquería La Hija De Los Apaches**.



TAKE THE METRO

Take the transportation of the average *chilango* (Mexico City inhabitant) on the underground 'metro' train system. It's hot, cheap and traffic-beating.

Day 1

Morning

● Day one dawns and you find yourself standing in the **Zócalo** (p74), once the center of the Aztec universe. Explore the pre-Hispanic ruins at **Templo Mayor** (p66) then admire Diego Rivera's cinematic murals at **Palacio Nacional** (p70).

Afternoon

● In the afternoon, try the famous *suadero* (beef brisket) tacos at iconic **Los Cocuyos** (p73) and admire the blue-and-white-tiled facade of **Casa de los Azulejos** (p72). Step inside for a mural by José Clemente Orozco.

Evening

● Come nightfall, dine on traditional Mexican flavors and sip mezcal while mariachi musicians serenade you at the boisterous **Plaza Garibaldi** (p69).

Day 2

Morning

● On day two, delve into Mexico's past at the extensive **Museo Nacional de Antropología** (p116) and peer across Latin America's largest city park from **Castillo de Chapultepec** (p114), passing the local plants of **Jardín Botánico** (p118).

Afternoon

● In the afternoon, stroll through the cafe-lined streets of **Roma** (p97), with a late (Mexican-style) lunch at **Contramar** (p100) then admire the art deco buildings fronting leafy **Parque México** (p106) in Condesa.

Evening

● Start the evening with a creative cocktail at **Baltra** (p107) and, if the hours roll by, join the crowds for post-party tacos at **Taquería Orinoco** (p104).



VISIT A FLOWER MARKET

Immerse yourself in a sea of *cempasúchil* (marigolds) around Day of the Dead at **Mercado Jamaica**.



EAT IN AN AUTO-MECHANIC SHOP

Venture south of Roma to Narvarte for nighttime *tacos al pastor* from a **taco joint** that is an auto-mechanic shop by day.



VISIT THE PYRAMIDS

The stunning pre-Hispanic city of **Teotihuacán** isn't strictly within the capital, but day trips are a cinch.



WATCH A MEXICAN WRESTLING MATCH

Dip into the rougher area of Doctores, next to Roma, for the chaotic choreography of a Mexican wrestling match at **Arena México**.

Day 3

Morning

● Greet the new day with a stroll around the fountains and leafy paths of **Alameda Central** (p84), making time to acquaint yourself with the art deco splendor, and the Diego Rivera mural, of **Palacio de Bellas Artes** (p82). Continue the mural exploration with a look at the 'big three' muralists at **Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso** (p69) then take it easy over Oaxacan slow food (and drinks) at **Sin Nombre** (p80).

Afternoon

● In the afternoon, venture further afield, to the south, with a visit to the blue house of **Museo Frida Kahlo** (p127) in Coyoacán.

Evening

● As the sun goes down, have dinner and sample mezcal on the delightful **Jardín Centenario** (p129).

CENTRO HISTÓRICO

BUZZING HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

Packed with magnificent buildings and absorbing museums, the Unesco-listed Centro Histórico (historic centre) is the obvious place to start your Mexico City explorations.

Its heart is the massive Zócalo, downtown's main square, where pre-Hispanic ruins, imposing colonial-era buildings and a dominating cathedral convey Mexico City's storied past. This is where Diego Rivera and the other 'big three' muralists proclaimed on the walls of public buildings that murals must be both the art for, and the voice of, the people.

Centro vibrates with street life and nightlife. Sprawling traditional markets cater to specialist purchases, from witchcraft to *mole* pastes and exotic ingredients, and students fill the bars.

Recent years have seen the area polished up. Streets have been repaved, lighting and traffic flow improved and security bolstered. New museums, restaurants and clubs have moved into the renovated structures, spurring a continued revitalization.

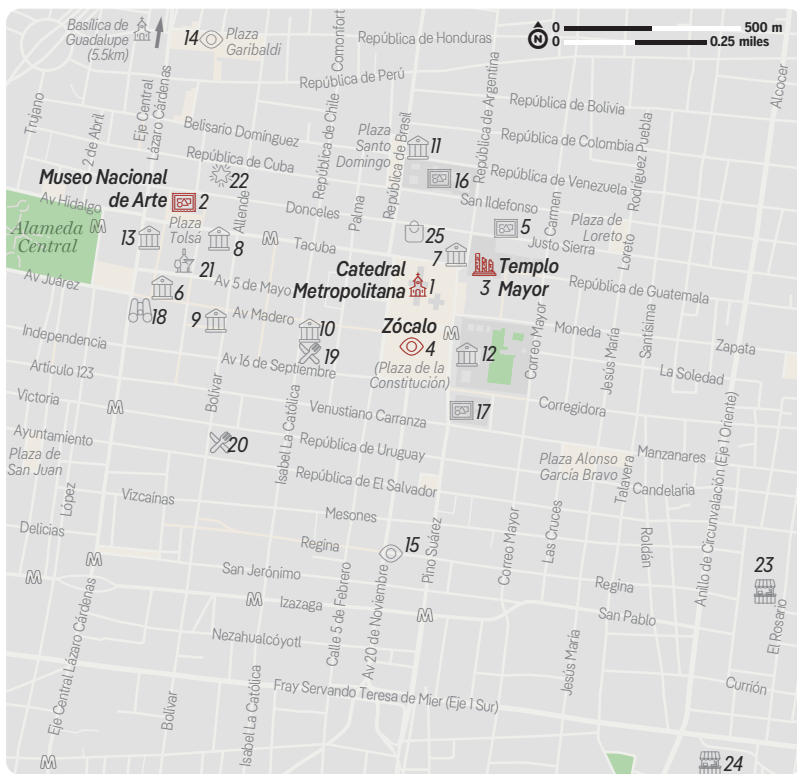
TOP TIP

The sheer size of the Centro Histórico makes the streets confusing. Use the Zócalo and Palacio de Bellas Artes (in Alameda Central) as points of reference. Connecting that pair is the pedestrianized, but crowded, Avenida Madero. It's much calmer strolling down the parallel Avenida 5 de Mayo.



KANIRIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Palacio Nacional (p70)

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Catedral Metropolitana
- 2 Museo Nacional de Arte
- 3 Templo Mayor
- 4 Zócalo

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- 5 Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso
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- 8 Museo de la Tortura
- 9 Museo del Calzado El Borceguí

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EATING

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- 21 Bar La Ópera
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SHOPPING

- 23 Mercado de la Merced
- 24 Mercado de Sonora
- 25 Pasaje Catedral



Mercado de la Merced

MEGA MARKET SELLING EVERYTHING

They're back. In 2019 a fire burnt down 630 stalls, and repairs continue, but this gigantic market has mostly returned to its former chaotic glory. Mexico City's largest market occupies four whole blocks dedicated to the buying and selling of daily needs at rock-bottom prices. It has photogenic displays of spices, chilies and every fresh Mexican foodstuff imaginable, from ant larvae to candied fruit. The sweets area is popular, with typical Mexican prepared candy from every region of the country. In the lead up to Day of the Dead in October, it is a frenzy of color and sugar skulls.

An atmospheric eating area serves all varieties of fresh tacos, *mole* (a type of chili sauce) and *tlacoyos* (pork- or cheese-filled oval tortillas).



WTR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Scan this QR code for prices and opening hours.



TOP SIGHT

Templo Mayor

This temple complex was the center of the universe, according to Aztec cosmology. Dedicated to gods of sun and rain, Templo Mayor was a vital hub for religion and politics. With every ruler, it expanded and included sacrifices for prosperity. Today, exploring the shrines, ruins, museums and gruesome relics of Templo Mayor reveals a fascinating origin story of Mexico City.

DON'T MISS

Museo del Templo Mayor

Museo Subterráneo

Plaza del Templo Mayor

Excavation display

Shrine to Tláloc

History

In Aztec belief, this spot was, literally, the center of the universe. This temple is thought to be on the exact spot where the Aztec saw their symbolic eagle perched on a cactus with a snake (though some say that Spaniards added this serpent image) in its beak – the very symbol of Mexico today.

Discovery

Before the Spaniards demolished and built over it, the Aztec 'Great Temple' Teocalli of Tenochtitlán covered the site where the cathedral now stands, as well as the blocks to its north and east. It wasn't until 1978, after electricity workers happened on an 8-tonne stone-disc carving of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, that the decision was taken to demolish colonial buildings and excavate the Templo Mayor.

Sacrifice & Expand

Like other sacred buildings in Tenochtitlán, the temple was enlarged several times, with each rebuilding accompanied by the sacrifice of captured warriors. What we see today are sections of the temple's seven different phases.

Shrine to Tláloc

At the center of the temple is a platform dating from about 1400. On its southern half, a sacrificial stone stands in front of a shrine to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec war god. On the northern half is a *chac-mool* (a Maya reclining figure) before a shrine to the water god, Tláloc. By the time the Spanish arrived, a 40m-high double pyramid towered above this spot, with steep twin stairways climbing to shrines of the two gods.

Plaza del Templo Mayor

The entrance to the temple site and museum is east of the cathedral, across the hectic Plaza del Templo Mayor, where it's possible to see much of the exterior of the *templo* without entering. Authorized tour guides (with Sectur ID) offer their services by the entrance.

Museo del Templo Mayor

The on-site Museo del Templo Mayor (included in the site's admission price) houses a model of Tenochtitlán and artifacts from the site, and gives a good overview of Aztec, aka Mexica, civilization, though it has little signage in English, unlike the ruins. Pride of place is given to the great wheel-like stone of Coyolxauhqui (She of Bells on Her Cheek), best viewed from the top-floor vantage point. She is shown decapitated, the result of her murder by Huitzilopochtli (her brother; the hummingbird god of war, the sun and human sacrifice), who also killed his 400 brothers en route to becoming top god. The museum's latest artifact is an Aztec sculpture of Xipe Tótec, a deity to which the Aztec's made human sacrifices.

Excavation Display

A newer entrance hall, open to the public, displays objects discovered over four years of the hall's excavation – funerary objects, bones, colonial-era fine china and pre-Hispanic structures of Cuauhxicalco (the place of the eagle vessel).

Museo Subterráneo

A new underground museum lets you get close to the pyramid base of Templo de Ehécatl, while scale models give you a visual understanding of how it fitted in.

DIGGING FOR AZTEC ROYALTY

In 2017 a tower of more than 650 human skulls was unearthed near Templo Mayor, and it's believed to be Huey Tzompantli. Then in 2019, two sacrificial burial sites were uncovered, one of which contained a boy dressed as Huitzilopochtli. In 2022, 160 starfish were uncovered as offerings to the same war god, giving hope to the discovery of royal Aztec tombs, which have yet to be found despite decades of excavation.

TOP TIPS

- There's free entry for Mexican residents on Sunday, making it the most crowded day to visit.
- English-speaking tour guides are available at the entrances, and may be worthwhile to bring alive the assortment of ruins.
- No water is allowed inside.
- If you are short on time, you can view a lot of the site for free from Plaza del Templo Mayor and decide if it's for you. The excavated artifacts are a highlight that can only be viewed inside.
- A series of steps connect each excavated layer throughout the site, making it unsuitable for people with mobility issues.



Museo del Estanquillo

POP-CULTURE MUSEUM

Housed in a gorgeous neoclassical building two blocks from the Zócalo, this museum contains the vast pop-culture collection amassed over decades by Mexico City essayist and hoarder Carlos Monsiváis. The museum illustrates various phases in the capital's development by means of the numerous photos, paintings, movie posters, comic strips and so on from the collection. Sometimes highlighted are prints by José Guadalupe Posada, who popularized much of the skeleton imagery used during Day of the Dead celebrations.



WANGKUN JIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Museo del Estanquillo



Regina

STREET ART AND STUDENT BARS

Known just by its street name, Regina is a pedestrianized corridor of student cool. Beer-bucket bars, theater rehearsal studios, party hostels, galleries, esoteric gift stores, a living grass wall sculpture and original cheap *fondas* (inns) sit alongside a church and colonial buildings. Then there is the street art. Lifelike graffiti murals emerge and vanish as if Regina were an open-air gallery. You'll often catch an artist at work. The style here is often photorealism. The one, permanent caricature piece is a parody by Sr Niuk of Rivera's *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*.



Museo Nacional de Arte

PALATIAL MUSEUM OF ART

This museum holds collections representing every school of Mexican art until the early 20th century. A highlight is the work of José María Velasco, depicting the Valle de México in the late 19th century. The library

holds a vast collection of books on Mexican art that you can peruse (but not borrow).

The museum was built around 1900 in the style of an Italian Renaissance palace. It's worth visiting for the ornate

architecture inside alone. The statue in front is Carlos IV of Spain and was designed by architect Manuel Tolsá, giving the plaza here its name. Free guided tours in English are available.



Secretaría de Educación Pública

OPEN-AIR RIVERA MURALS

Diego Rivera painted murals on public buildings to make art accessible to everybody. The murals of the Education Department are along open-air halls lining working offices. Here, you can get up close to see every detailed brushstroke.

The two front courtyards are lined with 120 fresco panels painted by Rivera in the 1920s. Together they form a tableau of ‘the very life of the people,’ in the artist’s words.

Each section is themed: the east courtyard deals with labor, industry and agriculture, while the interior courtyard depicts traditions and festivals. On the latter’s top level is a series on proletarian and agrarian revolution, underneath a continuous red banner emblazoned with a Mexican *corrido* (folk song).

Look for Frida Kahlo as an arsenal worker in the first panel, while *La cena capitalista* famously depicts a ‘capitalist dinner’ of coins and the proclamation ‘Gold is worth nothing if there is no food’. Here, under the noses of government workers, and as a snub to the US, Rivera and Kahlo proclaimed their Marxist beliefs.



Antigo Colegio de San Ildefonso



Antigo Colegio de San Ildefonso

PATIO OF BIG-THREE MURALISTS

Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros painted murals at the Antigo Colegio de San Ildefonso in the 1920s. Most of the work on the main patio is by Orozco – look for the portrait of Hernán Cortés and his concubine, La Malinche, underneath the staircase. The amphitheater, off the lobby, holds Rivera’s first mural, *La creación*, undertaken on his return from Europe in 1923. Built in the 16th century, the former Jesuit college today hosts outstanding temporary art exhibitions.



Plaza Garibaldi



Plaza Garibaldi

MARIACHI, RESTAURANTS AND TEQUILA MUSEUM

Every night the city’s mariachi bands belt out heartfelt ballads in this festive square. Wearing silver-studded outfits, they toot their trumpets and tune their guitars until approached by someone who’ll pay for a song. Also roaming Garibaldi are white-clad *son jarocho* groups, hailing from Veracruz, and *norteño* combos, who bang out northern-style folk tunes. The notoriously seedy Garibaldi continues to undergo a makeover that includes heightened security, but caution is still sensible. Check restaurant bills and avoid withdrawing money from the ATMs here.

The latest addition to the plaza is the **Museo del Tequila y el Mezcal**, which has exhibits explaining the origins and production processes of Mexico’s two most popular distilled-agave drinks.

RIGHT: BEARDS THE OBVIOUS / SHUTTERSTOCK ©
TOP RIGHT: RAUL LUNA / SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Catedral Metropolitana



Catedral Metropolitana

MONUMENTAL CATHEDRAL

This iconic cathedral is a monumental edifice: 109m long, 59m wide and 65m high. Started in 1573, it remained a work in progress during the entire colonial period, thus displaying a catalog of architectural styles. The conquistadors ordered the cathedral built atop the Templo Mayor and used most of the *templo's* Aztec stones in its construction.

The first thing you notice on entering is the elaborately carved and gilded **Altar de Perdón** (Altar of Forgiveness). There's invariably a line of worshippers at the foot of **Señor del Veneno** (Lord of the Poison). Legend has it that the dusky Christ figure attained its color when it miraculously absorbed a dose of poison through its feet from the lips of a drugged clergyman.

The cathedral's chief artistic treasure is the 18th-century **Altar de los Reyes** (Altar of the Kings), behind the main altar. Fourteen richly decorated chapels line the two sides of the building. Enormous **painted panels** by colonial masters Juan Correa and Cristóbal de Villalpando cover the walls of the sacristy, the first component of the cathedral to be built.

Visitors may wander freely, though you're asked not to do so during Mass (noon Sunday). A donation is requested to enter the golden **Sacristía Mayor** and the **crypt**, where guides provide commentary.

Once you've explored the cathedral, turn left as you exit. On the corner is a 16th-century colonial-era building housing the **Museo Archivo de la Fotografía**, which hosts changing exhibits focusing on all things Mexico City. The museum has amassed an impressive archive of more than 12,000 photographs spanning the entire history of photography in Mexico. Images range from iconic portraits of famous artists and politicians to stunning landscapes and candid street scenes. Explanations are in Spanish.

LEFT: ALEXANDAR TODOROVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK ©;
BOTTOM LEFT: KAMRAN/SHUTTERS DOCK ©



Palacio Nacional

RIVERA MURALS IN
PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

Inside this grandiose colonial palace you'll see Diego Rivera murals (painted between 1929 and 1951) that depict Mexican civilization from the arrival of Quetzalcóatl (the Aztec plumed serpent god) to the post-revolutionary period. The nine murals covering the north and east walls of the 1st level above the patio chronicle local life before the Spanish conquest.

The Palacio Nacional is also home to the offices of the president of Mexico and the Federal Treasury. The first palace on this spot was built by Aztec emperor Moctezuma II in the early 16th century. Cortés destroyed the palace in 1521, rebuilding it as a fortress. In 1562 the crown purchased the building from Cortés' family to house the viceroys of Nueva España.



Altar de Perdón



Bar La Ópera

BAR OF PRESIDENTS AND WRITERS

This sumptuous Parisian-style bar-restaurant has been visited by nearly all of Mexico's ex-presidents and literati from Monsiváis to Gabriel García Márquez. The ornate copper-colored ceiling still bears the bullet hole from where Pancho Villa is said to have fired his pistol in 1914 to silence some raucous patrons. With its dark-walnut booths carved in New Orleans, the late-19th-century watering hole remains a bastion of tradition. It's best for a drink, though its French-Mexican chipotle snails are also highly rated.



Bar La Ópera

RIGHT: ANNA EWA BIENIEK/SHUTTERSTOCK © TOP RIGHT: EDUCATION IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES ©



View from Torre Latinoamericana



Torre Latinoamericana

LOFTIEST CITY VIEWPOINT

See just how big this metropolis is – views from the 44th-floor observation deck and the 41st-floor lounge bar of this tower are spectacular, smog permitting. The Torre Latinoamericana was Latin America's tallest building (166m) when constructed in 1956, and thanks to the deep-seated pylons that anchor the building, it has withstood several major earthquakes, including those of 1985, 2017 and 2022.

You're free to leave and return the same day – useful for getting views both day and night. Admission includes access to an on-site museum that chronicles Mexico City's history. Admission is free if you're just visiting the bar.



Palacio Postal

GOLDEN BAROQUE
POST OFFICE

More than just Mexico City's central post office, this golden palace, built in 1907, is an Italianate confection designed by the Palacio de Bellas Artes' original architect, Adamo Boari. Flourishes of art nouveau, art deco, rococo, neoclassical and Moorish styles are incorporated into the building. The beige stone facade features baroque columns and carved filigree around the windows. The bronze railings on the monumental staircase inside were cast in Florence. The small **Postal Museum** on the 1st floor is where philatelists can ogle a design of the first stamp ever issued in Mexico.



Casa de los Azulejos

LUNCH AMONG ORNATE TILES

You have arrived at the pedestrian corridor to Centro Histórico when you spot the sun-catching blue and white tiles of the extravagant Casa de los Azulejos. Dating from 1596, it was built for the Condes (Counts) del Valle de Orizaba. Most of the tiles that adorn the outside walls were produced in China and shipped to Mexico on the Manila *naos* (Spanish galleons). The staircase has a 1925 mural by Orozco and you're free to walk to the upper level.

The Sanborns restaurant here serves affordable Mexican dishes, despite the impression given by the decadent covered courtyard and Moorish fountain.



LEFT: ATOSAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; BOTTOM LEFT: MELVYN LONGHURST/LAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

Casa de los Azulejos



Suprema Corte de Justicia

MURALS CONFRONTING STATE VIOLENCE

How would Mexican muralists interpret 'justice'? In 1940 Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco painted four panels around the 2nd level of the Supreme Court's central stairway, two of which dealt with the theme of justice. A more contemporary take on the same subject, *La historia de la justicia en México* (The History of Justice in Mexico), by Mexico City-born Rafael Cauduro, unfolds over three levels of the building's southwest stairwell.

Executed in his hyper-realist style, Cauduro's series (aka *The Seven Worst Crimes*) catalogs the horrors of state-sponsored crimes against the populace, including the ever-relevant torture-induced confession. On the southeast corner of the building's interior, Ismael Ramos Huitrón's *La busqueda de la justicia* (The Search for Justice) reflects on the Mexican people's constant struggle to obtain justice, as does the social-realism work *La justicia* (Justice) by Japanese-Mexican artist Luis Nishizawa, on the northwest stairwell.

Free audioguides are available to 4pm, and photo ID is required for admission.



Suprema Corte de Justicia



Azul Histórico

FINE COURTYARD DINING

Chef Ricardo Muñoz is taking traditional Mexican recipes to new heights with dishes such as *pescado tikin xic*, a mouthwatering grouper dish from the Yucatán with plantain and tortilla strips. The restaurant is inside a beautiful complex of converted buildings, where diners can enjoy their meals in an inner courtyard surrounded by lush trees and romantic lighting, enclosed by stunning stone archways. It's a rare find in Centro. Azul attracts upmarket diners and is a must-visit for anyone looking for a unique and upscale dining experience.



Los Cocuyos



Los Cocuyos

ICONIC STREET TACOS

Suadero (beef brisket) tacos are everywhere in the capital, but this always-open stand takes the crown as the best in the city. The aroma of bubbling meats will lead you straight to it. Indulge in the delicious and hearty *campechano* (mixed-beef-and-sausage taco) or, for the more daring, try the *ojo* (eye) or its specialty *lengua* (tongue) tacos. For vegetarians, *nopales* (cactus paddles) are also available (though cooked on the same hot plate). Expect a line, but it's worth the wait. Something about the crowds and limited plastic stools also makes it easy to strike up a conversation with locals.



Suadero tacos

QUAILILO STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK © TOP RIGHT: NELSON ANTONIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



La Purísima

GAY CLUB AND LGBTIQ+ STREET

Zona Rosa (p96) isn't the only LGBTIQ+ jewel in Mexico City. The Alameda Central end of Calle República de Cuba has a snatch of gay clubs that are so tightly clustered that they feel like the same place. La Puri, as regulars call it, is legendary here. Mix kitsch with cabaret and a big dash of hipness and you only have the upstairs covered. Downstairs is wall-to-wall pop and people. Neon art of Jesus in heels and a harness keep La Puri in the spotlight and on social feeds. The weekend queues to get in are just as infamous – you might spend hours in them – so arrive early, though socialising on the street is half the fun around here.



Zócalo

CENTRAL CITY SQUARE



Zócalo

The heart of Mexico City is the Plaza de la Constitución. Residents began calling it the Zócalo, meaning ‘base,’ in the 19th century, when a planned monument to independence went unrealized, leaving only the pedestal. Measuring 220m from north to south, and 240m from east to west, it’s one of the world’s largest city squares.

The ceremonial center of Aztec Tenochtitlán, known as the Teocalli, lay immediately northeast of the Zócalo. Today the Zócalo is surrounded by the Palacio Nacional, Catedral Metropolitana and city government offices. The Danzantes Aztecas dance daily in the Zócalo, wearing snakeskin loincloths and shell ankle bracelets and chanting in Náhuatl. Drummers bang on the conga-like *huehueltl* (indigenous drum) and barrel-shaped *teponaztli*. It is meant to evoke the Aztec mitote, a frenzied ceremony performed by preconquest Mexicans at harvest times, although scant evidence exists of the actual dance moves.

Mexican soldiers ceremonially raise the huge Mexican flag in the middle of the Zócalo at 8am then lower it at 6pm.



Turibús

HOP-ON HOP-OFF BUS

It’s a tourist bus by name but the wide scope of sites makes Turibús very useful for getting around. Red double-decker buses run four *circuitos* (routes) across the city on the one ticket: Centro (downtown), Sur (south, including Museo Frida Kahlo), Hippódromo (Polanco and Chapultepec) and Basílica (north). Buses pass every 15 to 60 minutes and you can hop off and on at any designated stop. All routes coincide on the west side of Catedral Metropolitana.

Buy ticket-wristbands on board, or at major stops such as El Ángel or Mercado Roma.

Turibús also offers day trips to Teotihuacán and themed tours.



TOP LEFT: BRETT WELCHER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; LEFT: SUREIL RAMZAU/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Catrina, Día de Muertos

MORE IN CENTRO HISTÓRICO

Visit Altars for Día de Muertos

DECORATED ALTARS AND PARADE

Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a Mexican tradition celebrated on November 1 and 2. This is a time to pay tribute and remember loved ones who have passed away. Visitors have the opportunity to view colorful *ofrendas* (altars) that can be found throughout public spaces, each adorned with flowers, pictures and the deceased's preferred meals. It is traditional to believe that the spirits of loved ones return to the earth for one night, drawn by the *ofrendas*, to participate in the celebrations.

In the lead-up, a huge annual street parade, Desfile de Día de Muertos, sees 1000 costumed dancers and performers join giant *calavera* (skeleton) puppets along Reforma (decorated with giant *cráneos* 'skulls') to the Zócalo. Hundreds of families watch from the sidelines and see the many-themed altars of the **Megaofrenda** in the main plaza.

Most museums have an *ofrenda* to visit, and some of the best can be seen at **Anahuacalli**, **Museo Dolores Olmedo**, **Plaza Santo Domingo** in the Centro (no longer in its long-held home of Ciudad Universitaria) and in the neighborhood of San Andrés Mixquic in the extreme southeast of the CDMX (Ciudad de México; Mexico City). Check the official government website for a program of the city's main events.

Visitors can expect to see intricate designs, vibrant colors and traditional elements such as candles, incense and brightly



BEST LIVE ENTERTAINMENT IN CENTRO HISTÓRICO

Arena Coliseo

The more intimate and smaller of two CDMX wrestling venues features flamboyant *luchadores* (wrestlers) in a circus-like atmosphere.

Zinco Jazz Club

A subterranean supper club and hub for local jazz, funk and Sinatra and Winehouse tribute acts.

Salón Tenampa

This festive cantina on Plaza Garibaldi is awash with tequila, food and serenading mariachi.

Café de Tacuba

Iconic Mexican restaurant with lively *estudiantinas* (student musical groups) entertaining the dinner crowd Wednesday to Sunday.



WHERE TO STAY IN CENTRO HISTÓRICO

Gran Hotel Ciudad de México

The stained-glass Tiffany ceiling and luxurious rooms are almost topped by brunch overlooking the Zócalo. \$\$\$

Mexico City Hostel

Excellent-value, quiet hostel with spacious communal areas and door security in a house near the Zócalo. \$

Hotel Catedral

Location location: right next to the cathedral. The semi-modernized rooms and on-site restaurant are good, too. \$\$



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN CENTRO HISTÓRICO

El Cardenal

Experience traditional Mexican cuisine in the city's finest surroundings in a Parisian-style mansion with live piano music. \$\$\$

Coox Hanal

Unpretentious Yucatecan fare founded by boxer Raúl Salazar in 1953, featuring top-notch *cochinita pibil* (slow-cooked pork). \$

La Casa de las Sirenas

In a 17th-century relic overlooking the Zócalo, Sirenas serves contemporary regional dishes such as pumpkin-seed *mole* chicken. \$\$

Al Andaluz

Catering to the substantial Lebanese community with shawarma, falafel and vine leaves. \$\$



WTR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Basilica de Guadalupe

colored *cempasúchil* (marigolds) to attract and guide the spirits. The visitors themselves are half the spectacle, with wild Halloween-type costumes and a ghastly number of classic *Catrin*s (elegant ladies) and suited men with *calavera* face makeup.

Weird & Wonderful Museums

SHOES, TORTURE, MEDICINE, RELIGION, WITCHCRAFT

Mexico City has more museums than any other city in the world, outside of London, so some lesser-known museums are decidedly niche. Shoe enthusiasts should sashay to the Museo del Calzado El Borceguí, the oldest shoemaker in Mexico, which has been operating since 1865. The collection on display boasts over 2000 pieces of footwear, including shoes from famous figures such as Mexican authors Carlos Fuentes and Elena Poniatowska and *fútbol* (soccer) players. Decide for yourself if Magic Johnson's size 14½ basketball shoes and Neil Armstrong's lunar boots are real or replicas.

For those into the macabre, the Museum of Mexican Medicine, inside the former headquarters of the Holy Inquisition, Palacio de la Inquisición, displays a wide range of medical instruments and pickled body parts, alongside information



WHERE TO DRINK IN CENTRO HISTÓRICO

La Faena

A forgotten relic-bar-and-bullfighting-museum, attracting a new generation of drinkers with low prices and matador artifacts.

Nardo Cocktail Club

This bright, edgy gallery-bar mixes up 'Águila y Sol,' a cactus cocktail that tastes inspired.

Hostería La Bota

Each *cerveza* (beer) or mezcál cocktail supports local art projects at this grungy bar adorned with bric-a-brac.

on traditional Mexican medicine. A more hardcore option for the morbidly curious is the Museo de la Tortura, which showcases European torture instruments from the 14th to 19th centuries. There's a metal-spiked interrogation chair and the menacing skull splitter.

For a more spiritual experience, **Pasaje Catedral**, opposite the cathedral, is a corridor of stores offering a colorful array of religious items, including rosary beads, dangling cherubs, figurines and other curios that cross into the pagan and esoteric. This is where you'll find La Virgen de Guadalupe sitting alongside Santa Muerte (the death cult figure) and boughs of sage for spiritual cleansing. If fresh ingredients here such as *cuatecomate* (respiratory-healing fruit) spark your interest, then **Mercado de Sonora** will dazzle with its Mexican witchcraft aisles hawking voodoo dolls, amulets and everything you need to make potions.

Basílica de Guadalupe

THE WORLD'S MOST VISITED CATHOLIC SHRINE

The cult around this site began in December 1531 when a Christian convert named Juan Diego claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to him on the hill. Diego's story of the apparition, along with multiple reported sightings, led to the creation of a shrine in her honor.

Today the Virgin's shrines around the Cerro del Tepeyac (formerly an Aztec shrine site) are the most revered in Mexico, and the most visited Catholic shrines anywhere, attracting thousands of pilgrims daily and hundreds of thousands on the days leading up to her feast day, December 12. Some pilgrims travel the last meters to the shrine on their knees.

Around 1700, to accommodate the faithful flock, the four-towered Basílica de Guadalupe was erected at the site of an earlier shrine. But by the 1970s, the old, inadequate yellow-domed building (now called the Antigua Basílica) was replaced with the new blue-roofed Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, constructed next door. The vast, round, open-plan structure holds more than 40,000 people. The image of the Virgin, dressed in a green mantle trimmed with gold, hangs above and behind the main altar of the *basílica*, where moving walkways bring visitors as close as possible. Mass is performed hourly.

Throughout history, La Virgen has been credited with many miracles, which helped to promote the acceptance of Catholicism among indigenous Mexicans. So did depicting her with Mexican facial features. She is a Christianized version of the earlier Aztec goddess Tonantzin. The Virgin was officially declared the patron of Mexico in 1737.

PLAZA DE LAS TRES CULTURAS

North of Centro Histórico, Plaza de las Tres Culturas is a symbol of the fusion of pre-Hispanic and Spanish roots into the Mexican mestizo identity. The plaza displays the architectural legacy of three cultural facets: the Aztec pyramids of Tlatelolco, the 17th-century Spanish Templo de Santiago and the modern tower that houses the Centro Cultural Universitario.

You can view the remains of Tlatelolco's main pyramid-temple and other Aztec buildings. The double pyramid on view has twin staircases that once supposedly ascended to temples dedicated to Tláloc and Huitzilopochtli.

The Centro Cultural Universitario documents a massacre: on October 2, 1968, hundreds of student protesters were massacred here by government troops on the eve of the Mexico City Olympic Games.



WHERE TO SEE THE BEST ARCHITECTURE AT BASÍLICA DE GUADALUPE

Capilla del Pocito

Exquisite yet peculiar 18th-century baroque chapel with a circular shape that forces visitors to explore slowly.

Basílica Bell Tower

Designed in 1991 by the Anthropology Museum architect with multiple time devices: sundial, astrolabe and Aztec lunar clock.

Jardín del Tepeyac

A paradisaical garden with fountain statues recreating the sighting of the Virgin by indigenous people.

ALAMEDA CENTRAL

CULTURAL OUTDOOR PLAZAS

Surrounded by historically significant buildings, Alameda Central was first established in 1592 as a promenade and garden for the viceregal palace, designed as a place for the city's elite to promenade and socialize, and it quickly became a popular spot for fashionable society. Much of the surrounding area was destroyed in the 1985 earthquake, but in recent decades it has been the focus of ambitious redevelopment, while the green spaces of Alameda Central remain a street-vendor-free respite.

The neighborhood is a continuation of Centro Histórico to the east (many locals consider it the same area), and extends west along Paseo de la Reforma to the hero edifice Monumento a la Revolución and onwards to the adjacent up-and-coming areas of San Rafael and Santa María la Ribera.

Metro stations Bellas Artes and Hidalgo are located on the park's east and west sides, respectively.

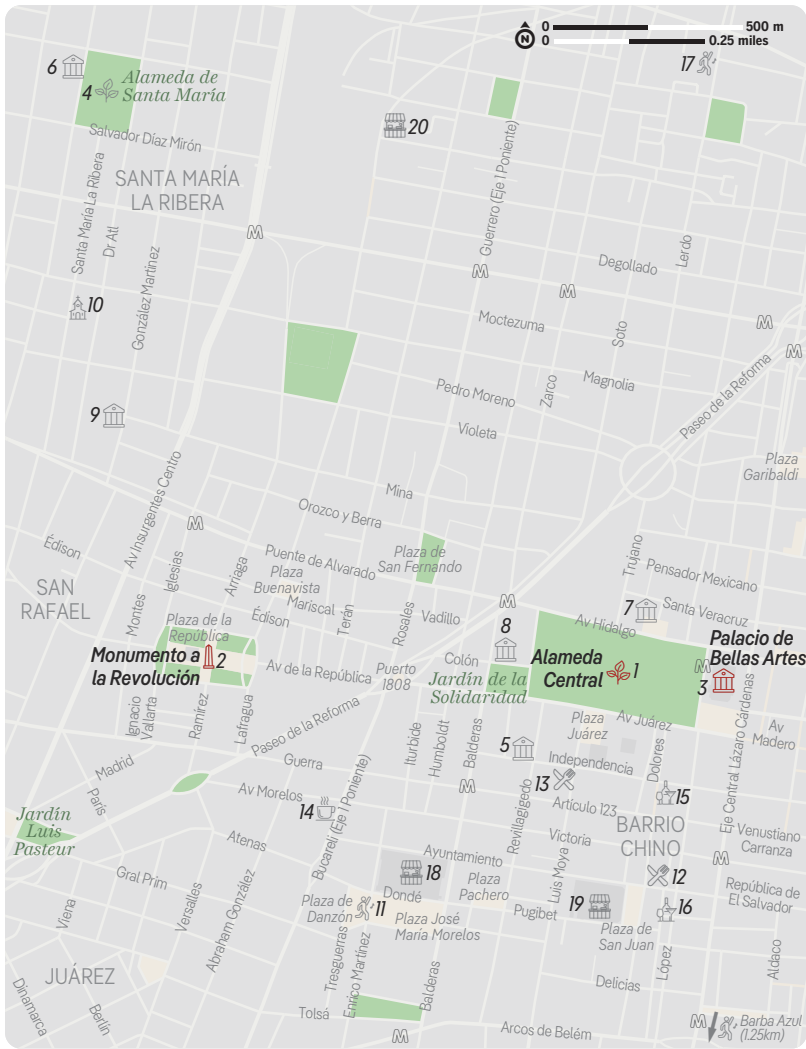
TOP TIP

Most museums in the capital, including Museo de Arte Popular and Palacio de Bellas Artes in this neighborhood, are closed on Monday and have free admission on Sunday, which makes it the busiest day to visit. You can avoid the crowded streets by coming (and paying admission) during the week.



PAWEŁ TOCZYSKI/GETTY IMAGES ©

Alameda Central

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Alameda Central
- 2 Monumento a la Revolución
- 3 Palacio de Bellas Artes
- 4 Alameda de Santa María la Ribera
- 5 Museo de Arte Popular
- 6 Museo del Instituto de

Geología de la UNAM

- 7 Museo Franz Mayer Rivera
- 8 Museo Mural Diego Rivera
- 9 Museo Universitario del Chopo
- 10 Parroquia Josefina Sagrada Familia

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- 11 Plaza de Danzón

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- 12 El Huequito
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- (see 13) Bóforo
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SHOPPING

- 18 Centro de Artesanías La Ciudadela
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Sin Nombre

OAXACAN SLOW FOOD
IN A SECRET SPOT

Too good to keep hidden, the 'No Name' restaurant, next to *mezcalería* (mezcal bar) Bósfaro, prepares handcrafted Oaxacan and other Mexican slow-food dishes such as *conejo encacahuatado* (biodynamic rabbit in peanut salsa with sweet potato) and *pulpo en morita* (grilled squid with fruity smoked chilies) in earthenware cookware. Select ingredients are sourced from across Mexico, and the industrial-chic atmosphere is just as charming. Not for rowdy groups, this is a place that locals still visit for intimate dinners, but it's changing quickly.



Alebrije



Museo de Arte Popular

MEXICO'S BEST FOLK-ART MUSEUM

A major showcase for folk art from every state of Mexico, this is a colorful museum that even museum-haters and kids love. Across three levels, crafts are thematically displayed in five halls - from the roots of Mexican everyday objects to 'fantastical things'. An

illustrated wall map provides an overview of Mexico's regions and their traditions.

Items include carnival masks from Chiapas and *alebrijes* (colorful wooden animal figures) from Oaxaca. Highlights are costumes from each region and a section

dedicated to Day of the Dead. The museum occupies the former fire-department headquarters, an outstanding example of 1920s art deco by architect Vicente Mendiola. The ground-level shop sells quality, unique handicrafts that can't be easily found elsewhere.



Museo Franz Mayer



Museo Franz Mayer

SHOWCASING PHOTOJOURNALISM AND MEXICAN CULTURE

In a city where political journalists often go missing, this museum is the home of the annual World Press Photo (worldpress-photo.org) exhibition, held between late July and October.

The museum displays the collection of Mexican silver, ceramics, textiles and furniture amassed by German-born Franz Mayer, who prospered as a financier in his adopted Mexico.

The exhibit halls open onto a sumptuous colonial-era patio with the excellent Cloister Café.

The museum occupies the old church and hospice of the San Juan de Dios order, which became a halfway house for sex workers under the brief reign of Maximilian.



Plaza de Danzón

LEARN CUBAN-MEXICAN DANCING

If you like to dance, learn a few steps at the Plaza de Danzón, northwest of La Ciudadela, near metro Balderas. Couples of all ages (but especially mature dancers) crowd the plaza every Saturday from 11am to do the *danzón*, an elegant and complicated Cuban step that infiltrated Mexico in the 19th century. Lessons in *danzón* and other styles are given. Salsa and *cumbia* (from Colombia) dancers take to the plaza at around 3pm. Even if you don't plan to bust a move, it's worth visiting to see the *danzón* couples resplendent in their fine threads from yesteryear.



Plaza de Danzón



Centro de Artesanías La Ciudadela

HANDICRAFT MARKET WITH IT ALL

The prices at this crafts market are surprisingly fair for such a huge shopping space. If Mexico City is the last stop of your trip, this is a convenient hub to pick up good (and also mass-produced) handicrafts from all over Mexico that you might have regretted not buying. Worth seeking out are Oaxacan *alebrijes* (whimsical painted animals), hand-painted Talavera tiles from Puebla, guitars from Paracho and Huichol beadwork. Stock up on sun hats for Teotihuacán, wrestling masks and Mexican kitsch belts.

The most truly individual pieces that you are unlikely to see elsewhere are the *retablos*, hand-painted old soft-drink cans with praise for holy figures for helping people with everyday problems such as cheating partners and near-death experiences.

The higher-quality ceramics have suitably higher prices. A good strategy is to take an initial browse and then have lunch at the outdoor traditional *fonda* (inn) at the market's center to mull over your favorites and compare items.



Centro de Artesanías La Ciudadela



MORE BIG THREE MURALS

Find more murals from Los Tres Grandes muralists, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, downtown on the walls of **Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso** (p69). Some of Rivera's best fresco panes are in the open air of the halls of the **Secretaría de Educación Pública** (p69).



JOHN COLETTI/GETTY IMAGES ©

Palacio de Bellas Artes



Palacio de Bellas Artes

CROWNING JEWEL STREWN WITH MURALS

This giant of downtown is such a symbol of Mexico City that you might just think it's an impressive facade, but inside is where muralists drive home the point that art should be accessible to the average Mexican. Immense, free-to-access murals by world-famous Mexican artists dominate the top floors of the splendid white-marble palace – a concert hall and arts center commissioned by President Porfirio Díaz. Construction on the iconic building began in 1905 under Italian architect Adamo Boari, who favored neoclassical and art nouveau styles.

Complications arose as the heavy marble shell sank into the spongy subsoil, then the Mexican Revolution intervened. Architect Federico Mariscal eventually finished the interior in the 1930s, utilizing the more modern art deco style.

On the 2nd floor are two early 1950s works by Zapotec-heritage painter Rufino Tamayo: *México de hoy* (Mexico Today) and *Nacimiento de la nacionalidad* (Birth of Nationality), a symbolic depiction of the creation of the mestizo (mixed-ancestry) identity.

At the west end of the 3rd floor is Diego Rivera's famous *El hombre en el cruce de caminos* (Man at the Crossroads), originally commissioned for New York's Rockefeller Center. The Rockefellers had the original destroyed because of its anti-capitalist themes, but Rivera recreated it here in 1934.

On the north side are David Alfaro Siqueiros' three-part *La nueva democracia* (New Democracy) and Rivera's four-part *Carnaval de la vida mexicana* (Carnival of Mexican Life). To the east is José Clemente Orozco's *La katharsis* (Catharsis), depicting the conflict between humankind's 'social' and 'natural' aspects.

The 4th-floor Museo Nacional de Arquitectura features changing exhibits on contemporary architecture. In addition, the palace stages outstanding temporary art exhibitions.



BALLET IN BELLAS ARTES

The Ballet Folklórico de México is a two-hour festive blur of costumes, music and dance from all over Mexico. Performances are staged in the spectacular Palacio de Bellas Artes theater, which is viewable only during performances. Its stained-glass curtain depicting the Valle de México is based on a design by Mexican painter Gerardo Murillo (aka Dr Atl), and assembled by New York jeweler Tiffany & Co from almost a million pieces of colored glass.

Tickets are usually available the day of the show at the venue, or through Ticketmaster.



Monumento a la Revolución

MEXICAN LANDMARK AND VIEWING DECK

Unveiled in 1938, this monument contains the tombs of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary heroes Pancho Villa, Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas. It persists as a symbol of Mexican independence and resilience. The star for visitors is the 65m-high summit Paseo Linternilla, accessed by glass elevator and opening to a spiraling staircase (not suitable for young kids) that ascends to a round terrace with a panoramic view of the city. Below it is the equally impressive, though not as tall, 360-degree observation deck, which is as high as you can go without the all-access pass.

You can also access the skeleton of the structure in the 1910 Structure Galleries, and there's an interesting basement art gallery, the **Paseo Cimentación**, where you can check out temporary art exhibitions amid a labyrinth of gigantic steel beams that serve as the structure's foundation.

Underlying the plaza and monument, the **Museo Nacional de la Revolución** covers a 63-year period, from the implementation of the constitution guaranteeing human rights in 1857 to the installation of the post-revolutionary government in 1920. Explanatory text is in Spanish only.

Originally meant to be a legislative chamber, the current Monumento a la Revolución's construction was interrupted by the Revolution itself, and there was talk of demolishing the building, but instead it was modified and given a new role.

Kids love frolicking in the plaza's geyser-like fountains, while at night the monument's renovated architectural features are lit up by colorful lights.

PAUL LUNA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Monumento a la Revolución



MONUMENTAL VIEWS & DINING

Terraza Cha Cha is as festive as it sounds. A margarita and *tuna tostada* (large crispy tortilla) on the terrace overlooking the Monumento a la Revolución is a real fiesta starter. Groups and families love the big ballroom and varied menu – grilled meat and fish, oysters, *aguachile* (lime-cured shrimp) and tacos of beef tongue, duck, soft-shell crab or zucchini flower. The cocktail bar is laid-back but turns things up on weekends with live music and DJs. Reserve to nab a terrace spot.



Museo Mural Diego Rivera

WHO'S WHO IN MEXICAN HISTORY MURAL

This museum houses one of Diego Rivera's most famous works, *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Central), a 15m-long mural painted in 1947. Rivera imagined significant figures who walked in the city from colonial times onward, including Hernán Cortés, Benito Juárez, Porfirio Díaz and Francisco Madero.

All crowd around a *Catrina* (skeleton in prerevolutionary women's garb). Charts identify all the characters, which include Rivera himself and Frida Kahlo. The museum was built in 1986 to house the mural, after the 1985 earthquake destroyed its original home, the Hotel del Prado.



Diego Rivera is depicted on the 500 peso bill



Alameda Central



Alameda Central

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN GREEN SPACE

The city's own template for New York's Central Park is a popular refuge from the noise of downtown, particularly on Sunday when families stroll its pathways and lovers snuggle on benches around its 12 fountains.

What started as an Aztec marketplace in Tenochtitlán in the 14th century became a place where 'heretics' were burned during the Spanish Inquisition. As a park, Alameda Central was created in the late 1500s by mandate of then-viceroy Luis de Velasco. The Alameda took its name from the *álamos* (poplars) planted over its rectangular expanse. By the late 19th century, the park was graced with European-style statues and lit by gas lamps. It became the place to be seen for the city's elite and visitors, and poet William Cullen Bryant used it as inspiration for the creation of Central Park.

Palacio de Bellas Artes (p82) dominates Alameda Central's east side; the boutique gift stores of Barrio Alameda are to its west; and, since no street vendors are allowed inside, convenience stores, decent mid-range restaurants and Barrio Chino (Chinatown) are to its south.



El Huequito

STREET TACO EXPERT

These old taco pros have been churning out delectable *tacos al pastor* (tacos with marinated pork roasted on a spit) since 1959. They even claim to have introduced the dish to Mexico City (from Puebla's Lebanese immigrants), thus the higher than average asking price. Several downtown Huequito branches offer the sit-down experience, but for some reason the tacos are better here at the original hole-in-the-wall location. The perpetual queue is worth the wait and guarantees taco freshness.



El Huequito tacos

NELSON ANTONINA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Mercado San Juan



Mercado San Juan

EXOTIC FOODIE MARKET

Crocodile, check. Truffle-like fungus that grows on corn, check – that's *huilitacoche*. Mercado San Juan is definitely for fans of the different. The small market specializes in rare, top-price food items such as insects, ostrich, deer and unusual fruit. Local chefs and foodies come to the market to score ingredients not available elsewhere in the city. It's a fascinating sight for any visitor, even if you just stick to the *mole* pastes and baguettes. You can eat the produce fresh at the stalls. Near the entrances, it's the juices, paella and ceviche (lime-cured seafood), not just the unusual stuff, that draw the crowds to the stools. The adventurous can try the fried grasshoppers for a traditional taste of Mexico.



Bósforo

HIP UNDERGROUND
MEZCAL BAR

Blink and you might walk right past the coolest neighborhood *mezcalería* in town. Behind the nondescript curtain in Bósforo await top-notch mezcals, an eclectic mix of music and surprisingly good bar grub. There is no menu, just a price chalkboard, so ask for recommendations (English is spoken), with mezcal cocktails a good place to start. No photography is allowed, which helps keep the place mysterious and packed full of the city's creative professionals (and hip kids). Everybody looks better in the dramatic candlelit space, and even the loft gets crammed so expect to mingle.



FOR MEZCAL MASTERY

Bósforo (p85), near the Palacio de Bellas Artes, is the speakeasy home for meeting sleek, like-minded lovers of mezcal downtown.

BEST CAFES IN ALAMEDA CENTRAL

Vegamo

Fresh vegan Mexican meals and clean eating alongside soy chai and coffee in a loft.

Farmacia Internacional

A stylish brunch spot for strong coffee with soy and macadamia milk options, house-made granola with yogurt, eggs, and salads.

Panadería Regis

An espresso with a Mexican *ocho* pastry at the park's fringe is blissful.

Finca Don Porfirio

A well-priced, decent coffee gains you entry to the Sears 8th-floor cafe for postcard-perfect views of Palacio de Bellas Artes across the road.



EVE OREA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Kiosco Morisco

MORE IN ALAMEDA CENTRAL

Cantinas, Writers & Revolutionaries

POWER TO THE DRINKING PEOPLE

Small-town drinks are now big in the metropolis of Mexico City. *Pulque*, a sacred Aztec drink that ferments all by itself on maguey plants, has gone from a quaint rural drink to a mark of Mexican resistance against the beer of foreign elites. **Pulquería Las Duelistas**, four blocks south of Palacio de Bellas Artes, is a classic *pulquería* that has been rediscovered by young artists and musicians. Despite this, the *pulque* (in a variety of flavors) is still dispensed straight from the barrel. The Formica tables and graffiti-art murals make for a casual place for meeting locals over a guava *pulque*, befitting of this, the people's tippie.

When the Spanish arrived, they began distilling the maguey into tequila and mezcal. There are still traditional Mexican cantinas around Centro and Alameda Central to get these shots the way William Burroughs did in the early 1950s. It's said that the Beat Generation author was inspired to write



WHERE TO STAY IN ALAMEDA CENTRAL

Palace Hotel

Spacious with city views, live music, pool and modern polish, near Palacio de Bellas Artes.

\$\$\$

Plaza Revolución Hotel

Stylish, modern rooms four blocks east of Monumento a la Revolución. \$\$

Casa MX Alameda

Rooftop parties yet quiet and comfortable dorms in a spruced-up hostel north of the park. \$

about a ‘cheap cantina’ in *Junky* after spending time at Cantina Tío Pepe, one of the city’s oldest and most traditional watering holes. Over nearly 14 decades, this saloon has poured shots to influential Mexican politicians and famous artists.

Journalists and writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Roberto Bolaño and Octavio Paz frequented the classic **Café La Habana**, which is where Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara also plotted the Cuban revolution.

Explore Emerging Santa María la Ribera

NEW HIP NEIGHBORHOOD

Just northwest of Alameda Central, **Santa María la Ribera** is Mexico City’s current *it* neighborhood. It’s worth a stroll on its calm streets dotted with neo-classical Porfiriato (late-19th-century French-influenced art and architecture favored by President Porfirio Díaz) mansions that have survived the area’s highs and lows – from a suburb of the wealthy to an industrial wasteland that’s finally re-finding its groove.

The **Alameda de Santa María la Ribera** is the area’s central plaza-park and the main attraction is the striking Kiosco Morisco (Moorish Kiosk) designed by Mexican architect José Ramón Ibarrola for the 1884 World’s Fair in New Orleans. The kiosk features Mudejar-style ornamentations, a blend of Spanish and Moorish architecture. On weekends, visitors can see dancers performing *cumbia* or practicing K-pop moves.

The **Museo del Instituto de Geología de la UNAM**, on the northwest edge of the park, is a fine example of Porfiriato art nouveau architecture. Commissioned in 1890 by President Porfirio Díaz, it features a volcanic-stone exterior carved with images of Mexican scenery, and an impressive art nouveau spiral staircase. The collection includes the first dinosaur fossils found in Mexico, meteorites and a mammoth skeleton.

South of the park, the **Parroquia Josefina Sagrada Familia** is a unique neo-Byzantine masterpiece built in 1899, featuring domed roofs, arches, marble columns and Islamic-inspired floral cutouts.

The **Museo Universitario del Chopo** is a towering steel structure with a glass art nouveau facade. Built in Germany in 1902 and shipped to Mexico City, it was opened in 1905 and is now a modern-art museum showcasing marginalized and emerging artists.



SMALLEST CHINATOWN

Across from Palacio de Bellas Artes is Mexico City’s Chinatown. The reproduction red entrance gate, stone lions and lanterns are there, but what’s missing is a Chinese community.

Chinese merchants who settled in Mexicali and Torreón in northern Mexico in the 19th century were attacked, killed and driven out by xenophobic nationalists during the Mexican Revolution in 1911. Some fled to the capital and, by the 1930s, the streets of Dolores and Luis Moya housed bakeries and famous *cafés chinos* with their *bisquets* (pastries now considered Mexican) and budget meals.

Today, El Barrio Chino (Chinatown) is one of the world’s smallest Chinatowns, but it’s growing. The fusion Chinese archway, Arco Chino, was co-designed by Mexican artists with hopes that Chinatown may blossom again.



WHERE TO EAT IN ALAMEDA CENTRAL

El Cuadrilátero

Torta (sandwich) joint owned by wrestler Super Astro, featuring a shrine to *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling) masks. \$

Taquería Tlaquepaque

Mexican-style diner with classics from Guadalajara such as slow-roasted goat *birria* and pork-leg *chamorro*. \$

El Cardenal

Old-world Mexican-family-restaurant charm with traditional breakfasts and homely favorites. \$\$



BEST ARTY HANGOUTS IN SANTA MARÍA LA RIBERA

Eucalipto 20

A queer artist collective exhibiting and selling art and putting on weekend artisanal pizza and wine nights.

Casa Equis

A trailblazer for up-and-coming art and a hangout spot for locals and artists over a craft beer and snacks.

Moonrise

A hub for locally designed skateboard decks, street wear and zines.

Galería Rab 63

Tiny gallery displaying local artists that puts on exhibition-parties.

Ranzō Café y libros

A cafe-bookstore with designer tomes, bagels and chic velvet chairs.



Barba Azul

NURPHOTO SRL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

Dance on the Wild Side

ROUGH, RETRO, REAL MEXICO CITY

Venture outside of Alameda Central to find less-touristy suburbs where Mexican subcultures feel preserved in gritty amber. The infernal red lighting and colorful artwork of dancers engulfed in flames set the mood at **Barba Azul**, a cabaret-style dance hall where you still see some *ficheras* (women who dance with men) at work. Since the 1950s, Barba Azul has staged some of the city's best salsa, merengue and *son* (folk) acts. Check your bill carefully and call for a secure taxi when leaving.

At Salón Los Ángeles, fans of dance-hall music will be treated to the outstanding orchestras or the graceful dancers who fill the vast floor of the atmospheric 1937 ballroom. The live music, consisting of salsa and *cumbia* (dance music originating in Colombia) on Sunday and swing and *danzón* on Tuesday, draws a mostly older crowd. It's located in the rough Colonia Guerrero, so take an authorized taxi or Uber.

By day, the younger cool cats keep the '80s and '90s alive at **Tianguis Cultural del Chopo**. It's a gathering place for the city's various youth subcultures – especially goth, metal, indie and punk – with most of the outdoor vendor stalls selling new and vintage clothes or offering tattooing, piercings and hair coloring. At the north end of the market is a concert stage for young-and-hungry bands with an often-high audience. Watch your belongings and expect to hear whispered drug offerings at this notorious market.



WHERE TO EAT IN SANTA MARÍA LA RIBERA

Sabina

Star-quality octopus *gorditas* (stuffed tortilla) and cocktails at a stately converted mansion and garden. \$\$

Kolobook

A Russian institution on the park for dumplings, borscht, honey cake and ample fish and vegetarian options. \$

Mercado La Dalia

Pull up at a Formica bar in the market for flavorful *tacos de carnitas* (braised pork tacos). \$

JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

GAY BARS AND EMERGING COOL

This neighborhood is at the crossroads of gay clubs, sports bars, Korean grocery stores, tourist buses, Japanese restaurants and the financial district. And that's mostly around Zona Rosa. Since the pandemic, female street sellers have claimed the space outside Insurgentes metro station to hawk trinkets, giving the whole area an even more chaotic ambience. Zona Rosa is where the youth subcultures of skaters, sad boys, kawaii girls, college activists, rockers and K-poppers hang out.

Adjacent is blossoming Juárez, which was born in 1906 from a desire to create an elitist neighborhood open only to foreigners and the Porfirian elite, though it became overcrowded with workers from the lower classes and the small businesses catering to them. In recent years Juárez' fine buildings have been dolled up into boutiques, bars, gallery spaces and hip cafes lined with digital nomads. Still unrenovated around the edges, Juárez is an insight into how Roma once was.

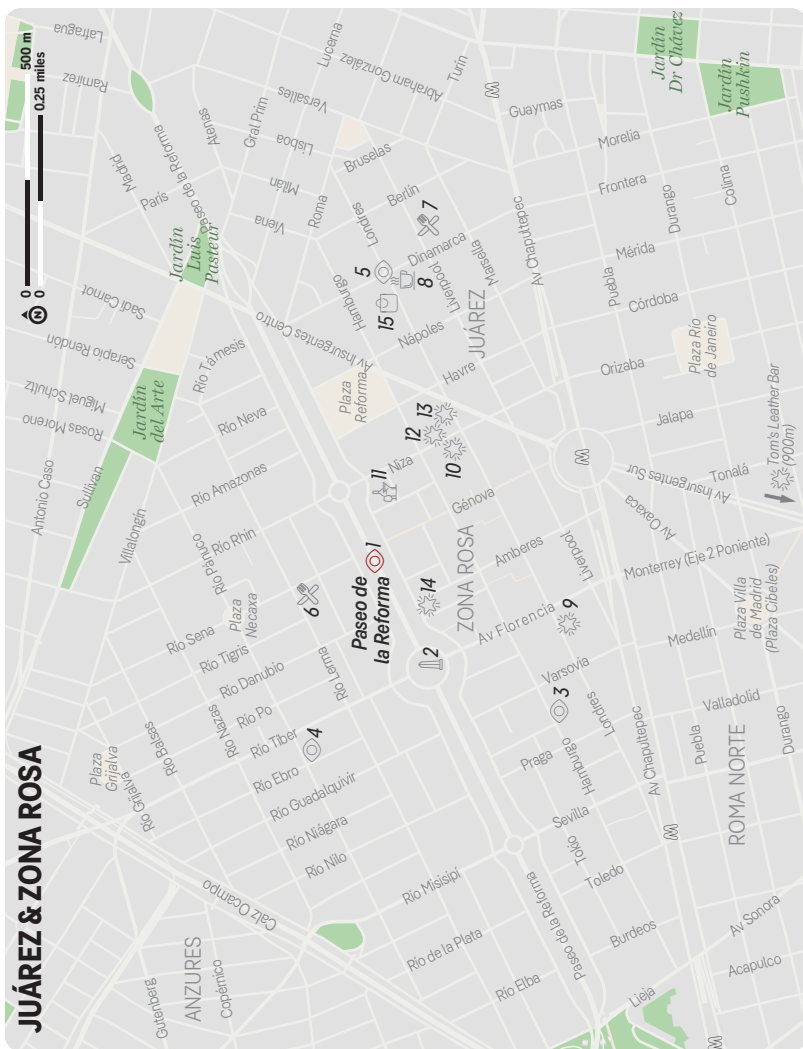
TOP TIP

Confusingly, the area goes by various names. Locals refer to Paseo de la Reforma simply as Reforma and may mean any *colonia* (neighborhood) near the avenue - 'Reforma' might mean Cuauhtémoc on its north side, Juárez to its south, or Zona Rosa next to that. Equally confounding, the metro station, walking distance from Roma, is Insurgentes.



KAMIBA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Zona Rosa



JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Paseo de la Reforma

SIGHTS

- 2 El Ángel
- 3 Little Seoul
- 4 Little Tokyo
- 5 Plaza Washington

EATING

- 6 Tacos Gabriel
- 7 Tamales Madre
- 8 La Rifa Chocolatería

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 9 Nicho Bears & Bar
- 10 Rico
- 11 Xaman Bar
- 12 Blow Bar
- 13 Cabaréto Fusión
- 14 Kinky

SHOPPING

- 15 Bazar Fusión



Paseo de la Reforma



Tacos Gabriel

EATING ON THE EDGE IN CUAUHTÉMOC

The tacos at Gabriel are slightly left of centre. *Camarón* (shrimp), *hongos* (mushroom, vegan), chicken and classic *lechón* (sucking pig) are standouts. What makes Gabriel excel are handmade tortillas and six flavorful salsas – from the sparkle of *piña habanero* to smoky chipotle. To indulge, try the tacos *volcán* style, with fried tortillas and melted cheese. The spiced *tostaditas adobadas* (corn chips) are cult-level good with a beer or *agua fresca*. The small space and retro neon styling means there is always a weekend queue.



Tacos



Tamales



Tamales Madre

STEAMED, STYLISH CORN DOUGH

This is *tamales* heaven, especially for vegetarians. Cyclists blaring ‘Tamales!’ from speakers on CDMX’s streets sell lard-based *tamales* that are stingy on the fillings, but to find the best *tamales*, head to modern and minimally designed Tamales Madre. Here packets of *mole* (chocolate sauce) with chicken or vegan plantain, *hoja santa* (Mexican pepperleaf), or vegetarian pecan cream, are artfully steamed within corn *masa* (dough) in a corn husk or plantain leaf and without *manteca* (lard). The one large dining table means you can watch the cooks prepare the *tamales* and chat to them and other diners, if you like, while you wait.



Little Korea & Little Tokyo

KOREAN, JAPANESE, MEXICAN FUSION

Zona Rosa has become the unlikely shared home not only to the LGBTIQ+ community but to **Pequeño Seúl** (Little Seoul). More than the window dressing that is Chinatown, the grocery stores, karaoke bars, BBQ restaurants, cafes and beauty stores dotted through the area serve actual Korean clientele.

Going upmarket, neighboring *colonia* Cuauhtémoc is unofficially **Pequeño Tokio** (Little Tokyo). By day, office and embassy workers lunch at ramen restaurants (Rokai) or *sando* (sandwich) bistros (Endomoto Coffee). In the evenings, paychecks go to sleeping on a futon in austere

stylish Ryo Kan, and dining at Edo-period chic Koku. Otherwise, try fusion ‘*taconori*’ toasted-seaweed tacos at Shiso or *birria* (goat stew) ramen at Ánimo Ay Caldos!. Finish at swanky Tokyo Music Bar for cocktails and vinyl records.



La Rifa Chocolatería

PRE-HISPANIC
CHOCOLATE DELIGHTS

Pre-Hispanic cacao traditions are treated with artisanal respect at pleasant outdoor Plaza Washington. The fermented hot chocolate has a deep, textured flavor. Choose water-based drinks for an authentic (as it was here thousands of years ago) yet creamy taste; you can ask for half-sweet or a touch of chili.

The chocolate, mango and fig fruit salad and tarts are out of this world, too. Or try *mole tamales* (tamales in a spiced cacao sauce) or *chalupas* of mini-tortillas with *chapulines* (grasshoppers) for a savory option. Pick up chocolate gifts to remember this highlight of Juárez.



mole tamales



Bazar Fusión

WEEKEND ARTISANAL MARKET

From a converted *casona* (grand house) typical of the Juárez neighborhood, a dozen independent boutique stores produce giftware, clothing and furniture, most with a Mexican spin. It's an excellent place to pick up sustainable products and vegan beauty items. Each Friday to Sunday, there's an ever-changing courtyard market showcasing products and food from a particular region, such as Michoacán. These events are often a fine source of artisanal mezcal to take home, after a chat with knowledgeable producers. A cafe serves gourmet snacks such as *chapulín* (grasshopper) pizza, or simply aubergine. It's a place you can wander through at brunch o'clock and get a sense of the neighborhood. Locals show off their dogs and best weekend-casual looks.



LEFT: RODRIGO LUCENTINI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©
TOP LEFT: MARCOS CASTILLO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mini tortillas with *chapulines*



Xaman Bar

COCKTAILS IN A HIDDEN SPEAKEASY

This is an underground bar, literally. Take the hidden entrance into the moody interior, and Xaman resembles the laboratory of a cocktail cult. Herbs such as sage daub smooth mezcal served in coconut shells, while smoke, capers and anise materialize from marble vessels. Designer spaces and drink names such as 'astral travel' conjure a mystic-chic vibe. Wizardry aside, the cocktails are enchanting. The secretive (but polished) space is oh-so Juárez (technically Cuauhtémoc), with similar bars such as Hanky Panky showing what makes the neighborhood so cool.



Museo Tamayo



Paseo de la Reforma

THE WHOLE CITY IN ONE BOULEVARD

When you first lay eyes on the trees flanking the broad boulevard of Paseo de la Reforma, you realize *this* is the Mexico City people rave about. It may resemble the Champs-Élysées in Paris, but this road takes in all walks of Mexican life as it cuts a bold southwestern path from Tlatelolco to Bosque de Chapultepec, skirting Alameda Central and crossing the Juárez and Zona Rosa neighborhoods.

Emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg laid out the boulevard to connect his castle on Chapultepec Hill with the old city center. After his execution, it was given its current name to commemorate the reform laws instituted by President Benito Juárez. The wide, pleasantly walkable avenue has statue-studded medians that stage book fairs and art exhibits. Paseo de la Reforma links a series of monumental *glorietas* (traffic circles), starting near Alameda Central with **El Caballito**, a yellow representation of a horse's head by the sculptor Sebastián. It continues by the **Centro Bursátil**, an angular tower and mirror-ball ensemble housing the nation's Bolsa (stock exchange), before arriving at the golden icon of Mexico City, **El Ángel** (p94). This monument is the heart of Reforma.

Continue to the monument commonly known as **La Diana Cazadora**, a 1942 bronze sculpture representing the Archer of the North Star. The Paseo becomes leafier at the **Bosque de Chapultepec**, **Castillo de Chapultepec** and top museums **Museo de Arte Moderno**, **Museo Tamayo** and **Museo Nacional de Antropología**, before finishing at the **Auditorio Nacional** concert hall in Polanco.



DIY REFORMA TOUR

See the whole boulevard on public transportation on a double-decker bus. Línea 7 *metrobús* covers the most interesting sections of Paseo de la Reforma and rarely gets full on weekends or between 10am and 4pm weekdays. It makes for a cheap, comfortable ride from Plaza Garibaldi, passing all the sights on Paseo de la Reforma to El Ángel, then onwards to Bosque de Chapultepec (terminating here on Sundays before 2pm) and Museo Nacional de Antropología before finishing after Auditorio Nacional.



Plaza Washington

LEAFY HEART OF JUÁREZ

Shaded by trees, the *glorieta* intersection of Plaza Washington is where the renewed Juárez is at its most glorious. A statue of George Washington (moved to Bosque de Chapultepec) once stood in a garden here. This is still a green space amongst the edginess of Juárez. Leisure seekers lounge under trees at chocolatier Rifa (p92), and eat fried-chicken sandwiches at digital-nomad meeting spot Cicatriz. There are nearby bistros, bars and boutiques secreted away, adding to the cool factor, yet there is still the sense that Plaza Washington exists in a living neighborhood, complete with *torta* (sandwich) and pizza joints.



Torta al pastor



El Ángel



El Ángel

GOLDEN SYMBOL OF CDMX

The icon of Mexico City, known as *El Ángel* (The Angel), this gilded statue on a 45m-high pillar is the winged Greek goddess of victory, Nike. The golden figure was sculpted for the independence centennial of 1910. Inside the monument are the remains of Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos, Ignacio Allende and nine other notables. Thousands of people congregate here on Independence Day, New Year's Eve and after *fútbol* matches.

El Ángel also makes superb people watching. Strolling families and K-pop fans circle here, unbothered by gay and lesbian lovers whispering sweet nada on surrounding benches, while anxious visa applicants wait here before their interviews at the nearby US embassy.

It's also a magnet for political demonstrations, and in August 2019 a protest against femicide ended in graffiti on El Ángel to draw attention to the problems of inequality in the country.

To get near the monument, wait for a break in the traffic. There are no pedestrian lights.



Cycling, Paseo de la Reforma

MORE IN JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Car-free Sunday Cycling

RECLAIM PASEO DE LA REFORMA

On Sunday mornings (8am to 2pm; except the last Sunday of the month) Paseo de la Reforma is closed to auto traffic from Bosque de Chapultepec to the Alameda Central for El Paseo Dominical. It is a liberating feeling to join the legions of *chilangos* who happily skate, cycle or scoot down the avenue without cars in the way.

The 26km '*ciclotón*' route extends from Auditorio Nacional along Reforma to the Basílica de Guadalupe. The route passes monuments such as El Caballito, Centro Bursátil, El Ángel and La Diana Cazadora, the facades of which you can enjoy without entry.

If you can't make this day, much of the route is marked with *ciclovías* (dedicated bicycle paths) anyhow. The *ciclovía* on Paseo de la Reforma is physically separated from traffic with small speed humps. You are also allowed to ride inside Bosque de Chapultepec – helpful to see the many small sights separated by great distances.

To rent a bicycle, an ever-changing roster of bike- and scooter-sharing apps are used in CDMX. You can rent city bicycles from Ecobici with a credit card, or free from Bicigratis modules (along Reforma and Fuente de Cibeles) with a passport for three hours of riding.



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Masala y Maiz

Indian/East African-Mexican fusion fine dining. Excellent vegetarian options and organic wines. \$\$

Alba Cocina Local

Seasonal menu of Mexican breakfasts and dinners with a creative flourish. Does wonders with artichoke and octopus. \$\$

Café NiN

This oh-so photogenic, gold-rich bistro and bakery of Rosetta fame is brunch heaven for solo diners and couples. \$\$

Yug Vegetariano

Over 50 years of unpretentious homestyle vegetarian and vegan dishes and a great lunch buffet. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Casa González

Family-run for nearly a century; a perennial hit for peaceful rooms around a leafy patio. \$\$

Hoteles Geneve

Zona Rosa institution maintains a belle époque ambience dripping in gold among the action. \$\$\$

Capsule Hostel

Non-party budget Juárez hostel that's more boutique hospital ward than Japanese capsule. \$



BEST ARCHITECTURE IN JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Calle Havre

Resplendent with remodelled *casonas* (grand houses) from Mansion Havre to French beauty Havre 77.

Museo de Cera, Londres 6

An art nouveau beauty that is now a Ripley's museum.

Edificio Vizcaya, Bucareli 128

When this apartment block opened in 1924, it was one of the first in Juárez to have running water.

Secretaría de Salubridad, Lieja 7

Art deco government building near Chapultepec ordered by post-revolutionary ex-president Calles.



SERGIO MENDOZA HOCHMANN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Zona Rosa

Out in LGBTIQ+ Zona Rosa

HUB OF MEXICO'S QUEER COMMUNITIES

Mexico City is a beacon of hope to immeasurable gay, lesbian and trans folk fleeing less tolerant Mexican towns, or even other Latin American countries, and embracing Zona Rosa. Here, partygoers spill from the back-to-back pumping bars and clubs along Amberes, sometimes mixing with the sports bars nearby with barely any hassle. Zona Rosa scoffs at the dress-coded *nice* (snobby) gay parties of Polanco and Condesa.

Young locals and escapees (for the night) from Mexico State party at grungy club **Rico**, with its drag shows and roof garden open till late. Similarly cramped but fun are nearby **Cabaréti-to Fusión** and the reggaeton third level of **Blow Bar**, both popular for *perreo* (dirty dancing). Arrive on opening to beat the queues.

Back on the main gay strip, **Amberes**, take your pick of similar dive bars with dance floors, some with glass walls, if posing for passersby is your thing. The pick here is **Kinky**, with its roof terrace, gogo boys and pop music attracting a more dressed-up, 30-something crowd. Thursdays here are 'Ellas' lesbian nights with female 'goga' dancers.

Bears and cubs should seek welcoming **Nicho Bears and Bar**. Those into raunch leave Zona Rosa to the dark room of **Tom's Leather Bar**, which is 'macho' but less fetish than it sounds, especially on busy, international Tuesdays.

As anywhere, pickpocketing is rife in many bars.



WHERE TO BUY ARTS AND CRAFTS IN JUÁREZ & ZONA ROSA

Antigüedades Plaza del Ángel

Weekend flea market within a mall of antique shops selling jewelry, ornaments and furniture.

Fonart

This government-run crafts store sells quality wares from around Mexico. Prices are fixed.

México Hecho Arte

Contemporary art pieces and traditional artisanal handicrafts come together just north of El Ángel in Cuauhtémoc.

ROMA

HIP STORES IN BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS

Once inhabited by artists and writers, Roma now is also the home of fashion labels and international dining, while still retaining its slower pace in the backstreets. Roma's tattoo parlours, designers, clubs, vinyl-record stores, vegan cafes and even hairdressers are the tastemakers for the city. Wander off Álvaro Obregón, Roma's main thoroughfare, and discover its many cafes, taco joints, galleries and specialty boutiques scattered around the leafy streets. A stroll down Orizaba passes two lovely plazas: Río de Janeiro, with a statue replica of Michelangelo's *David*; and Luis Cabrera, which is decorated with a fountain.

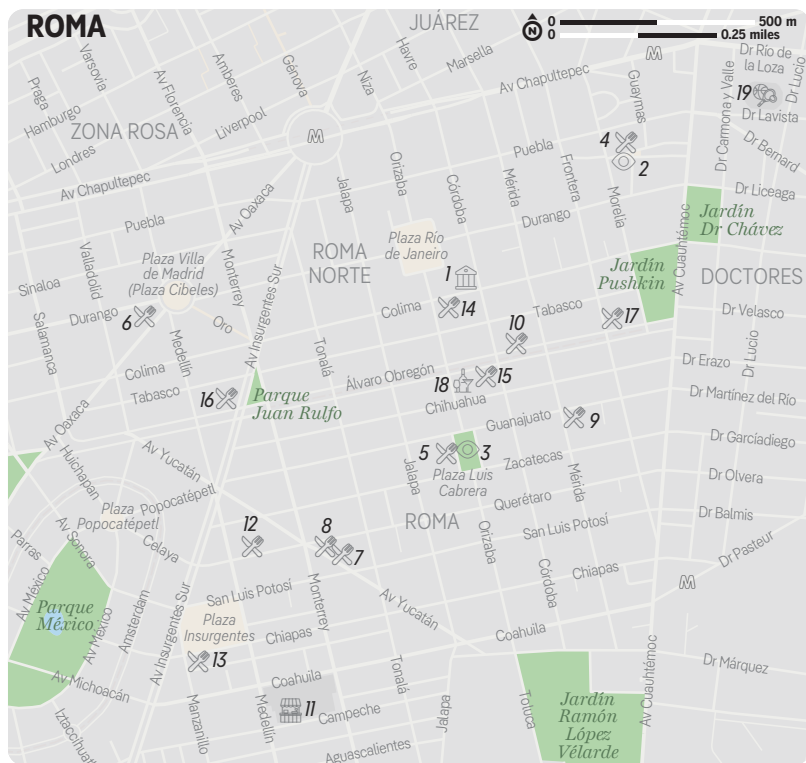
Roma Norte (north) is the site of most of the action. Heading into Roma Sur (south), the area slows to a residential pace. It buzzes again near the Mercado Medellín, and its surrounding *fondas* (inns), bars and Colombian stores. Once you cross the highway Insurgentes, things transform into upscale Condesa.

TOP TIP

What a difference a highway makes. Crossing west over Avenida Cuauhtémoc takes you into the Doctores neighborhood, where accommodations are significantly cheaper than in Roma. Despite whispers of regeneration, the dark streets of Doctores can empty out at night, making muggings more likely.



Plaza Río de Janeiro

**SIGHTS**

- 1** Museo del Objeto del Objeto
- 2** Plaza La Romita
- 3** Plaza Luis Cabrera

EATING

- 4** Antojitos La Romita
- 5** Cabrera 7
- 6** Contramar

- 7** El Parnita
- 8** Expendio de Maíz
- 9** Forever
- 10** Maximo
- 11** Mercado Medellín
- 12** Mercado Roma
- (see 7)** Páramo
- 13** Por Siempre Vegana Taquería

- 14** Rosetta
 - 15** Tacos Álvaro Obregón
 - 16** Taquería Orinoco
 - 17** Taquitos Frontera
- DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE**
- 18** Licorería Limantour
- ENTERTAINMENT**
- 19** Arena México



Maximo

LOCAL PRODUCE TAKEN TO THE MAX

The thrill of Mexico City's exciting modern culinary scene is spearheaded by Maximo. The constantly evolving menu, which draws on European and some Mexican recipes, features fresh, seasonal ingredients in dishes such as crab-stuffed zucchini flowers or octopus ceviche (lime cured). Owner and chef Eduardo García honed his cooking skills at Pujol in Polanco under the tutelage of famed chef Enrique Olvera. The name change (from Máximo Bistrot Local), barn space and premier new location on Álvaro Obregón are sleek updates. Reservations a must.



Mercado Roma

ON-TREND GOURMET
SNACK HALL

Weekends at this gourmet food hall resemble a red-carpet event of well-to-do families and the best dressed (Mercado Roma has featured in top fashion mags). The upmarket orbit of Condesa is nearby, after all. It is indeed an impressive, if cramped and showy, space to meet, eat and drink. The snacks are top-notch, representing a best-of from around town – tuétano (bone-marrow) blue-corn tacos, tlayudas (tortilla ‘pizzas’), paella and fine burgers. There are plenty of vegan and international options, too. The slight ‘market’ element brings fine ingredients to local pantries – spices, seafood or hard-to-find items.



Mercado Roma



Plaza Luis Cabrera

HISTORY ON THE ROAD

Throughout the 1950s, Roma was a haven for American Beat Generation writers. At Plaza Luis Cabrera, poets such as Allen Ginsberg spent drug-hazed sessions around the fountain, inspiring their works (and the image of Mexico). There’s a photo of Kerouac and buddies possibly posing here. Today the tranquil plaza is an outdoor art space lined with lovers on benches, restaurants in converted houses and cafes in which to type your own masterpiece. The giant bronze head is by Roma local Javier Marín. Bookending Roma Norte, the plaza and larger Plaza Rio De Janeiro (with its David statue) are charming rest stops to your exploration.



Plaza Luis Cabrera



Museo del Objeto del Objeto



Museo del Objeto del Objeto

MUSEUM OF MEXICAN CURIOS

Packing a collection of nearly 100,000 pieces, some dating back as far as the Mexican War of Independence (1810), this two-story design museum tells unique versions of Mexican history by compiling objects for thematic exhibits such as *fútbol* in Mexico. The permanent collection groups together items such as vintage typewriters, posters, matchboxes, printing stamps and plenty of tins – for tobacco, shoe polish and gramophone needles. It's light on explanations in English, but it gives a rare visual glimpse of hobby life in Mexico across the decades.



Licorería Limantour

COCKTAILS WITH MEXICAN SPICE

This boisterous cocktail bar regularly ranks as one of the top 50 bars in the world and, controversially, the best bar in Latin America. The service and cocktails certainly live up to the hype. The most local of creations are a hit, such as the guava, or Al Pastor, which pays homage to the taco's pineapple garnish. Thanks to the headlines, all three levels get busy. Arrive early to get a table on the rooftop, but the real fun and energy is sitting at the bar and watching the cocktail artists at work.



Tostadas de atun (tuna tostadas), Contramar



Contramar

TOP SEAFOOD AND AMBIENCE

Seafood is the star attraction at this dining hall with a seaside vibe and impeccable service. On weekends, there is a brash flurry of waiters and a sense that half the city and all of its visitors are brunching here in their finest linen. The specialty is tuna fillet Contramar-style – split, swabbed with red chili and parsley sauces and grilled to perfection. The creamy tuna *tostada* (crispy tortilla) topped with avocado slices is a must-try appetizer. Ask for a half serve to fit it all in, or solo diners can sit up at the bar with a *carajillo* (coffee and liqueur cocktail) and order an accompaniment to watch Roma at its most buzzing. Reservations recommended.



Rosetta

BAKERY AND
RESTAURANT
SHOWSTOPPERS

Sublime Mexican and French *pan dulce* (pastries), proper croissants and baguettes are made fresh daily at this bakery. The expanded outdoor undercover booths and tables have created a magnetic destination among the stately French architecture of Calle Orizaba. When deciding where to eat, your mind might wander back to the sandwiches and Mexican breakfasts at Rosetta. Then in the evening, the converted corner mansion of sister restaurant Rosetta is where you might end up for a romantic dinner over pink *mole*, yam *tamales* and the *hoja santa* (Mexican pepperleaf) dessert.

Rosetta



MISTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO © BOTTOM RIGHT: NUBPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES ©



Mercado Medellín

MEXICAN MARKET REALNESS

Imagine the scent: *sempasuchil* (marigold) around Day of the Dead and *nochebuena* (poinsettia) at Christmas. In one direction are sheets of *chicharrón* (pork crackling) under hot lamps, while perming lotions waft from beauty salons; in the other, incense streams before Santa Muerte effigies.

As you enter, delis peddle tamarind sweets and dried chili-strawberries. You'll be beckoned deeper by sellers crying '¿Qué le doy?' (What can I get you?) and gesturing to stacks of *guanabaná* (soursoy), *nopal* (cactus) and *mole* sauces. Push by swinging piñatas in the form of orange-tinged ex-presidents and other cartoon characters.

The market is a hub for migrants to source ingredients from Latin America. Hunt down **El Conde de Medellín** to sip excellent coffee from Colombia and Chiapas. At the rear, at **Helados Palmeiro**, a Havana native serves Cuban ice cream with flavors such as *mantecado* (nutmeg vanilla), using his grandmother's recipe. This is also where you'll find *fondas* (inns) with plastic tables to eat traditional Mexican lunches amongst the hubbub.



Mercado Medellín



Expendio de Maíz

FRESH OFF
THE HOT PLATE

An unmissable, unique experience. No menu, no official name (except the 'corn dealer' description), just a relaxed, communal table with food straight from the *comal* (hot plate) to wow you. Bilingual staff explain each dish, such as the crunchy smoky *carnitas* (pulled-pork) with Oaxacan cheese on house-made tortillas. Mostly organic, locally sourced, seasonal produce is used. Each round of dishes includes a vegetarian option. When you've had enough, tell them to stop. Expect to pay M\$200 for four courses of generous snacks with a drink such as kombucha or mezcals. Cash only; expect a long queue.



ROBERT HANING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©. BOTTOM/LEFT: CATHY ROSE MELLON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©.

Tortillería, La Romita



La Romita

SECRET OASIS PLAZA



Plaza de Romita

A village hidden in Roma? The moment you step into Plaza de Romita you might feel like you are in a *pueblo mágico* (magical village). Pine trees block out the renovated modern world and encircle a sole fountain that seems to be made just for you. Time seems to trickle by as if it is still 1953, when the plain white Rectoría de San Francisco Javier church here was built. Go way back and La Romita (as this section of Roma is known) once formed part of pre-Hispanic Tenochtitlan, pre-dating Roma. This plaza is where Spanish-Mexican filmmaker Luis Buñuel partly set *Los Olvidados* (1950). La Romita does feel wonderfully 'forgotten'. Listen: there's the creak of hot tortillas stumbling off the conveyor belt in the dilapidated, half-century-old *tortillería*. This is the Mexico City of yesteryear, as is the inexpensive **Antojitos La Romita** diner, serving unpretentious enchiladas and other classics. In the *huerto* (plant nursery), volunteers provide workshops on the connection between what we grow and eat. An ethos of small-town life is not forgotten here.



Luchador

MORE IN ROMA

Heckle Lucha Libre Wrestlers

MEXICAN WRESTLING MATCH TIPS

Arena México is the champion of wrestling in the capital. Just across the highway from Roma, the 17,000-seat stadium is taken over by a gladiator atmosphere each week, with bombastic *luchadores* (wrestlers) such as Místico and Sam Adonis going at each other in tag teams or one on one. There are three or four bouts, building up to the headline match.

It's an eye-opening cultural experience, even if wrestling isn't your thing. For some, the intermissions featuring folkloric dancers are just as interesting.

There are some pitfalls to avoid, though. First, to get to the arena's sketchy Doctores neighborhood, it's safer to walk east from the direction of Roma rather than from the west. Once there, ignore claims by the touts outside that the match is sold out. Tickets are nearly always available from the windows. When choosing, consider the cheap seats. They may be higher up behind a wire fence, but this is where the most raucous locals sit, making it the most atmospheric spot for heckling the wrestlers (expect to learn lots of Mexican swear words). To smell the action from the pricier seats near the front, book in advance for Fridays (pick up tickets from window 1).

You can't enter with food or water, but you can buy beer and beverages inside and take them to your seat. Drinks are surprisingly reasonably priced; this is a spectator sport of the people,

WHY I LOVE MERCADO MEDELLÍN



Phillip Tang, writer

Mercado Medellín (pl01) is more than a place to sniff out exciting spices and grab a lime squeezer (though there's that, too). This is a concentrated hit of daily Mexican life. I'm biased because Mercado Medellín was my local market from 2011. I would get my hair cut by a girl with braces while she explained the *ranchero* songs playing. This market is a showcase of flavors from across Latin America, so I could zip from Peru to Guatemala and back to Mexico down each aisle. It's where I was electrified by the sweet honey-pumpkin texture of the Aztec *mamey* fruit, and you never forget your first. Despite how Roma gentrifies, traditional life flourishes here.



WHERE TO STAY IN ROMA

Hotel Milán

The best-value modern option in Roma has minimalist decor and well-maintained small rooms with quality bedding. **\$\$**

Hotel Stanza

A cushy base with a gym on the east edge of Álvaro Obregón. **\$\$\$**

Hotel Monarca

Excellent-value hostel-type hotel in the middle of the action, noise and all. **\$**

I LIVE HERE: GOING OUT IN ROMA



Armando López Muñoz, local screenwriter and radio presenter, shares his recommendations for the best nightlife in Roma. Instagram @laroid_palmus
Twitter @doktorpalma

Covadonga

A relaxed cantina and local cultural hub for groups or solo drinkers. It has it all – hipsters, old Spaniards, office workers, journalists and artists. And it has great Spanish-Mexican food.

Casa Franca

Good jazz in the heart of Roma. There are lots of different spaces in the house, so it's good for couples or small groups. It also has great Franca (Italo-Argentinian) food downstairs.

Cine Tonalá

Good for a drink, with Mexican-international food, arthouse films and sometimes live experimental music. It's in a quieter area, so it doesn't fill up and there's a cosy terrace.



Cine Tonalá

after all. You can also ask your usher to bring you drinks and snacks, for a tip, so you don't miss any of the camp action.

Find Your Taco Personality

OLD-SCHOOL TO BEST-IN-CLASS

To get under the skin of this eclectic neighborhood, consult the Mexican constant: the taco.

Roma Sur (south), although next to fancy Condesa, remains rough around the edges. Opposite a local market, the tattooed staff at **Por Siempre Vegana Taquería** look right at home and do wonders with soy and other mock meat without the plant-based trendiness. As you enter Roma Norte (north), things get more refined with handmade tortillas with slow-cooked pork at **El Parnita**. In the evenings, the hip crowds at neighboring **Páramo** drink cocktails and knock back tacos of seared tuna in honey in a grand space.

Meanwhile, befitting of the energetic main avenue of Roma Norte, **Tacos Álvaro Obregón** churns out tongue tacos and is a peek at the area's grungier past. **Taquitos Frontera** is another stalwart, producing excellent *tacos al pastor* without having to charge for on-trend decor.

On the ritzier side of Roma Norte, the *tacos gobernador* (shrimp tacos) of **Cabrera 7** taste divine with a terrace view across leafy Plaza Luis Cabrera and a cocktail in hand. Maybe you require a side of the drop-dead-exquisite art deco exteriors of vegan **Forever** with your stuffed chili tacos.

Late into the night, **Taquería Orinoco** fills with the hippest of Roma's party crowd for some of the best pork tacos the city has to offer.



WHERE TO EAT IN ROMA

Yemanyá

The Mexican-accented seafood creates unique flavors in a great atmosphere on the patio. \$\$\$

Departamento

One-stop hub of cool, with a restaurant showcasing modern bites, and a club with live music. \$\$\$

El Hidalguense

Even before Netflix fame, the lamb *barbacoa* (pit roasted in maguey leaves) here had legions of fans. \$\$

CONDESA

LEAFY AND CHIC

Condesa's striking architecture, palm-lined esplanades and joyful parks echo its origins as a haven for a newly emerging elite in the early 20th century. The trendy restaurants, hip boutiques and hot nightspots live on. During and after the pandemic, Condesa became a haven for digital nomads and escapees from Europe and the US. Alongside the influx, an ever-growing number of cafes, restaurants and accommodations cater to visitors in the sought-after area. Fortunately, much of the neighborhood's old flavor also remains. So much of the appeal can be found strolling along park-like medians filled with art deco and California-colonial-style buildings. The heart of the neighborhood is the peaceful Parque México, the oval shape of which reflects its earlier use as an *hipodromo* (horse-racing track). Condesa is a leafy enclave within the metropolis that you might be happy never leaving.

TOP TIP

You pay a premium for proximity to Parque México. Restaurants and accommodations can be just as interesting blocks away, at more reasonable prices. Just make sure you are near everything you need. It can be surprisingly difficult to find something to eat after 9pm, especially outside of weekends.



MENDOZZA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Condesa

**HIGHLIGHTS**

1 Parque México

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

2 Amsterdam

EATING

3 El Moro

4 Lardo

5 Nevería Roxy

6 Pastelería Maque

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

7 Baltra

8 La Clandestina

9 Tom's Leather Bar

SHOPPING

10 Librería Rosario

Castellanos

11 Tianguis de Condesa



El Moro

SWEET BREAK BY PARQUE MÉXICO

**Churros, El Moro**

El Moro started in the 1930s with a homesick Spanish immigrant selling *churros* (doughnutlike fritters) from a car in the Zócalo. Today the Parque México views and Moro's blue-and-white tiles make for a lovely, re-energizing stop. Sweet *churros* come rolled in cinnamon or *azúcar* (sugar) to complement the hot chocolate, which ranges from gentle Mexicano style to heart-thumpingly syrupy, Español style. You'll be in good company. Famous Moro fans over the years include actor Cantinflas, novelist Carlos Fuentes and poet Octavio Paz.



Parque México

GREEN HEART OF TOWN

The ideal place to start your Condesa explorations is at its heart, in the buzzing greenery of Parque México, attracting professional dog walkers, dancers practicing their moves, *fútbol* players, lovers whispering on the benches,

and families in the enclosed children's play area.

Everything revolves around this park and every street leading off it is a delight. The art deco park opened in 1927 and the sculpture of an indigenous woman holding water pitchers

at the middle entrance was designed by great Mexican sculptor José María Fernández Urbina, who also helped reconstruct El Ángel in 1957.

Two blocks northwest is Parque España, which has another kid zone.



La Clandestina

CLANDESTINE MEZCAL-TASTING SPEAKEASY

Fashioned after a rural mom-and-pop shop, the Clandestina provides a detailed menu describing the distillation process of the 22 mezcals on offer, dispensed from jugs on high shelves. For newbies to the artisanal tippie, there is a tasting flight of three mezcals, with explanations from the bar staff (in varying levels of English, depending on who is working). The *espadin reposado* is an excellent, smoky aged variety. In true clandestine fashion, the sign outside is tiny and for those in the know.



Mezcal



Baltra

COCKTAILS MEXICAN STYLE

This bar is dark enough to make everybody look lovely in a warm glow, with an excellent cocktail in hand. Knowledgeable, English-speaking staff can help work out what flavors you want, but a fine place to start is the Pacifica, which blends mezcal, cucumber and the right touch of habanero chili. No wonder Baltra has ranked in the prestigious 'World's 50 Best Bars' list. The brass- and wood-rimmed nautical decor was inspired by Charles Darwin's trip to the Galápagos. Tables fill up quickly and reservations are a good idea on weekends. The Martini Tuesdays attract eager drinkers, too.



Baltra



Lardo

EURO-MEXICAN BISTRO

It always seems sunny in this convivial stylish bistro, which takes Mexican flavors and matches them with European freshness. Part of the Rosetta patisserie family (p101), Lardo's exquisite zucchini-and-spearmint pizzettas show baking prowess, and dishes such as red snapper with pepita sauce or *adobo* (red pepper) baby chicken are expertly balanced.

At brunch, crowds descend on Lardo for its excellent *chilaquiles*, a typical light Mexican breakfast featuring tortilla chips smothered in salsa and topped with fried eggs or meat. If you can't wait for a table or bar space, there's always the side window, where the bakery sells excellent *conchas* (glazed buns) and other pastries to take away with you.

THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES © TOP RIGHT: ANDRÉO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Amsterdam

WALKING INTRO TO CONDESA

The center of Condesa, Parque México, is ringed by a tree-lined median walkway called Amsterdam that is almost a park itself. A stroll along the length of Amsterdam gives you a good overview of Condesa, with roads running off it like wagon-wheel spokes. Each section has its own flavor, and intersects with sculptures and plazas – sweet Plaza Citlaltépetl and fountain to the south; and art deco Plaza Popocatepetl, encrusted in Talavera tiles from Puebla. Wherever you go, beware of joggers huffing by in designer Lycra.



WIRESTOCK CREATORS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©. BOTTOM LEFT: LOONHITZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Amsterdam



Pastelería Maque

FRENCH AND MEXICAN CAFE-BAKERY

Condesa sophisticates gather for coffee in the mornings and Irish coffee in the evenings at this Parisian-style cafe-bakery near Parque México. Waiters bring trays of freshly baked croissants and other French and Mexican pastries. Ex-president Porfirio Diaz was obsessed with French culture, so the fingerprints of Parisian architecture, lifestyle and cuisine were all over Condesa by the early 1900s. From this sprang Mexico's own touch. The Mexican *conchas* at Maque take the glazed round bun but with French pastry knowledge for the perfect soft texture. Having a *flor de calabaza* (zucchini flower) omelet brunch here is quintessential Condesa.



Conchas



Nevería Roxy

SCOOPS OF ICE-CREAM NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia glows like a child's smile at this old-school ice-cream parlor. The two Condesa locations retain the same charming striped awnings, upholstered stools and swell chrome finishings that they've sported since Nevería Roxy

began in 1946. The fruit that flavors the *helados* (ice cream) and *nieves* (sorbets) are still sourced from La Merced market, too. Mexican specialties are popular – *mamey* (like sweet creamy yam), *arroz con leche* (rice pudding), *guanábana*

(custard apple) and coconut with Kahlúa – along with more classic flavors. There is also date-worthy banana split and affogato for grown-ups. Visit on the weekend if you want a peek at the families or the young and hip who live in Condesa.



Librería Rosario Castellanos

VAST BOOKSTORE AND READING ROOM

Inside the impressive art deco Centro Cultural Bella Época is one of the largest bookstores in Latin America. The building was once a cinema, so it's mammoth and hosts literary events. If you're hunting for an author from Latin America, or want to discover one, this is the place to go.

It is easy, and permitted, to sit for hours perusing on the couches and in the cafe at its center. The only catch is that you need to find a book that is not shrink wrapped, as most are. There is an excellent selection of books on photography, art, travel and Mexican culture, with some in English. There are also CDs, DVDs and designer gifts.



Librería Rosario Castellanos



Tianguis de Condesa

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Tianguis de Condesa

TUESDAY FOOD MARKET

If you want to understand Mexican life, a visit to a *tianguis* (outdoor bazaar) is the best way to see (and smell) it for yourself. Even in upmarket Condesa, the weekly Tuesday *tianguis* has the brashness and verve of any town market. You can buy inexpensive clothing, antiques, gifts and fresh produce. Otherwise pull up a stool at one of the food stalls for tacos and *flautas* (flute-shaped fried tacos) under the tarps.

It's worth seeking out village-fresh avocados, fruit or nuts from the indigenous women on the fringes of the market who can't afford a stall or to source from wholesalers.



Se Compran Colchones

FIERRO VIEJO JUNK-HAUL TRUCK

Every visitor to Mexico City will eventually ask: What is that truck with the screaming girl? You can't seek out this sight, but it will find you. The high-pitched whine of the junk-haul truck is a CDMX institution and a must-hear. The formula is reproduced all over the capital, even in fancy Condesa: young guys cruise a pickup truck through a neighborhood, while a girl's recorded voice screeches from a loudspeaker: '*Se compran colchones, tambores, refrigeradores...*', proclaiming that they buy mattresses, bed bases, fridges and other '*fierro viejo*' old metal.

This scrap-metal-seller's tape recording of his 15-year-old daughter from 2005 has been parodied and remixed, but is also fondly remembered by expats. People do actually sell, or donate, old mattresses for less than M\$50, rather than pay for their removal. The springs and other metal is then recycled. It doesn't get quieter in the evenings: listen out for the *cyclos* selling/yelling '*tamales*', or the shrill whistle of the roving oven firing up *camotes* (roasted sweet potatoes).

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO EAT IN CONDESA



Karen Villagómez, bar manager at Cien in Condesa and owner of *ñom* baked goods, shares her recommendations for the best places to eat in Condesa. @flevrs_

Esquina Común

Chef Ana Dolores and her partner serve dinners in their Condesa apartment. The concept of using ingredients that are available is wonderful. And it feels like eating at a friend's place.

Antolina

With a focus on Mexican cuisine and mezzal, they respect the ingredients and explain what's in season, sourcing vegetables from Xochimilco's *chinampas* (floating farms) to create colorful dishes.

Lagerbar

It has dishes that are very Mexican, such as *chamorro* (beef shank) that you would order in a cantina and octopus *tostada* (crispy tortilla). A great place to eat with friends.



CATHROSE MELLON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

Red Tree House

MORE IN CONDESA

A Vegan Trip Around Parque México

VEGAN AND VEGETARIAN SNACKS AND MEALS

Plant-based and *comida vegana* (vegan food) is big in Condesa. Whether it's because locals have become more health conscious, or cosmopolitan, or to cater to foreigners, nearly every restaurant has at least one vegetarian or vegan dish on the menu. For more options, start with a meat-free snack around Parque México. Try a Middle Eastern falafel pita pocket at **Falafelito**, a crispy 'chicken' burger at **fakc-yeah** and a coffee at **Tierra Garat**, where soy milk costs no extra.

More substantial vegan noodle soup can be found northeast at **V Ramen**, while nearby **Veganion Antojería** takes mock meat to the extreme with *milanesa* (schnitzel) and *molcajete* (mortar-full of grilled meat and *nopal* cactus).

Heading south, **Groovy's Taquería Vegana** is a retro pastel dream for vegan tacos *al pastor* (spiced 'pork').

West of Parque México, **u.to.pi.a** is a paradise indeed for tapioca-cheese pizzas with mushrooms on crispy bases. It also does personal size for solo diners, or if you can't decide. **Veguísima** is all about chowing down on burritos on outdoor tables, while the gem of west Condesa is **Green Corner**, which is not vegan but has a rotating daily lunch menu of vegan and healthy organic choices. It's perfect for groups who want to enjoy the leafy setting or shop at its health-food store.

If you're still searching, cross the highway to welcoming **India Mandala**, a hole-in-the-wall *fonda* (diner) for its daily home-cooked set lunch of Indian delights with authentic flavors.



WHERE TO STAY IN STYLE IN CONDESA

Red Tree House

Elegant B&B with stylish rooms, patio, garden and happy hour for socializing with guests. \$\$\$

Condesa Haus

A gorgeous, tranquil, designer house with excellent attention by Fernando and his staff in the best area. \$\$\$

Casa Comtesse

Eight artfully decorated rooms in a historic 1940s building with parquet flooring, exceptional breakfasts and helpful staff. \$\$\$

POLANCO & BOSQUE DE CHAPULTEPEC

TOP MUSEUMS AND SPRAWLING PARK

Known for fine restaurants, sky-high rents and designer clothing stores, Polanco is privileged territory. The area arose in the 1940s as a residential alternative for a burgeoning middle class anxious to escape the overcrowded centro. Today, even mere mortals can dine in world-class restaurants and visit some of the capital's most prestigious museums and art galleries here, and next door in sprawling Bosque de Chapultepec. The park covers more than 4 sq km with lakes, an ex-presidential abode and a former imperial palace 'castle.' Visit on any given Sunday and vendors line the main paths and throngs of families come to picnic, navigate the lake on rowboats and crowd into the museums. Even still, there are plenty of green corners in which to find some peace.

TOP TIP

Most of the attractions in Chapultepec are in or near the eastern la Sección (1st section). The Soumaya and Jumex museums are not near Polanco metro station, but if you arrive this way, the 25-minute walk past boutiques and mansions lets you see how the other half (or 1%) live.



FERRANTINANTE/GETTY IMAGES ©

Castillo de Chapultepec

POLANCO & BOSQUE DE CHAPULTEPEC

 0 500 m
0 0.25 miles


HIGHLIGHTS

- 1** Castillo de Chapultepec
- 2** Museo Nacional de Antropología

SIGHTS

- 3** Avenida Masaryk
- 4** Bosque de Chapultepec
- 5** Jardín Botánico
- 6** Monumental Fuente de Nezahualcóyotl
- 7** Museo Jumex
- 8** Museo Soumaya
- 9** Museo Tamayo
- 10** Papatote Museo del Niño

ACTIVITIES

- 11** Auditorium

EATING

- 12** Pujol

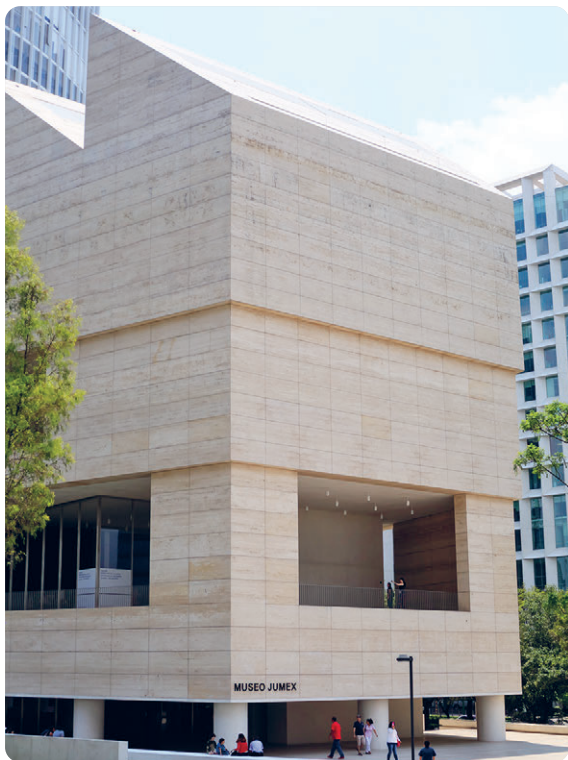


Museo Tamayo

CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE PARK

The small museum exhibits one main cutting-edge work from around the globe at a time, which is thematically arranged with shows from the Tamayo collection and one or two other tiny shows. The museum crowds with visitors on Sundays, when entry is free.

The multilevel structure was built to house international contemporary art, donated by Oaxaca-born painter Rufino Tamayo to the people of Mexico. Museo Tamayo is an architectural highlight of the city. The award-winning brutalist, stepped design by late Mexican architects Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludowsky was inspired by pre-Hispanic pyramids in 1981, and updated and extended in 2012.



Museo Jumex



Museo Jumex

BIG-NAME
CONTEMPORARY ART

Yes, Jumex, the Mexican juice company. Its sole heir has amassed one of Latin America's leading contemporary art collections in Museo Jumex. Temporary exhibits draw on around 2600 pieces from renowned Mexican and international artists, including Gabriel Orozco, Fernanda Gomez, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. British architect David Chipperfield designed the museum's unmistakable sawtooth roof in reaction to the lack of any uniform architectural style in the surrounding area. (Selfie lovers, head to the balconies for good views across adjacent Museo Soumaya.)



Museo Soumaya

SPARKLING ARCHITECTURE, RODIN AND DALÍ

The silver, rotated-rhomboid shape of this private museum even outshines the artworks inside. Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim named his six-story behemoth after his late wife. Designed by son-in-law architect Fernando Romero, with guidance by Frank Gehry, Soumaya is plated with 16,000 aluminium hexagons. No wonder it's a social-media hit and local meeting spot.

The deceptively vast interior holds more than 60,000 pieces of art. There is a lot of filler, so head up the spiral walkways to the top floor for the impressive collection of sculptures by Frenchman Auguste Rodin, including his *Thinker*, and Catalan surrealist Salvador Dalí. The museum also contains worthy Rivera and Siqueiros murals, a Botero inflated-style sculpture and paintings by French impressionists.



Museo Soumaya



MUSEO DE ARTE MODERNO

A short walk from Castillo de Chapultepec is the Museum of Modern Art. The collection here exhibits work by noteworthy 20th-century and contemporary Mexican artists, including a photography hall, and canvases by Dr Atl, Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, Remedios Varo, Tamayo and O'Gorman, and Frida Kahlo's *Las dos Fridas*, possibly her best-known painting. It also has good temporary exhibitions with a focus on Mexican artists. The museum itself is housed in a sleek building originally constructed for the 1968 Olympic Games.



FOR FRIDA KAHLO FANS

Museo Frida Kahlo (p127) in Coyoacán is the must-visit tribute to the artist in Mexico City. It's where she was born, worked and lived, and is now a museum.



Castillo de Chapultepec

OPULENT CASTLE WITH CITY VIEWS

A visible reminder of Mexico's bygone aristocracy, the 'castle' that stands atop Chapultepec Hill was begun in 1785 but not completed until after independence, when it became the national military academy. When Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota arrived in 1864, they refurbished it as their residence.

The east end of this castle preserves their palace, with sumptuously furnished salons opening onto an exterior deck that affords panoramic city views – the highlight for many visitors.

The castle sheltered Mexico's presidents until 1939, when President Lázaro Cárdenas converted it into the Museo Nacional de Historia.

On the upper floor, the opulent rooms are the work of Porfirio Díaz, who in the late 19th century was the first president to use the castle as residences. In the center is a patio where a tower marks the top of Chapultepec Hill, 45m above street level.

To reach the castle, follow the road that curves up the hill behind the Monumento a los Niños Héroes. Alternatively, a train-like vehicle runs up every 15 minutes when the castle is open. You are free to walk to the entrance at the top but to enter, and for the views, you need to buy a ticket. Audioguides in English are available to rent. There's no entry with water bottles or food, but there are lockers.



RICHE CHAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Castillo de Chapultepec



Papalote Museo del Niño

SCIENCE MUSEUM IN THE PARK

Kids won't want to leave this innovative, hands-on museum where they can put together a radio program, channel their inner mad scientist, join an archaeological dig and try out all kinds of technological gadgets and games. The strongest Mexican flavor at Papalote is felt in getting up close to axolotls and flora from Xochimilco, learning about urban living in Mexico City and trying on Mexican clothes from other eras. Little ones get a kick out of the planetarium's 'domodigital' spherical screen and IMAX theater.



Papalote Museo del Niño



Pujol



Pujol

STREET-FOOD FINE DINING

One of Mexico's most highly rated gourmet restaurants, Pujol offers a contemporary take on classic Mexican dishes. Lauded chef Enrique Olvera regularly reinvents the menu, grabbing Oaxacan dishes and adding Asian flavors. The fusion is presented as a *menú degustación*, a multiple-course tasting extravaganza. Tasty morsels include a charred aubergine *tamal*, *infladita langosta* (a corn puff filled with lobster) and, on the main menu, the famed *mole madre*. You can find more delicious dishes in humble surroundings, but Pujol is a destination itself for its exclusive, modern setting. Not without controversy (for accusations of culinary cultural appropriation and claims of mistreatment by ex-workers), Pujol is nonetheless extremely popular and is a place where you need to decide for yourself.



Designer Shopping Strip

FIFTH-AVENUE VOYEURISM

Polanco is dripping in money, old and new. To witness how the other 1% live, sashay down **Avenida Masaryk** where international fashion labels hobnob with local boutiques nestled amongst the trees.

Pasaje Polanco is a classy complex flanked by sophisticated specialty stores and a large crafts shop selling handbags, wrestling masks and Day of the Dead folk art. To the northwest, along Moliere, is the wedge-shaped, high-end department store **El Palacio de Hierro**, and further north is the charming semi-outdoor **Antara**, in which mere mortals can browse before exploring the museums around Museo Soumaya.

CITY FOODSTERS, CC BY 2.0 VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS ©
TOP PHOTO: FRANCISCO GÓMEZ SOSA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Scan this QR code for admission costs and opening hours.



TOP SIGHT

Museo Nacional de Antropología

This world-class museum is a highlight of visiting CDMX. The entire rich history of Mexico is orchestrated together in a fascinating, accessible way. There are opportunities to get close to artifacts and even a reproduction of a pyramid from Teotihuacán. Giant Olmec head statues and intricate temples sit in verdant outdoor courtyards, uniting the old world and real world.

DON'T MISS

Sun Stone

Jade mask of the Zapotec Bat God

Temple of Quetzalcoatl

Olmec heads

Pakal's tomb

Moctezuma headdress

Fountain & Anthropology

The magnificent cascade in the central courtyard is known as *el paraguas* (the umbrella) and acts as a reminder of our connection to nature. Each side depicts a different sculpture – east showing the integration of Mexico; west, outward-looking Mexico; and north and south, the fight for liberty in Mexico's villages.

The best place to start a visit is on the right, with the introduction to how the hemisphere's earliest settlers got here and developed to a farming existence in Mexico's central highlands.

Teotihuacán Hall

Models and objects from the Americas' first great and powerful state are displayed here. The full-color **Temple of Quetzalcoatl** shows what the pyramid would have looked like in its heyday.

Los Toltecas

The hall moves into Los Toltecas, which displays one of the four basalt **Atlantean warrior columns** from Tula's Temple of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. The serpent sculptures are standouts, including the two-headed Toltec throne, *trono bicéfalo*.

Mexica

The next hall is devoted to the Mexica, aka Aztec, and has a bounty of visual riches. Come here to see the famous Sun Stone, unearthed beneath the Zócalo in 1790, and other magnificent sculptures from the pantheon of Aztec deities.

Sun Stone

Learning about the misunderstood history of the previously misnamed 'Aztec Calendar' is a highlight of the museum. The 24-tonne basalt disk covered with glyphs is most likely a ceremonial altar linked to the Aztec sun god, Tonatiuh, pictured at the center within the sign Ollin, representing movement.

Chacmool

Human-like Mesoamerican sculptures called *chacmool* were used to hold the hearts of warriors in blood rituals to create good harvests. The *chacmool* here are taken from temples across the country.

Moctezuma headdress

Moctezuma II was the Aztec leader at the time of the Spanish Conquest 500 years ago. An excellent replica of his brightly colored, spectacular headdress, made of the feathers of peacocks and other birds, hangs on a wall.

Oaxaca & the Gulf of Mexico

The following halls display the fine legacy of civilizations from Oaxaca and the Gulf of Mexico, including two 3000-year-old Olmec colossal head carvings weighing in at almost 20 tonnes.

Monte Albán

The iconic artifact here is the **jade mask of the Zapotec Bat God** uncovered in the ruins of the pyramids.

Veracruz

The outdoor courtyard in the Gulf States hall is a good place to sit and take in fresh air while admiring the (reproduced) sculpture of Mictlantecuhtli from Veracruz and its many human skulls and jaguar heads.

Maya

In the Maya exhibits, be sure not to miss the breathtaking full-scale **replica of the tomb of King Pakal**, discovered deep in the Templo de las Inscripciones at Palenque.

Ball Game Goal

The Mayans from Chichen Itza played a high-stakes ritual ball game where the penalty for losing was death. The weathered-stone goal rings here are reproductions.

CHEAT SHEET

If you just want the greatest hits, jump straight to the Teotihuacán hall and its reproduction pyramid. Then fast forward to the Moctezuma headdress and Sun Stone – near-mythical symbols of Mexico – in the Mexica hall. Cut through the Oaxaca hall, admiring an Olmec head on the way to the Maya hall and the Pakal jade death mask.

TOP TIPS

- At the entrance, ask about worthwhile free one-hour guided tours, which sometimes run in English.
- The vast museum offers more than most people can absorb in a single visit. Plan your route with the site map on the website.
- As you enter, start on the right. These halls are laid out counterclockwise in chronological order.
- Like most CDMX museums, this one is closed on Mondays and has free admission (residents only) on crowded Sundays.
- There is only one on-site cafe-restaurant, but snack stands are plentiful near the entrance.
- Expect to spend hours here. There are opportunities for breaks in the open-air exhibits.



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN POLANCO

Quintonil

Consistently named among the world's best for creative Mexican dishes using local, organic ingredients. \$\$\$

El Rey del Suadero

Try iconic *suadero* and *al pastor* tacos at El Rey, recommended by renowned chef Enrique Olvera. \$

Taquería El Turix

This old-school *taquería* only serves *cochinita pibil* (marinated pulled pork) from a near-50-year family recipe. \$

Sala Gastronómica

The menu at the Museo Nacional de Antropología's restaurant travels across Mexico, including to Tamaulipas with a *tampiqueña* mixed-meat plate. \$\$



Monumental Fuente de Nezahualcóyotl

MORE IN POLANCO & BOSQUE DE CHAPULTEPEC

Museum-Free Fun

KID-FRIENDLY IN THE PARK

Kids (and adults) that say 'boring!' to galleries can find amusement in the open air. The expansive (and more interesting) *la sección* of **Bosque de Chapultepec** is crisscrossed with good walking paths. **Colegio Militar**, the path under the lake, is the only one filled with stalls selling American and Mexican food, toys and wrestling masks. The entrances aren't obvious on maps; the most convenient are at the very east, or opposite Museo Nacional de Antropología. About 100m in front of the museum's entrance, indigenous Totonac people perform their spectacular **voladores** rite – 'flying' from a 20m-high pole – every 30 minutes for tips. Across the road at **Lago de Chapultepec**, you can take a rental kayak, paddleboat or rowboat out for a spin with the ducks. Cut across to **Jardín Botánico** and sniff out diverse flora, divided into Mexico's climatic zones. There are plenty of cacti and agave, a wonderful greenhouse nurturing rare orchids, and oversized bug sculptures for kids to point at.

Audiorama behind the castle is a peaceful secret-garden outdoor library. You can borrow a selection of books freely (or nap) while music plays from speakers in the trees.

To the very west is little-visited **Monumental Fuente de Nezahualcóyotl**. This imposing promenade of water cascading from the jaws of coyote sculptures hewn from black stone, leading to the Texcoco warrior Nezahualcóyotl, is as dramatic and wonderful as it sounds.



WHERE TO DRINK IN POLANCO

Fifty Mils

Cocktails that make best-in-the-world lists, enhanced by the lush Four Seasons courtyards.

Cafe Joselo

Serious about good coffee, with varied options and a relaxing spot across from green Parque Lincoln.

Cafebrería El Péndulo

Coffee and cocktails with terrace views for a museum-like adoration of books.

SAN ÁNGEL

COBBLESTONE CHARM IN THE SOUTH

Settled by the Dominican order soon after the Spanish conquest, San Ángel, 12km southwest of the center or a mere 3.5km east of Coyoacán, maintains its colonial splendor despite being encroached upon by the metropolis. Its roots as a Carmelite monastery town are visible at the Templo & Museo de El Carmen, where you can still visit the mummies kept in the crypt.

San Ángel is often associated with the big Saturday crafts market held alongside the Plaza San Jacinto. It reflects the town's reputation as a refuge for artists and the wealthy. Its most famous residents were the artist couple Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, whose adjacent houses and studio draw visitors today.

Though the main approach along Avenida Insurgentes is typically chaotic, wander westward to experience the old village's cobblestoned soul – it's a tranquil enclave of colonial mansions with massive wooden doors, potted geraniums behind window grills and bougainvillea spilling over stone walls.

TOP TIP

Combining a visit to San Ángel with Coyoacán can save you time, especially if you just want to see Frida Kahlo's houses. The Fridabús makes round trips between the two, but only from Museo Frida Kahlo in Coyoacán, so it pays to visit there first.



HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo
- 2 Templo & Museo de El Carmen

SIGHTS

- 3 Casa de la Marquessa de Selva Nevada

- 4 Jardín de la Bombilla
- 5 Museo Casa del Risco
- 6 Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil
- 7 Parroquia de San Jacinto
- 8 Plaza de El Carmen
- 9 Plaza de los Arcángeles
- 10 Plaza San Jacinto



Plaza San Jacinto



Jardín de la Bombilla



Jardín de la Bombilla

SOVIET-STYLE STATUE

In this tropically abundant, pruned park spreading east of Avenida Insurgentes, paths encircle the Monumento a Álvaro Obregón. The monolithic shrine to the post-revolutionary Mexican president is the work of Mexican sculptor Ignacio Asúnsolo. The sculptures of laborers, soldiers and a mighty eagle, along with the pool of reflection, give the strong flavor of a Soviet socialist-style war memorial.

The monument was built to house the revolutionary general's arm, lost in the 1915 Battle of Celaya, but cremated in 1989.

La Bombilla was the name of the restaurant that once stood here, where Obregón was assassinated in 1928. The killer, José de León Toral, posed as a cartoonist and was involved in the Cristero rebellion against the government's anti-church policies.

The park itself is pretty with multiple fountains. In July the park explodes with color as the main venue for **La Feria de las Flores**, a major flower festival.



Templo & Museo de El Carmen

CARMELITE CHURCH AND MUMMIES

This magnificently preserved monastery is where San Ángel was born. The **Templo del Carmen** was a monastery and college built for the Discalced (Barefoot) Carmelites in 1615. The Aztec village of Tenanitla grew around it and became San Ángel. Today the church is a smashing example of Herrerian-style architecture, with its domes tiled in weathered Talavera from Puebla and a golden baroque altar inside.

Next door, **Museo de El Carmen** is a storehouse of magnificent sacred art in a former school run by the Carmelite order. The collection includes oils by Mexican master Cristóbal de Villalpando, though the big draw is the collection of mummies in the sumptuous crypt. Thought to be the bodies of 17th-century benefactors of the order, they were uncovered during the revolution by Zapatistas looking for buried treasure.

In the courtyard is an aqueduct that the Carmelites once used to feed the fruit orchards here, which was part of their duties alongside their religious studies.



Museo de El Carmen

DORLING KINDERSLEY LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©
TOP LEFT: GILL FLOUREA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil

SMALL MUSEUM WITH BIG MURALISTS

You can never have too much of Mexico's Los Tres Grandes – the Big Three – muralists. Some lesser-known works by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros are on offer at one of the city's first contemporary art spaces. This San Ángel museum was founded by Yucatecan pediatrician and businessman Álvaro Carrillo Gil to store a large collection he had amassed over many years. Long ramps in the building connect three floors of temporary exhibits that have included cutting-edge artists such as Cynthia Gutiérrez, who explores the transient nature of Mexican national identity.



Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo



Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo

FRIDA'S OTHER BLUE HOUSE

History was made in these houses. It was here that Mexican artist Frida Kahlo painted two works that established her true artistry: *Lo Que el Agua Me Dió* (depicting her whole life in a bathtub) and *El Difunto Dimas* (of a deceased child). Kahlo and husband Diego Rivera called this place home from 1934 to 1940, after a three-year stint in the USA.

If you saw the movie *Frida* (2002), you'll recognize the houses. The now-museum was designed by the artistic couple's friend, the architect and painter Juan O'Gorman. Frida, Diego and O'Gorman each had their own separate house: Frida's (the blue one) and O'Gorman's have been cleared for temporary exhibits.

The most interesting is Rivera's abode. His upstairs studio preserves his art tools, with brushes laid out and jars stained with colored waterlines. It's as if the artist has popped out mid-painting. Rivera produced 3000 art pieces here until his death in 1957. Frida returned alone to her Coyoacán home in 1941 and remained there until her death in 1954. Now only giant papier-mâché figures that Rivera (and Kahlo) collected loom large in Rivera's high-ceilinged studio.

The houses are linked by a walkway, visually reflecting their joined but separate lives.



Ciudad Universitaria

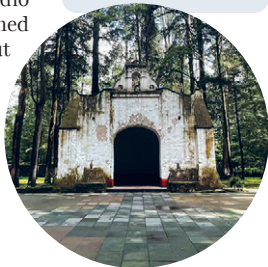
MEGA MURAL AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Down south, 2km from San Ángel, is Ciudad Universitaria, the main campus of **UNAM**, the largest university in Latin America. It's home to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed **Biblioteca Central**, which is

utterly bathed in an iconic mural by Mexican Juan O'Gorman. The artwork, titled *Historical Representation of Culture* (1953), seems to cram in every event in Mexican and Aztec history, to spectacular effect.

DESIERTO DE LOS LEONES

Just a half-hour drive from San Ángel are the cool, fragrant pine and oak forests of Desierto de Los Leones. The highlight within this national park is Ex-Convento Santo Desierto del Carmen, a 17th-century former Carmelite monastery. Today it's a museum that visitors can tour with guides dressed in cassock and sandals, roaming the halls of the monastery and the expansive gardens, and learn about the history and lives of the Carmelites. The park also offers extensive hiking trails, but robberies happen, making the main paths safer.



Desierto de Los Leones

Also here is **MUAC**, the nine halls of which display cutting-edge temporary exhibitions by contemporary artists from Mexico and abroad, such as Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei.



PAIN, ART & FRIDA

Frida Kahlo was born in Coyoacán in 1907. She contracted polio at age six, leaving her right leg permanently thinner than her left. In 1925 she was horribly injured in a trolley accident that broke her right leg, collarbone, pelvis and ribs. It was during convalescence that she began painting. Pain – physical and emotional – became a dominating theme of her art. Kahlo said: ‘I am my own muse.’ Kahlo had only one exhibition in Mexico in her lifetime, in 1953. She arrived at the opening on a stretcher. Partner Diego Rivera said: ‘Anyone who attended it could not but marvel at her great talent.’ She died at the Blue House the following year.



San Ángel Inn

MORE IN SAN ÁNGEL

Living Art & Architecture

EXPLORE MANSIONS AND ART MARKETS

Statues, gardens and *casonas* (grand houses) make San Ángel a museum without walls, best explored on foot. Start a DIY tour at **Plaza de El Carmen**, which is bordered by beauties: on the south corner are the clean lines of **Centro Cultural San Ángel** from 1887 and the neoclassical **Chucho el Roto** (now Biblioteca Revolucionales) with *two* (extravagant then!) courtyards; while northwest is **Casa del Mayorazgo Fagoaga**, a 17th-century gold merchant’s *casona*.

West, along the architecturally delightful, less-travelled backstreet Amargura is 18th-century **Plaza San Jacinto**. Every Saturday the **Bazaar Sábado** showcases some of Mexico’s best handicrafts. Converted mansions look onto the **fountain** with an easel-shaped **bust of artist Diego Rivera** sitting nearby.

Orange **Museo Casa del Risco** is midway along the plaza’s north side. The courtyard **fountain** is a mad mosaic of Talavera tile and Chinese porcelain. Upstairs is a treasure trove of Mexican baroque paintings. Outside on weekends there is an **antiques fair**.

West of Plaza Jacinto is 16th-century **Parroquia de San Jacinto** – the garden’s **atrial crucifix** is Mexico’s first to be carved in stone. On the Árbol-Hidalgo corner is the caramel-colored **Casa de la Marqueza de Selva Nevada** with ornate Mudejar-style wooden gates, once owned by the ambassador of Austria-Hungary. Dip south on Árbol and left on Frontera to **Plaza de los Arcángeles**. Bouganvillea, stone archways and ivy decorate mansions into a fantasyland you might never want to leave.



WHERE TO EAT IN STYLE IN SAN ÁNGEL

San Ángel Inn

Classic Mexican meals in the garden of this elegant former *pulque* hacienda. \$\$\$

Santana del Mar

Buzzing designer, seafood dining hall delights with great-value charred tuna tacos and tortilla-free mango tacos. \$

El Cardenal San Ángel

San Ángel institution spices up brunch with duck tacos and *escamoles* (ant larvae) in its mansion. \$\$

COYOACÁN

BOHEMIAN LIFE AROUND FRIDA'S HOUSE

It's little surprise that Frida Kahlo's neighborhood has a reputation as an artist's oasis. Coyoacán ('Place of Coyotes' in the Náhuatl language), about 10km south of downtown, was conquistador Hernán Cortés' base after the fall of Tenochtitlán, and only in recent decades has urban sprawl overtaken the outlying village. Coyoacán retains its restful identity, with narrow colonial-era streets, cafes and a lively atmosphere.

Once home to Leon Trotsky and Kahlo (whose houses are now fascinating museums), it has a decidedly countercultural vibe, most evident on weekends, when assorted musicians, mimes and crafts markets draw large but relaxed crowds to Coyoacán's central plazas. For visitors, Coyoacán is a chance to experience an urban version of *pueblo* (village) life. Eat ice cream around its plazas' fountains, sip some coffee from Veracruz and wander the cobblestoned streets between gardens, just like Kahlo and Diego Rivera might have.

TOP TIP

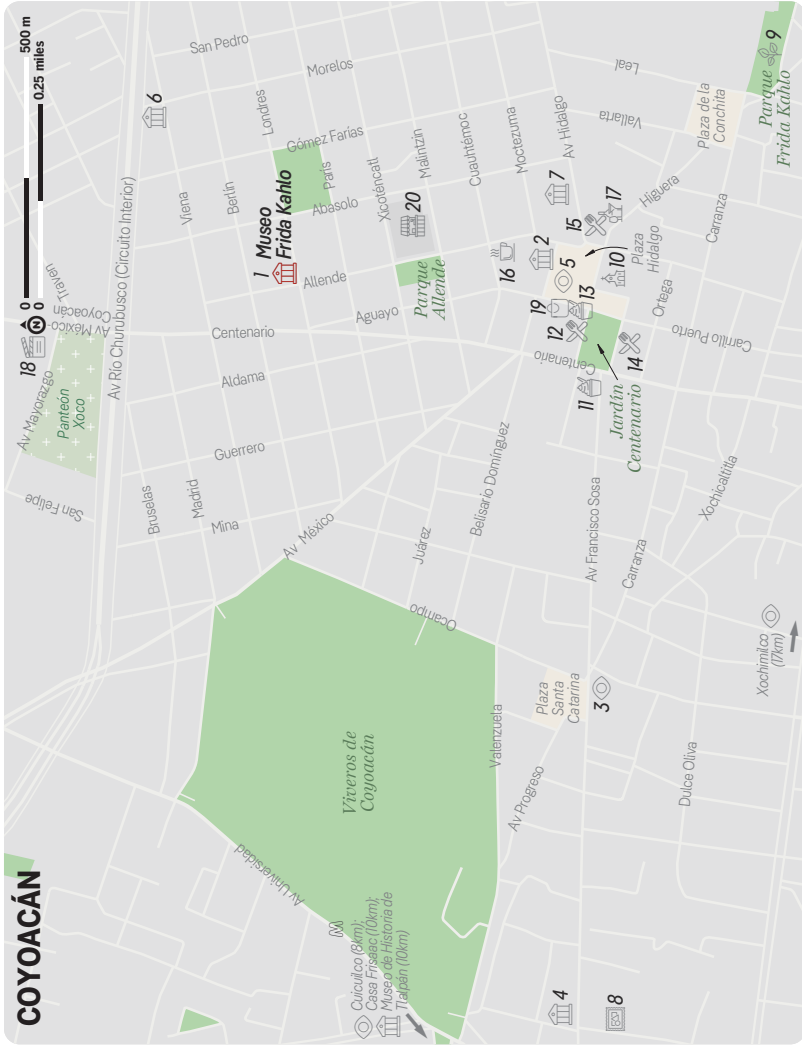
Walking from the nearest metro station, 'Coyoacán', to either the center of Coyoacán (around Jardín Centenario) or Museo Frida Kahlo takes about 20 minutes (1.6km), or 10 minutes between the two). Plan your path and you can make pit stops at Cineteca Nacional and Mercado de Coyoacán.



BENEDIK/GETTY IMAGES ©

Coyoacán

COYOACÁN

**EATING**

11 Churreria General de la Republica

SIGHTS

2 Casa de Cortés
12 Corazón de Magvey
13 El Kiosko de Coyoacán
14 Los Danzantes
15 Mercado de Antojitos

DRINKING &**NIGHTLIFE**

16 Café El Jaracho
17 Cantina La Coyoacana

ENTERTAINMENT

18 Cineteca Nacional
19 Bazar Artesanal

SHOPPING

9 Parque Frida Kahlo
10 Parroquia de San Juan Bautista



Café El Jarocho



Café El Jarocho

VERACRUZ COFFEE ICON

The most traditional coffee in Mexico is *café de olla* – brewed in earthenware pots with a touch of cinnamon and other spices. People queue for the stuff at the immensely popular, iconic Café El Jarocho. The many branches in Coyoacán churn out coffee from Veracruz to bean lovers, many of whom come to Coyoacán especially. *Jarocho* is a nickname for a man from Veracruz. As there's rarely any seating, people have their drink standing in the street or sitting on curbside benches.



Cineteca Nacional

ARTHOUSE POWERHOUSE

It may be a cinema complex, but Cineteca Nacional has the cinephile buzz of an arts centre, with a bold, museum-like exterior wowing visitors. Mexican and foreign indie movies are shown daily on 10 screens – subtitled in Spanish, not dubbed. Film lovers – many of them students – meet for pre-show snacks and drinks at the cafes or green space.

In November the complex hosts the *Muestra Internacional de Cine*, an international film festival. From October to March, catch free open-air screenings at dusk in the rear garden.

The on-site **Galería de la Cineteca Nacional** is dedicated to Mexican cinema with exhibitions on international film.



Museo Casa de León Trotsky

A HOME IN EXILE

In 1940, one of Stalin's agents, a Catalan named Ramón Mercader, smashed an ice axe into the skull of revolutionary León Trotsky in this house, now a museum.

Having come second to Stalin in the power struggle in the Soviet Union, Trotsky

was expelled in 1929 and condemned to death in absentia. In 1937 he found refuge in Mexico. Trotsky and his wife Natalia lived briefly in Frida Kahlo's Blue House, but after falling out with Kahlo (following an affair) and Rivera they moved nearby.



Museo Casa de León Trotsky

The Trotsky furnishings remain virtually untouched. Memorabilia is displayed in buildings off the patio, where a tomb engraved with a hammer and sickle contains Trotsky's ashes. Bullet holes remain in the bedroom, the markings of a failed assassination attempt.



Los Danzantes

TRADITIONAL DISHES AND FAMOUS MEZCAL

Los Danzantes puts a contemporary spin on traditional Mexican cuisine with dishes such as *huitlacoche* (truffle-like corn fungus) raviolis in *chile poblano* (peppers) sauce, organic chicken in black *mole*, and *hoja santa* (Mexican pepperleaf) stuffed with cheese and chipotle. You'll also find top-shelf mezcal from its own famous distillery.

Dare to sample dishes featuring *escamoles* (ant larvae), *gusanos* (agave worms), *chicatanas* (flying ants) and other bug dishes here during the 'Temporada de los Bichos' from early May to early June.



Los Danzantes



JUANARAZA/SHUTTERSTOCK © TOP RIGHT: GAMALEI240/CREATIVE COMMONS INFO ©



Cuicuilco

MESOAMERICAN CITY BURIED BY LAVA

One of the oldest significant remnants of pre-Hispanic settlement within the CDMX, Cuicuilco echoes a civilization that stood on the shores of Lago de Xochimilco as far back as 800 BCE. In its heyday in the 2nd century BCE, the 'place of singing and dancing' counted as many as 40,000 inhabitants – at that time, the Teotihuacán civilization was only just beginning to rise to importance.

The site, southwest of Coyoacán, was abandoned a couple of centuries later, after an eruption of the nearby Xitle volcano covered most of the community in lava.

Today, archaeological works continue to reveal new sections. The area is overgrown with grass in large areas, creating a sense of discovery. The highlight is a 23m-tall, circular, pyramid-like mound.



Tlalpan

TRADITIONAL CENTRAL-PLAZA JEWEL

Tlalpan today is what Coyoacán used to be – an outlying village with a bohemian atmosphere and impressive colonial-era architecture. Handsome **Casa Frisac** houses temporary exhibits, while **Museo de Historia de Tlalpan** has shown archeological pieces from Cuicuilco. There are some fine restaurants along the arcades of the charismatic plaza. Unfussy **Alipús**, maker of the popular Oaxaca-based mezcal brands Alipús and Los Danzantes, serves some of Mexico's finest mezcal and Tlalpan-created soup *caldo tlalpeño*.

Tlalpan is 12km south of Coyoacán, at the foot of the southern Ajusco range, enjoying a cooler, moister climate. **Metrobús Fuentes Brotantes** on Línea 1 is four blocks west of the main square.

Cuicuilco



Museo Frida Kahlo

AN ARTIST'S HOME, ART AND LIFE

Frida Kahlo's life was her art. The renowned Mexican artist was born in, and lived and died in, Casa Azul (Blue House), now an intimate museum to her life. Almost every visitor to Mexico City makes a pilgrimage here to gain a deeper understanding of the painter.

Built by Frida's father Guillermo three years before her birth, the house is littered with mementos and personal belongings that evoke her long, often tempestuous relationship with husband Diego Rivera and the leftist intellectual circle they often entertained here. Kitchen implements, jewelry, photos and other objects from the artist's everyday life are interspersed with art, as well as a variety of pre-Hispanic pieces and Mexican crafts.

The collection was greatly expanded in 2007 after the discovery of a cache of previously unseen items that had been stashed in the attic. Since 2012, the exhibition 'Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Frida Kahlo's Wardrobe' has placed the focus on Kahlo's image and famous style, displaying many of the dresses uncovered in her bathroom, alongside her spine-straightening corsets.

The intersection of her disability, fashion sense, ideology (look for the photos of Marx and Stalin over her bed), artistic themes and fame is a worthy exploration.

Arrive early to avoid the crowds, especially on weekends; book tickets online to jump lengthy queues.

ANTON_JANOV/Shutterstock.com



ANAHUACALLI

Designed by Diego Rivera to house his collection of pre-Hispanic art, the Anahuacalli museum, 5km south of Coyoacán, is a temple-like structure of volcanic stone. It contains one of Rivera's studios and his study for *Man at the Crossroads*, the mural that was commissioned and destroyed by the Rockefeller Center in 1934, but which Rivera later reproduced in the Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Entry to Anahuacalli is included in admission to Museo Frida Kahlo, from where Fridabús travels to Anahuacalli on weekends.



FRIDA & DIEGO'S OTHER HOUSE

Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo (p121) in San Ángel is a museum with Frida's other, more austere, blue house. Diego's fascinating studio sits alongside it, separated by an outdoor walkway.



Mercado de Coyoacán

MARKET WITH ENDLESS TOSTADAS



Chapulines

A *tostada* crispy tortilla smothered in seafood – this one *antojito* (snack) is the darling of the Mercado de Coyoacán. The rainbow assortment of exotic fruit, bobbing piñatas and sacks of peppers and spices of a traditional Mexican market are all here, yet it's the allure of a *tostada* that draws the crowds. Pull up a bench at one of the many stands and choose between *pulpo* (octopus), *jaiba* (crab), *atún* (tuna) or the classic *camarón* (lime-cured prawn ceviche) topped with avocado.

Adventurous eaters can go harder at stalls starring dried *chapulines* (grasshoppers) – a good drink snack – *alacranes* (scorpions) and other many-legged bugs. There are also juices and more easygoing *antojitos* to eat between browses of the endless aisles of *artesanías* (handicrafts). Near Day of the Dead (end of October), sugar skulls and decorated altars color up the market.

If you're walking here from Museo Frida Kahlo, the market sits at the halfway point to the main plaza of Coyoacán and makes for an entertaining wander and pit stop.



La Coyoacana

BRIAN OVERCAST/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©, TOP LEFT: STEFANO DI FRANCESCO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Cantina La Coyoacana

MARIACHI, TEQUILA AND MEAT

Enter through swinging saloon doors and head to the open-air patio, where wailing mariachis do their thing in this traditional drinking establishment – the most famous of Coyoacán. You can pay to request

ranchera (traditional-style) songs or listen to others. It's a boisterous, fun and memorable way to spend the afternoon while sampling from the ample menu of snacks and mains. The *molcajetes* are the done thing

here, if you fancy a stone mortar filled with strips of steak and other meat and topped with *chicharrón* (pork crackling) and guacamole. Best washed down with a mezcal cocktail.



El Kiosko de Coyoacán

MORE IN COYOACÁN

Around the Coyotes

EXPLORE THE CENTER OF COYOACÁN

The center of Coyoacán life is the Jardín Centenario and Plaza Hidalgo, two adjacent plazas that are the scene of most of the weekend fun. The **Jardín Centenario** features a central fountain with the town's iconic coyotes, while the larger **Plaza Hidalgo** is cobblestoned and features a statue of independence hero Miguel Hidalgo and a stained-glass rotunda. When visiting Jardín Centenario, be sure to check out Mexican restaurant **Corazón de Maguey**, with upscaled takes on dishes from mezcal-producing regions such as Oaxaca.

On the north side of Plaza Hidalgo, you'll find the **Casa de Cortés**, where conquistador Hernán Cortés established Mexico's first municipal seat during the siege of Tenochtitlán. The south side of the plaza is dominated by the **Parroquia de San Juan Bautista** and its adjacent former monastery. The double archway here, **Arcadas Atrial**, was once the entrance to the Parroquia. Facing the church are multiple ice-cream parlors, such as **El Kiosko de Coyoacán**, and

AVENIDA FRANCISCO SOSA

This 450-year-old avenue once served as the main thoroughfare connecting Coyoacán with the then-village of San Ángel. Today, the avenue is home to more than 60 buildings recognized as historical monuments by the National Institute of Anthropology and History. A stroll down the avenue is an architectural delight. A standout is **Casa de Diego de Ordaz**, located nearest the coyote plaza. It's an impressive example of Mudejar-style tile architecture dating back to 1756. Despite not being open to the public, and with little evidence suggesting that conquistador Diego de Ordaz ever lived there, the house remains an intriguing attraction, even from the outside.



WHERE TO STAY IN COYOACÁN

Chalet del Carmen

Ecofriendly B&B with a kitchen and antique furnishings, run by a friendly local and Swiss couple. \$\$

Hostal Frida B&B

Family-run guesthouse-style *hostal* with six wooden-floored doubles, some with kitchens. Monthly rates available. \$\$

Hostal Cuija Coyoacán

An affordable, lizard-themed HI *hostel* near Coyoacán sights, with smallish, clean dorms and private rooms. \$

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO EAT & DRINK IN COYOACÁN



Alejandro Serra, Coyoacán native and bassist in band May Queen (@mayqueen official) shares his recommendations for the best places to eat and drink in the neighborhood. @ale.jandro.s

El Hijo del Cuervo

A great vintage tavern with typical Mexican dishes. It has a small stage for plays and live music, mostly Mexican rock and ska.

La Ruta de la Seda

This cafe has a great variety of exotic teas and infusions, such as chili or cacao. Its simply delicious 'Kyoto' cake is made with matcha. It's the house masterpiece.

Duke's Burgers & Beer

The specialty here is classic burgers, but with peculiar options such as apple slices and fried sweet potato. It also has delicious craft beers.

their crowds queueing for homemade ice cream and sorbet. **Bazar Artesanal Mexicano** is also nearby, but it's mostly filled with souvenir-focused jewelry and crafts.

For those looking for a more authentic local experience, **Mercado de Antojitos** is a great spot to find traditional Mexican snacks such as deep-fried quesadillas, *pozole* (hominy soup) and *esquite* (corn in a cup with broth). **Churrería General de la República** is one of many *churro* joints also located near Plaza Hidalgo, and it's a great place to try the famous deep-fried doughnut-like indulgences.

Art & Gardens

GALLERIES, MUSEUMS, GARDENS AND FRIDA

Coyoacán is a neighborhood of artists and nature. To understand local life at gallery-walking pace, start at **Museo Nacional de la Acuarela 'Alfredo Guati Rojo'**. Here, *acuarela* (watercolor) paintings are honored in exhibitions showcasing Mexican and international artists that span centuries and styles. The museum is free (like the others here) and has a preened lawn garden sporting palm trees and cacti. Around the corner, **Fonoteca Nacional** is dedicated to sound. Listen through sound archives, see vintage radios on display and catch events and recitals. The resplendent colonial mansion was home to late Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who you can hear speak in the archives. The idyllic arched courtyard garden, with music and sound effects piped through the speakers, is worth a visit alone.

Midway on magnificent Avenida Sosa is **Centro Cultural Jesús Reyes Heróles**, a colonial-era estate from 1780 hosting book presentations and art classes (in Spanish). Wander around the grounds, where yuccas, jacarandas and izote palms spring from carefully tended gardens. A sculpture of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo sitting on a bench is ready for photo opportunities. There are a few more open-air sculptures of Frida at the kid-friendly **Parque Frida Kahlo** in the area's southwest.

Near the center, the small but vivacious **Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares** and courtyard display handicrafts and national costumes from across Mexico. The *alebrijes* (fantastical animal carvings) and masks should also hold the attention of young ones. Frida was a promoter of traditional Mexican crafts and incorporated rural clothing, such as the *rebozo* (shawl), into her now iconic looks.



WHERE TO HAVE DESIGNER SWEETS AND COFFEE IN COYOACÁN

Picnic Helados

The artisanal ginger and mango ice cream and killer brownies here outshine any plaza snack.

Café Negro

Aeropress, cold brew and other coffee contraptions make fine coffee here. Chocolate croissants are worthy, too.

Churrería El Moro Coyoacán

Luckily there's chic seating here after downing piping fresh churros and thick hot chocolate.



Xochimilco

Xochimilco

CANALS AND FLOATING GARDENS

About 19km south of Coyoacán, a network of canals flanked by *chinampas* (raised fertile land where indigenous inhabitants grew food) is a vivid reminder of the city's pre-Hispanic legacy. The floating gardens were an economic base of the Aztec empire, transforming Lago de Texcoco into a series of canals. Remnants of *chinampas* are used today mainly for flowers such as marigolds. **Xochimilco** was designated a Unesco World Heritage site in 1987.

Gliding along the canals in a fancifully decorated *trajinera* (gondola) is an alternately tranquil and festive experience. On weekends the waterways become jammed with boats carrying groups of families and partygoers. Musicians and vendors hover alongside, selling food and drinks. Midweek, the mood is much calmer.



ISLAND OF THE DOLLS

For a truly surreal experience, head for Xochimilco and hire a gondola to the Island of the Dolls, where hundreds of creepy, decomposed dolls hang from trees. An island resident fished the playthings from the canals to mollify the spirit of a girl who had drowned nearby.



WHERE TO EAT IN XOCHIMILCO

Restaurante Lina Xochimilco

Generous Mexican breakfasts such as *chilaquiles* and salsa-smothered omelets in a courtyard. \$

Rincon de Mi Barrio

Weekend buffets attract locals for fresh quesadillas, granola, fruit and waffles. \$\$

Tortería La Planta

Near Xochimilco station, this *torta* joint is handy for *pierna* (leg-ham) sandwiches to go for boat rides. \$

AROUND MEXICO CITY



PYRAMIDS, COLONIAL WONDERS AND NATURE

The real Mexico is closer than you think, from the magic of small towns to soaring temples built by ancient civilizations.

Mexico City's gravity can feel immense, but it's easy to escape it. Just 20 minutes into a bus journey, the urban congestion can give way to open green fields and rolling hills. Even if you're in Mexico's capital for only a week, the ancient ruins, *pueblos mágicos* (culturally rich 'magical villages') and stunning mountain landscapes of the surrounding area should not be missed. Mexico City – like many capitals – has little in common with even its closest neighbors.

The pyramids of Teotihuacán are endlessly fascinating, but just a starter to whet your appetite. Taste your way through iconic Mexican dishes in Puebla, or the other photo-friendly colonial cities of Taxco and Cuernavaca. Then



discover how pre-Hispanic magic still happens in the small towns of Malinalco and Tepoztlán. And if you're craving some fresh mountain air, escape to the festive *pueblos mágicos* of Cuetzalan and Huamantla, or relaxing Mineral del Chico, Real del Monte and Valle de Bravo.

Adventure seekers can scale the volcanic giants of Iztaquíhuatl and Nevado de Toluca, and don't forget about the lesser-known, but equally impressive, ruins of Xochicalco.

This region may be vast but it's the best of both worlds – filled with excitement, new flavors and relaxation, but within the orbit of the nearby capital and all its city conveniences.

ERIKSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE MAIN AREAS

TEOTIHUACÁN

Ancient pyramid complex. **p138**

PUEBLA

Colonial centre with exciting cuisine. **p149**

CUERNAVACA

City escape to an 'eternal spring'. **p160**

MALINALCO

Town crowned with Aztec temples. **p168**



Above: Warrior telamones, Tula (p146); opposite: Puebla (p149)

Teotihuacán, p138

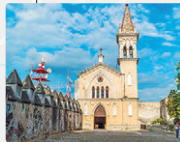
The fascinating ruins of the ancient Mesoamerican city include temples and some of the largest pyramids built in the pre-Columbian Americas.

Malinalco, p168

A small Aztec temple complex is found in the hills above the sleepy town with aspirations to be a boutique getaway.

Cuernavaca, p160

Known as the 'City of Eternal Spring' for its semi-tropical climate and gardens. Several historic landmarks reach back to the start of colonization.


JOSUE UH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

GUANAJUATO

Querétaro

QUERÉTARO

SAN LUIS
POTOSÍ

Tamazunchale

Huejutla de
Reyes

Río Amajac

Jacala

Río Mezquital

Río Amajac

Río Amajac

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Río Amajac

San Juan
del Río

Huichapan

Tezontepc

Actopan

Molango

Zacualtipan

Atotonilco
El Grande

Pachuca

Tulancingo

Atlatomulco

Tepotztlán

Zumpango

San Juan
Teotihuacán

Teotihuacán

Texcoco

Parque Nacional
Itzacihuatl-
Popocatepetl

Chalico

Texmelucan

Amecameca

Popocatepetl

Atlixco

Cuernavaca

Cautla

Taltizapán

Izúcar de
Matamoros

Acochiapan

Teloloapan

Iguala

Taxco

Teloloapan

Iguala

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Iguala

Taxco

Teloloapan

Iguala

Taxco

MICHOCÁN

Reserva de la
Biosfera Santuario
Mariposa Monarca

MÉXICO

MEXICO CITY

Toluca

Volcán Nevado
de TolucaValle de
BravoÁrea de Protección
de Flora y Fauna
Nevado de Toluca

Tejupilco

Ixtapan de la Sal

Tonatico

Xochicalco

Taxco

Teloloapan

Iguala

Huetamo

Ciudad
Altamirano

Tlapehuala

GUERRERO

Tlapa

Find Your Way

The regions are spread out, but most are straightforward to reach by direct, affordable buses from the four respective terminals in each compass direction in Mexico City. Few buses connect towns, requiring a return to the capital.



TAXI

Uber has only reached the larger cities. To get between towns, you can ask at hotels about renting a car and driver for a flat price.



BUS

Second-class buses and combis sometimes travel between towns in the region but most require you to have good Spanish, and patience for missed or late services. Ask at hotels.

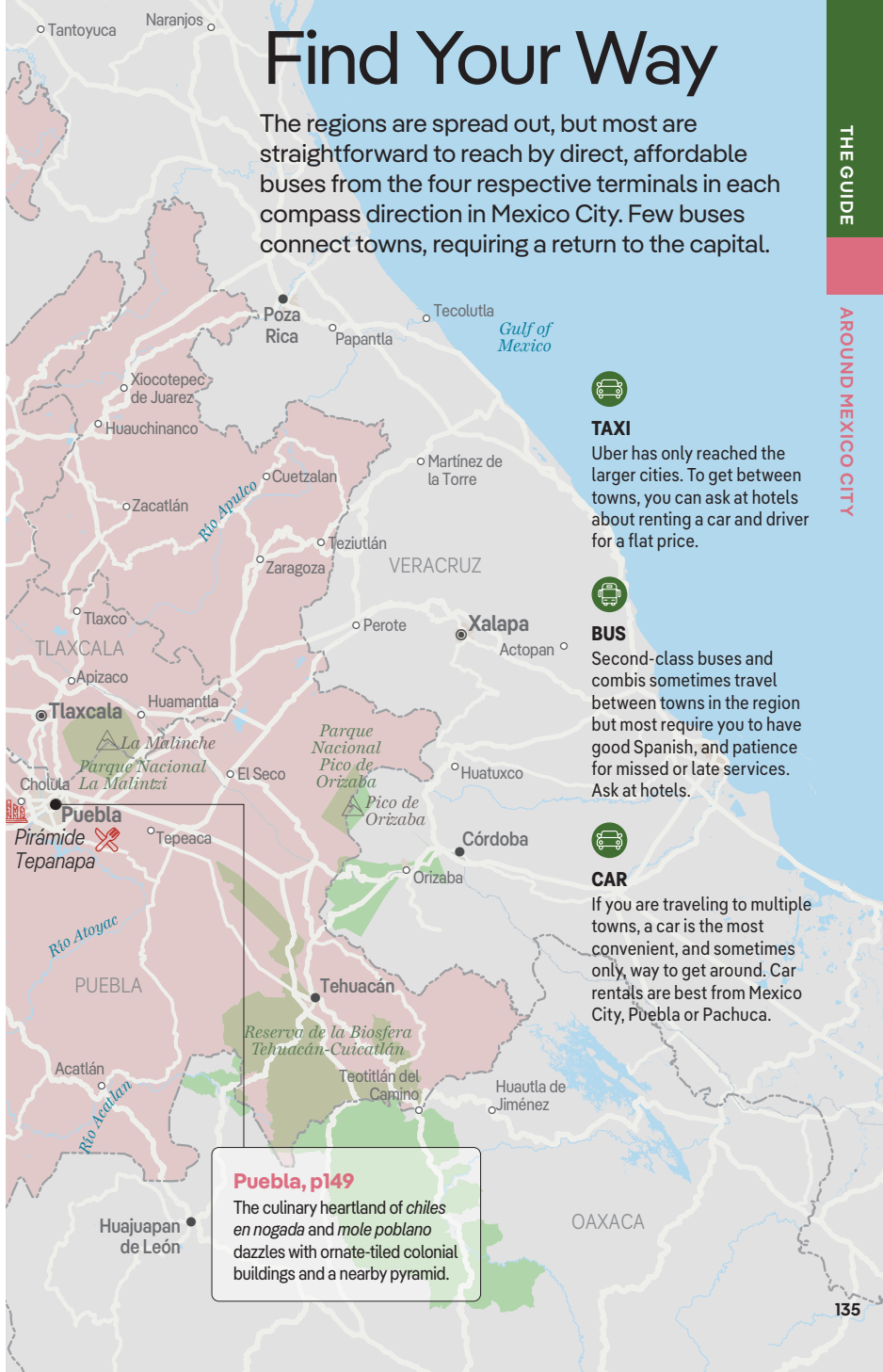


CAR

If you are traveling to multiple towns, a car is the most convenient, and sometimes only, way to get around. Car rentals are best from Mexico City, Puebla or Pachuca.

Puebla, p149

The culinary heartland of *chiles en nogada* and *mole poblano* dazzles with ornate-tiled colonial buildings and a nearby pyramid.



Plan Your Time

Plan your experiences by the departures from the four bus terminals in Mexico City: in the north, south, east and west. Each station corresponds to the sights in that region around Mexico City.



ANTON J. IANOV/Shutterstock ©

Taxco (p166)



Seasonal Highlights

The weather is varied but summer rains are a given from July to September. There is always an excuse to celebrate in any given town in the area.



JANUARY

Mild and dry Taxco celebrates **Fiesta de Santa Prisca** with locals parading their pets for blessings in costumes.



MARCH

Around the first month of spring, things warm up in Tepoztlán with costumed **Carnaval** dances of the Huehuenches and Chinelos.



MAY

Puebla celebrates **Cinco de Mayo** (May 5) with a huge parade and celebrations over the following fortnight.

If You Only Do One Thing

- The absolute must-see in the region, and perhaps to any visitor to the capital, is the spectacular pyramid complex of **Teotihuacán** (p138). Walking through Mesoamerica's greatest city and gazing up at the towering pyramids is an experience that will stay with you. Most people join a day-trip tour, making it easy to reach the site, which is 50km northeast of Mexico City.
- With some planning, you can see the pyramids lit up at night in the **Experiencia Nocturna** (p142), or take a **balloon ride** (p143) over the pre-Hispanic complex at dawn.

7-Day Town Hop

- After Teotihuacán, head south from Mexico City to a small pyramid on a hill in **Tepoztlán** (p165), with its health retreat activities and charming center.
- Spend an afternoon in **Cuernavaca** (p160) for some great museums and restaurants, before heading to **Taxco** (p166). Take in the winding cobblestoned streets and views of scattered white houses on the hills in this silver town.
- Return to Mexico City, then east to **Puebla** (p149), with its well-preserved colonial center, churches bejeweled with blue-and-white glazed tiles, and a delicious list of specialties for every season. Nearby is the pyramid of **Cholula** (p151), if you have time.

If You Have More Time

- Take your time and visit smaller towns from Mexico City, starting with **Malinalco** (p168), where Aztec temple ruins on a hill compete with boutique mezcal bars in the cobblestoned center.
- Pass through **Toluca** (p174), where a unique botanical garden in a stained-glass greenhouse tells the cosmic story of the origins of life. From here, adventure lovers can ascend the dormant volcano **Nevalo de Toluca** (p175), while those who might prefer to sit by a lake eating seafood can head to **Valle de Bravo** (p172) where the capital's elite have created a cosmopolitan weekend getaway amid the pine-tree-covered hills.



JUNE

In early June, Puebla celebrates its famous **mole poblano** (spiced sauce).



AUGUST

A two-week festival in Huamantla culminates on August 14 at **La Noche Que Nadie Duerm**e, with streets carpeted in colored sawdust.



SEPTEMBER

Around Independence Day, taste **chiles en nogada**, especially in Puebla. On September 7, Tepoztlán's **Fiesta del Templo** parties hard.



OCTOBER

Day of the Dead altars and activities in frigid October go big in Cuernavaca and Puebla; Valle de Bravo celebrates **Festival de las Almas**.

TEOTIHUACÁN

Mexico City ✦ Teotihuacán

Nothing in the region quite compares to the awe-inspiring ancient city of Teotihuacán. This complex of majestic pyramids, 50km northeast of Mexico City, is home to the region's most significant archaeological site. The sprawling site is comparable to the famous ruins of Yucatán and Chiapas.

Dominating the mountain-ringed offshoot of the Valle de México, Teotihuacán is most celebrated for its two towering pyramids, the Piramide del Sol (Pyramid of the Sun) and the Piramide de la Luna (Pyramid of the Moon). The ancient city of Teotihuacán covered more than 20 sq km, though most of what can be seen today is concentrated in an area of nearly 2km along the Calzada de los Muertos.

Exploring this ancient city will give travelers a glimpse into the technological advancements and architectural prowess of the Teotihuacán civilization. A visit is a journey through time that is guaranteed to inspire.

TOP TIP

Exploring the Teotihuacán site is fascinating, but rebuffing the indefatigable hawkers is exhausting. Crowds at the ruins can be huge. They're at their thickest from 10am to 2pm, and the site is busiest on Sundays, holidays and around the vernal equinox; going early in the day pays off.



Templo de Quetzalcóatl (p141)



GET TO KNOW THE TEOTIHUACANOS

Two museums within Teotihuacán offer a comprehensive understanding of the civilization that flourished here, and the impressive architectural and engineering feats accomplished.

The **Museo de los Murales Teotihuacanos** is dedicated to showcasing impressive reproductions of the original murals found in the Pirámide del Sol, as well as other buildings, allowing visitors to see them in greater detail. The reproductions are precise and vividly colorful, showing how the ancient murals would have looked originally. A scale model of the complex lets you comprehend its scale.

The **Museo del Sitio** offers an introduction to the ancient city's history, and displays artifacts (including reproduction human sacrifices) discovered at the site. The museum provides a detailed look into the daily lives and cultural practices of the Teotihuacán people.

Dine in a Cave

MEXICAN MEALS AND DANCE BY CANDLELIGHT

Set in a vast cave a short distance from Teotihuacán's gate 5, the **Restaurante la Gruta** is unapologetically gimmicky, but definitely a unique and kitsch eating experience. The ceiling is as high as a small pyramid, so there is little sense of being closed in. If nothing else, eating in a cave has its benefits: after a day exploring under the sun, you will be thankful for the cool interior, while the dark setting also means every meal is romantically lit, no matter the time of day.

A margarita, beer or *limonada* (lime squash) is a good accompaniment to the 40-minute folkloric dance show on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, when reservations are recommended.

The standard Mexican and pre-Hispanic fare served on clay-ware includes *mole* (chocolatey sauce on chicken), *barbacoa* (roast lamb), *tamales* (stuffed, steamed corn-based snacks with various fillings), *tostadas de cochinita* (pulled pork on crispy tortillas) and *tacos*, with surprisingly good *escamoles* (ant larvae). The *menú del día* (daily set menu) is the best value.

At the end of your meal, you are given a candle to place at the far depth of the cave, which is aglow with other candles. This is a nod to the ritual of rebirth performed here in the *ostotl* (Náhuatl for 'cave') by pre-Hispanic people.



WHERE TO STAY FOR DAWN VISITS OF TEOTIHUACÁN

La Finca del Abuelo Teotihuacán

A grassy oasis a 10-minute walk from gate 2 with clean, tiled rooms and on-site restaurant. \$\$

Hotel Posada Sol y Luna

Perfect when you just need clean, quiet digs in walking distance (20 minutes) of the pyramids. \$

Villas Teotihuacán Hotel

Elegant hotel south of the pyramids, featuring gym, spa with temascal (sweat lodge), playground and restaurant. \$\$\$



Scan this QR code for prices and opening hours.



TOP SIGHT

Teotihuacán

Teotihuacán was once the largest city in ancient Mexico, known for its impressive pyramids and mosaics, and served as the capital of a pre-Hispanic empire. It was a hub of migration, with multiethnic groups living in segregated neighborhoods, which possibly led to its downfall, with studies in 2015 suggesting that it was cultural and class tensions that caused the city's collapse.

DON'T MISS

Pirámide del Sol

Pirámide de la Luna

Templo de
Quetzalcóatl

Puma mural

Calzada de los
Muertos

Restaurante La
Gruta

Museo del Sitio

Calzada de los Muertos

The 'Avenue of the Dead' is the main path that connects most of the sights at Teotihuacán. Gate 1 brings you to the avenue in front of La Ciudadela. For 2km heading north, the avenue is flanked by the former palaces of Teotihuacán's elite and other major structures, such as the Pirámide del Sol. The Pirámide de la Luna looms large at the north end. Look out for the mysterious mural of a puma (or jaguar) on a wall between the two pyramids.

Pirámide del Sol

The world's third-largest pyramid – surpassed in size only by Egypt's Cheops (which is also a tomb, unlike the temples here) and the pyramid of Cholula (p151) – overshadows the east side

of the Calzada de los Muertos. When Teotihuacán was at its height (between 375 and 500 CE), the pyramid's plaster was painted bright red, which must have been a radiant sight at sunset. The pyramid has 248 uneven steps – yes, we counted – with an inspiring overview of the ancient city. Unfortunately, in order to preserve the structures, at present climbing the pyramid is no longer possible.

Palacio de Tepantitla

This priest's residence, 500m northeast of the Pirámide del Sol, contains Teotihuacán's most famous fresco, the worn *Paradise of Tláloc*. The rain god Tláloc is shown attended by priests, with people and animals nearby. Above is the sinister portrait of the Great Goddess of Teotihuacán, thought to be a goddess of the darkness and war because she's often shown with jaguars, owls and spiders, which are underworld animals. Look for her fanged nose-piece and her shields adorned with spiderwebs.

Pirámide de la Luna

The Pyramid of the Moon, at the north end of the Calzada de los Muertos, is smaller than the Pirámide del Sol, but more gracefully proportioned. Completed around 300 CE, its tip is nearly the same height as the Pirámide del Sol because it's built on higher ground, and it's worth climbing for a perspective on the dominance of the larger pyramid.

Palacio de Quetzalpapálotl

Southwest of Pirámide de la Luna is the Palace of the Quetzal Butterfly, which is thought to have been the home of a high priest. The remains of bears, armadillos and other exotic animals were discovered here, showing that the area was used by the elite for cooking and rituals.

Palacio de los Jaguares

The Palacio de los Jaguares (Jaguar Palace) and Templo de los Caracoles Emplumados (Temple of the Plumed Conch Shells) are behind and below the Palacio de Quetzalpapálotl. The lower walls of several chambers off the patio of the Jaguar Palace display parts of murals showing the jaguar god blowing conch shells and praying to the rain god Tláloc.

Templo de Quetzalcóatl

Teotihuacán's third-largest pyramid is also its most ornate. The four surviving steps of the facade (there were originally seven) are adorned with striking carvings. In the *tablero* (right-angled) panels, the feathered serpent deity alternates with a two-fanged creature identified as the fire serpent, bearer of the sun, on its daily journey across the sky. Imagine its eye sockets laid with glistening obsidian glass and the pyramid painted blue, as it once was.

AFTER THE FALL

The Pirámide del Sol was completed, over an earlier cave shrine, by 150 CE. The city declined and eventually collapsed in the 8th century.

Centuries after its fall, Teotihuacán remained a pilgrimage site for Aztec royalty, who believed that all of the gods had sacrificed themselves here to start the sun moving at the beginning of the 'fifth world,' inhabited by the Aztec themselves.

TOP TIPS

- If you don't mind groups, tour buses that include transportation and a guide can work out cheaper than making your own way to Teotihuacán and hiring a guide at the entrance.
- There is virtually no shade, so bring a hat, or buy an inexpensive one on site.
- Eating options are very limited around the site. Most are formal restaurants not adjacent to exits. Bring snacks and water, or even small meals for accompanying children.
- The best photos of the whole Teotihuacán complex are from Pirámide de la Luna – scale it if you can; otherwise from the plaza in front.

BEST PLACES TO EAT AROUND TEOTIHUACÁN

Restaurante La Gruta

More than a restaurant, this cave offers a magical eating experience in itself. \$\$\$

Conejo en la Luna

Surprisingly satisfying, serving up hearty plates of *barbacoa* and Mexican classics near gate 2. \$\$

Restaurante Agumiel

Mexican casual fine dining with a garden in the township of San Juan Teotihuacán. \$\$

Restaurante Techinanco

Behind Pirámide de la Luna, this homey restaurant serves excellent enchiladas plus vegan options. Cash only. \$



FOR HISTORY LOVERS

For a deeper dive into Teotihuacán culture, the **Museo Nacional de Antropología** (pliló) in Mexico City has a reconstructed section of the Pirámide del Sol plastered in red as it would have been in its heyday.

Spring Equinox Energy

EMBRACE THE DAWN SUN

Each year at the return of spring, when the northern hemisphere begins to tilt back towards the sun, thousands of believers in cosmic energy dress in white and flock to Teotihuacán. The goal is to embrace the first rays of the sun from the top of the Pyramid of the Sun. According to visitors, the equinox is the time the energy is at its strongest. The hope is for the dawn to bathe their white clothes in red light as they dance, meditate, chant and burn incense.

Were the Teotihuacán people aware of this energy? Archaeoastronomy investigations have revealed that the Palace of Quetzalcoatl was a solar observatory. Even now, at the spring equinox, the rays of the rising sun create a shadow upward along red-painted owls on the wall. The bird was a symbol of stars – of both darkness and light. At the moment of the equinox, the sun shines directly on the equator, creating equal amounts of darkness and light.

In the past, there were long queues to scale the pyramid, but in recent years climbing has been banned to preserve the structures. Yet even from the ground, receiving the rays as they appear from the east, with arms outstretched, is still a magical moment for visitors at any time of the year.

Experiencia Nocturna

LIGHT SHOW PROJECTED ONTO THE PYRAMIDS

The pyramids you see today at Teotihuacán were once plastered bright red, and they radiated at sunset. The spectacular Experiencia Nocturna night event recaptures some of that majesty, projecting colored lights and video, with a soundtrack, onto the Pirámide del Sol and Pirámide de la Luna. The 35-minute show may be slightly cheesy but it does give an impressive glimpse at the pyramids in their original red splendor.

Before the show, you get a chance to walk in groups along the Calzada de los Muertos and take in the site under the stars without the crowds (though you are not free to wander). A 45-minute audioguide directs you along 10 stops, including the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, explaining their significance. Your group's chaperone-guide may use their flashlight like a laser pointer to indicate extra features of murals, which gives everything an additional otherworldly quality. Then everybody recon-



WHERE TO TAKE A BREAK AT TEOTIHUACÁN

Jardín Escultórico

A lovely sculpture garden with toilets, snack bar, picnic tables and bookstore near Museo del Sitio.

Museo del Sitio

One of the few places with shade in the complex.

Food stands

The roving snack stalls at entrance gates 4 and 5 can help tide you over.



MULTIETHNIC CITY

Teotihuacán was a multiethnic city formed into different neighborhoods.

Skeletal remains of 137 human victims have been found under La Ciudadela. DNA tests have revealed that they were brought from diverse parts of Mesoamerica to be sacrificed. Immigrants also came willingly and were employed by businesses, bolstering the economy.

They arrived after volcanic eruptions in the 1st and 4th century compelled them to move from the southern basin to the fringes of Teotihuacán.

The city of Teotihuacán is thought to have been home at one point to as many as 200,000 people who mostly lived in multifamily stone compounds painted with colorful murals. Compare this to the 58,500 inhabitants of the Teotihuacán municipality in 2020.



Aerial view of Pirámide del Sol (p140)

venes on cushions opposite the Pyramid of the Sun to watch the multimedia light show.

The 'Night Experience' is staged erratically, so check the website regularly, months in advance, as tickets sell out quickly.

Hot-Air Balloon Over the Pyramids

FLOAT ABOVE TEOTIHUACÁN AT DAWN

Seeing the pyramid complex from a hot-air balloon provides a new excitement to Teotihuacán, even if you have visited on the ground before. You have to arrive before dawn, but it's worth it. As you gaze out across the landscape above the ancient city, dozens of hot-air balloons in rainbow colors hang over the sun-kissed pyramids like sentinels. Your hot-air balloon passes over the Pirámide del Sol – close enough to see the steps. From as high up as 700m, the vastness of the Calzada de los Muertos is clear. The roadway points to the Pirámide de la Luna, a mere trinket on the hazy horizon, until, after much gliding, this Pyramid of the Moon too hulks far below your feet. The pyramids were an attempt by mere mortals to recreate the might of mountains, and as your balloon jets hot



WHERE TO GET COFFEE IN SAN JUAN TEOTIHUACÁN

Me Latte Café

A cafe-bar with cappuccinos and iced coffees to go in the small town next to the ruins.

Chocolateria Macondo

Yes, there is coffee, but the specialty here is subtly spiced pre-Hispanic hot cocoa.

Tierra Café Teotihuacán

Espressos, affogatos and juices to start the day, and coffee liqueurs and live music later on.

SACRIFICIAL MAYAN MONKEY

In 2018, the surprise discovery of a ritually sacrificed female spider monkey at Teotihuacán offered a rare glimpse into early diplomatic relations between the ancient Maya and Teotihuacán civilizations. Alongside the monkey were the skulls of a sacrificed eagle and puma and artifacts in jade, shell and obsidian.

It had previously been believed that the Maya and Teotihuacán civilizations were in constant conflict. Traces of Teotihuacán's military can be found on Maya territory around 378 CE. Yet the remains of the monkey date to before this, around 300 CE, suggesting it was a diplomatic gift by the Maya in a time of peace. Analysis of the skeletal remains in late 2022 suggested that the monkey was captured and brought to Teotihuacán from a humid Maya environment at the age of three. It was then fed a diet of maize and chili peppers before being sacrificed a few years later.



S.PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Palacio de Quetzalpapálotl (p141)

air into the sky, you might feel like a deity among the ‘mountains’ of Teotihuacán.

Balloon flights depart from the Municipality of Teotihuacán between 5am and 6am and typically last 45 minutes. Ask balloon operators about their contingency plans if it is too windy to fly on the day. Some offer a helicopter ride as a replacement.



GETTING AROUND

During daylight hours, Autobuses México–San Juan Teotihuacán run buses from Mexico City's Terminal Norte to the ruins (one hour). As armed robberies still occasionally occur on these buses, it is safer to take an Uber.

Tours to the ruins are plentiful, are better value for solo travelers than renting a guide

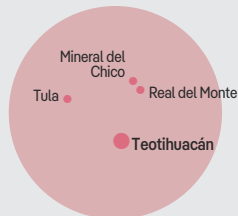
alone, and depart conveniently from Mexico City's Zócalo. Turibús and Capital Bus run nearly identical day trips in open-top buses from the capital – trips include a bilingual guide and entrance fees. Tours stop at Basílica de Guadalupe and tourist-reliant workshops (whether you're interested or not).



Beyond Teotihuacán

Teotihuacán's surrounds, north of Mexico City, are sprinkled with magical ancient charm far from the crowds.

The pyramids are just the beginning, as there are a handful of other historical relics beyond Teotihuacán. Take a short trip northwest to witness the stunningly preserved stone statues of Tula. Venture northeast to Pachuca, the burgeoning capital of the dynamic state of Hidalgo, diving into its colonial center before embarking on an adventure to nearby mountain towns. Immerse yourself in the natural beauty of Parque Nacional El Chico and discover the unique blend of Mexican and Cornish cultures in the charming ex-mining villages of Mineral del Chico and Real del Monte, where you can take in stunning views and breathe in the fresh, open air.



TOP TIP

A car helps connect all the areas north of Teotihuacán, but frequent buses from CDMX are faster for one-off visits.



Palacio Quemado (p146)



BEST SET LUNCH IN TULA

Cocina Económica Las Cazuelas

Excellent *menú del día* (set lunch) that includes soup, mains such as *chiles relLENOS* (cheese-filled chilies) and *agua* (fruit squash). \$

Mana

Homestyle vegetarian restaurant serving a generous *menú del día* that can include veggie burgers, quesadillas and oat milk. \$

Restaurant Casa Blanca

Dependable Mexican dishes and a varied buffet (1pm to 6pm). One of the few sit-down options downtown off the *zócalo*. \$\$

Tula's Atlantes Warriors

TOLTEC WARRIOR STATUES

A major city of the ancient, central Mexican culture widely known as Toltec, Tula is best known for its fearsome 4.5m-high stone warrior figures. Far smaller than Teotihuacán 100km to the southeast, Tula is nonetheless fascinating and worth a day trip or overnight stay for those interested in ancient Mexican history.

Two kilometers north of Tula's attractive *zócalo* (main square) town center, ruins of the main ancient ceremonial site are perched on a hilltop. Climb **Pirámide B**, also known as the Temple of Quetzalcóatl or Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (the Morning Star), to examine the four imposing **basalt warrior telamones** – male figures used as supporting columns and known as Los Atlantes. Wearing headdresses, breastplates shaped like butterflies, and skirts clasped by sun disks, the warriors hold spear throwers, knives and incense bags. Pause to take in the views over Tula's rolling countryside (and the nearby industrial sprawl).

Nearby **Coatepantli** (Serpent Wall) is carved with a row of snakes devouring human skeletons. Traces remain of the original bright colors with which most of Tula's structures were painted.

Palacio Quemado (Burned Palace) is a series of halls and courtyards probably used for ceremonies. **Sala de Orientación Guadalupe Mastache** is a small museum that includes the huge feet of caryatids (female figures used as supporting columns) and a visual representation of how the site might have looked in its prime.

Fresh Air in Mineral del Chico

NATIONAL PARK AND MAGICAL TOWN

The charming old mining village of Mineral del Chico is a *pueblos mágico* that outshines the much larger Pachuca, the capital of Hidalgo state, at ground level. You can take an easy and very lovely day trip or weekend retreat from Pachuca (or Teotihuacán via Mexico City by bus) to this little town, or the nearly 30-sq-km **Parque Nacional El Chico**, which was established as a reserve in 1898.

The views are wonderful, the air is fresh and the mountains have some great hiking and beautiful waterfalls. Local hotels have details about possible guided outdoor activities.

There are wide-angled views of the green mountains in Parque Nacional El Chico from the **Peña del Cuervo** lookout,



WHERE TO STAY IN TULA

Hotel Real Catedral

Luxurious digs back from the plaza with a gym and restaurant. Suites offer balconies and street views. \$

Hotel Cuellar

Pool and ample parking for longer city escapes in an LA-style motel with comfy beds. \$\$

Hotel Casablanca

Small, neat rooms in a centrally located business hotel tucked away from the noise. \$



Peña del Cuervo Mirador

located on a peak at 2770m. The distant rock formations are called Las Monjas (The Nuns) for their shape. Further away are more religiously named rocks: Los Frailes (The Friars).

Most Mexicans who visit on weekends hardly leave El Chico's cute main street (virtually the whole town) – not surprising when the locals are this friendly, proving their motto '*pueblo chico, gente grande*' (small town, great people).

A street back in most directions from the main street, **Corrón del Rosal** will reveal views of the valley. A good spot is the maze of walkways behind the **Capilla del Calvario**, a rustic 19th-century chapel on Calvario, uphill from the church.

Cornish Culture in Real del Monte

ENGLISH PASTIES AND MOUNTAIN MINERS

This gorgeous mountain town is a tangle of Cornish-style cottages scattered across a pine-tree-carpeted hillside. Real del Monte (officially known as Mineral del Monte) was settled in the 19th century after a British company commandeered the mines. It is easy to spend a pleasant afternoon following steep, cobbled streets to see where they lead, stopping in at *paste* (pastie) stores. At **Museo del Paste** you can learn



OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN PARQUE NACIONAL EL CHICO

The national park has activities you can do with a guide, or solo from Mineral del Chico's town center.

Río del Milagro

There is an easy 1.5km hike you can take to a creek, waterfall and valley viewing point. Start walking downhill from the town church and follow the signs.

Peña del Cuervo Mirador

For mountain views, take a *colectivo* marked 'Carboneras' from Mineral del Chico to the trailhead.

Visitor Center

Ask about guided activities, such as night tours of the national park and rock climbing, with transportation.

Camping

There are several campgrounds with rudimentary facilities between Km 7 and Km 10 on Carretera Pachuca en route to Mineral del Chico. Arrange camping and get information from the visitor center.



WHERE TO EAT MOUNTAIN TROUT IN MINERAL DEL CHICO

Restaurante y Cabañas San Diego

The owner's mother prepares excellent trout dishes beside a creek on the way into town. \$\$

La Gran Compañía

Local *trucha empapelada* (foil-baked trout) is followed by cocktails with views over Chico's main street. \$

La Trucha Grilla

Grilled fish with locally grown vegetables and wild mushrooms alongside fat shrimp skewers and optional salsas. \$\$



BEST MEXICAN PASTIES IN REAL DEL MONTE

El Serranillo

Mexican takes on the Cornish pasty work deliciously with *mole verde* (pumpkin-seed sauce) or *papa* (potato). \$

London Paste

Cheese and pineapple pasties in a landscaped garden on the highway. \$

Pastes Dificultad

Generously filled puff pastry, not shortcrust like most. Try chorizo as well as dessert *zazamora* (blackberries). \$



IVAN PASCOE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Panteón Inglés

how the English introduced the Cornish pasty into Mexico and make your own.

Workers from Cornwall, England, started arriving in 1824 and there is evidence they introduced *fútbol* into México through this town.

At **Mina de Acosta**, you can don a hard hat and enter the ice-cold abandoned mine for a guided tour, getting hands on with the steam engine and other equipment the English brought.

Tranquil **Panteón Inglés** (English Cemetery) from 1851 contains not only the gravestones of English workers (and their Mexican descendants) from as far back as 1834 (before the cemetery became official), but those of Chinese, German and Dutch miners.

Real del Monte is easy to package with Mineral del Chico to the northwest as a weekend escape from Mexico City. The air is thin here, so a mild case of altitude sickness isn't strange, but it's also clean, crisp and can get cold and windy suddenly (bring a sweater, if not a coat).



GETTING AROUND

For Mineral del Chico and Real del Monte, confident drivers will need to navigate steep mountain roads. Most other visitors need to return to Mexico City's Terminal de Autobuses Central del Norte for buses to Pachuca and then take combis to the mountain towns.

Buses to Tula leave from here too. There are second-class buses from the township of San Juan Teotihuacán to Tula or Pachuca, but they save no more time than returning to Mexico City and taking more comfortable, faster and safer buses.

PUEBLA

Mexico City  Puebla 

Prim and proper Puebla *appears* stately. The name evokes its well-preserved baroque center with more than 1000 colonial-era buildings and 70 churches adorned with blue-and-white Talavera tiles, yet Puebla has undergone a stunning transformation and offers a wealth of enticing experiences. A dynamic cultural life, thriving art and nightlife scenes driven by younger *poblanos* (people from Puebla), a bohemian artists' quarter and cutting-edge modern museums are essential to today's Puebla. Still, tradition and history remain present in Cinco de Mayo celebrations and through the preservation and reverence of an ancient pyramid just next door in Cholula.

Puebla is also one of the country's culinary heartlands. Names long synonymous with Mexico are actually *poblano* – dishes such as *chiles en nogada*, *mole poblano* and even the image of artist Frida Kahlo are riffs of the song that is Puebla. All together, Puebla offers visitors both the fine and the fun.

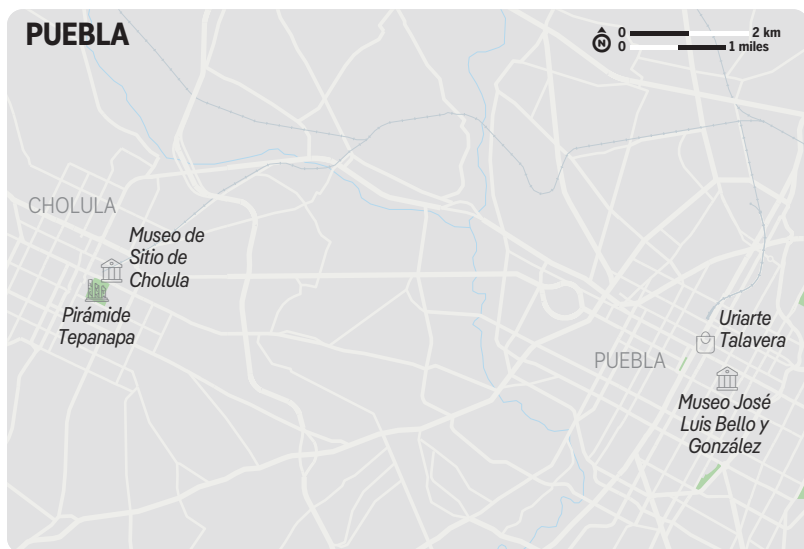
TOP TIP

Most Puebla museums close on Monday and have free admission on Tuesday, but Museo Amparo is open and free on Sunday and Monday, and Museo Internacional del Barroco is free on Wednesday. The Zona Arqueológica in nearby Cholula has free entry on Sunday.

ALAN HAZZOCO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Talavera tiles, Puebla



SANTUARIO DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LOS REMEDIOS

Pirámide Tepanapa is topped by the brightly decorated Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. The 16th-century church is a classic symbol of conquest, but possibly an inadvertent one, as the church may have been built before the Spanish realized the mound contained a pagan temple.

The mildly steep 15-minute climb (and panoramic views of Cholula) starts near the pyramid's northwest corner.

Talavera Tiles

SEE TRADITIONAL ARTISTIC GLAZED TILES

Everywhere you turn in Puebla you'll see the *azulejos de talavera* – glazed tiles painted in royal blues and other colors – adorning the city's many churches. The colors are key. Talavera should be hand painted with natural inks from a palette of only six colors – blue, green, yellow, orange, mauve and black.

Authentic Talavera is a tin-glazed ceramic that incorporates techniques that date from the 16th century, introduced by the Spanish. Fine pottery had long been crafted from the local clay and volcanic soil. Puebla pottery evolved as both an art and an industry after taking on influences from the blue-on-white porcelain introduced by the colonists from China.

Museo José Luis Bello y González is a house filled with the diverse art-and-crafts collection of the 19th-century industrialist Bello family who lived here. It's a treasure trove for fans of exquisite French, English, Japanese and Chinese porcelain and the museum's large collection of Puebla Talavera.

There are several good Talavera stores on Plazuela de los Sapos and the streets around it. Bigger pieces are expensive, delicate and difficult to transport. **Uriarte Talavera** has made its pottery on site since 1824. The showroom displays a gorgeous selection of high-quality, intricately painted pieces. Factory tours are offered during the week.



WHERE TO EAT MOLE POBLANO

El Mural de los Poblanos

The house specialty is five kinds of *mole*, each a masterpiece, served in a handsome colonial courtyard. \$\$

Restaurante Casareyna

The *chalupas* (*mole* chicken on small tortillas) are as exquisite as the 16th-century converted *casona* (grand house). \$\$

Celia's Cafe

Every *mole poblano* is served in (purchasable) Talavera-ware crafted in Celia's own studio. \$



Lower level of Pirámide Tepanapa

Pirámide Tepanapa

THE WORLD'S LARGEST PYRAMID

In the town of **Cholula**, a 20-minute ride from central Puebla, the incredible Pirámide Tepanapa looks more like a hill than the largest pyramid in the world. Yet with kilometers of walkable tunnels veining the inside of the 4.45-million-cu-meter structure, it's no letdown. You enter via the tunnel on the north side. This takes you on a spooky route of a few hundred meters through the center of the pyramid, with views of the earlier layers of the building.

Several pyramids were built on top of each other during various reconstructions, starting between 200 and 400 CE, and more than 8km of tunnels have been dug beneath the pyramid by archaeologists to penetrate each stage.

The **Zona Arqueológica** comprizes the excavated areas around the pyramid, too. You emerge from the tunnel on the east side near the **Patio de los Altares**. Ringed by platforms and unique diagonal stairways, this plaza was the main approach to the pyramid. Three large stone slabs on its sides are carved in the **Veracruz interlocking-scroll design**. At its south end is an **Aztec-style altar** in a pit, dating from shortly before the Spanish conquest. On the mound's west side is a



BEST TALAVERA IN PUEBLA & CHOLULA

Templo de San Francisco Acatepec, Cholula

Too much pattern on pattern is never enough on the facade of this Talavera-drenched church.

San Francisco de Las Cinco Llagas

Panels depicting Talavera floral urns and religious portraits pop against red *ladrillo* (brickwork) tiles.

Capilla del Rosario, Templo de Santo Domingo

Fireworks happen when gold leaf and Talavera collide on the ceiling of this baroque chapel.

Museo de Arte Religioso de Santa Mónica

A classic Mexican kitchen tiled in Talavera where *chiles en nogada* were created.



WHERE TO STAY IN PUEBLA

Hotel Colonial

Mid-19th-century hotel with a Jesuit monastery history exudes heritage near the action. \$\$\$

Hotel Nube

Almost-designer rooms with fresh bathrooms near the *zócalo* but without the noise. \$\$\$

Hotel Teresita

Tiny, modern rooms, but with private bathrooms, superb location and small price; a bargain. \$

HISTORIC PUEBLA'S WALKING TOUR

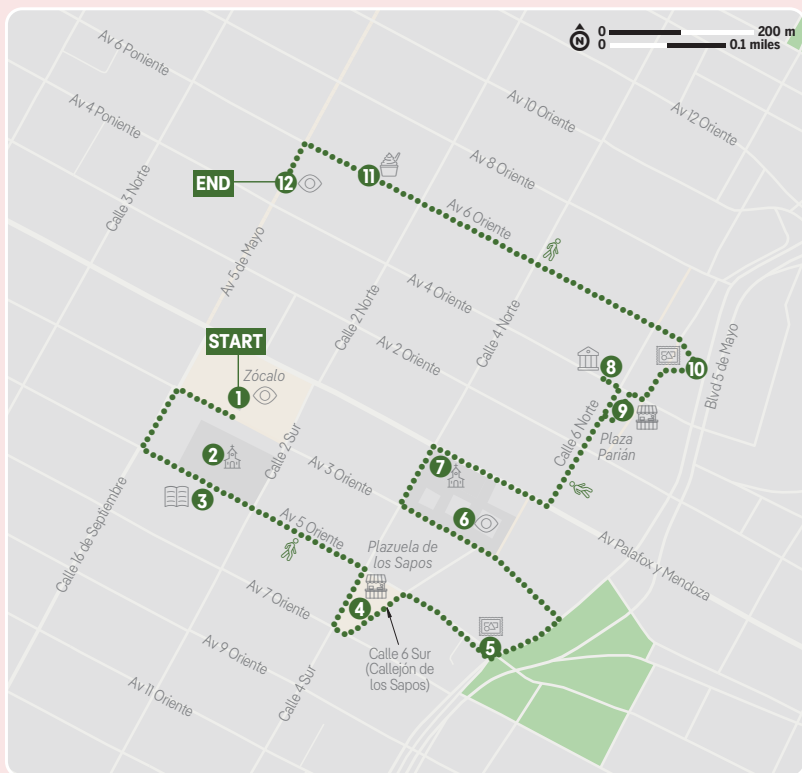
Start in Puebla's central **1 Zócalo** – originally a marketplace where bullfights, theater and hangings occurred. The surrounding arcades date from the 16th century. Look up at Mexico's tallest cathedral towers (69m) on the Herrerisque-Renaissance **2 Catedral de Puebla**, featured on Mexico's M\$500 bill until 2019. Circling south, check out a classic 17th-century brick-and-tile edifice, **3 Casa de la Cultura**, which is the former bishop's palace, now housing the first public library (from 1646) in the Americas.

Meander through the antiques-store-filled **4 Plazuela de los Sapos** for the market around the toad fountain that gives the plaza its *sapos* (toad) name. Pop to the highway to see the block-length **5 mural** by Oscar Pinto honoring the 5 de Mayo soldiers and their 1862 victory against the French. Then head north by the 16th-century **6 Edificio Carolino** to the elegant white and maroon-

trimmed **7 Iglesia de la Compañía**, where China Poblana is buried. Her embroidered blouses are now a national symbol, popularized by Frida Kahlo. Walking northwest, ogle **8 Museo Casa del Alfeñique**, a boisterous example of the 18th-century elaborate, stucco-style *alfeñique*, named after the egg-white candy that evolved into Pueblan marzipan.

Zigzag through cobblestoned **9 El Parián Crafts Market** and rest at **10 Barrio del Artista**, where you can watch artists toiling in studios under tiled archways. Here, Guadalupe Tecuapetla Romero's marble statue *Génesis* incorporates pre-Hispanic cat- and eagle-warrior symbols. Nearby, bullet-pockmarked Museo de la Revolución was the scene of the first battle of the 1910 Revolution.

Finish near the *zócalo* along **11 Calle de los Dulces** and its 40 traditional candy stores intersecting with the tree-lined shopping promenade **12 5 de Mayo**.



reconstructed section of the latest pyramid, with two earlier exposed layers.

Museo de Sitio de Cholula, across from the ticket office, provides the best introduction to the site, with a cutaway model of the pyramid.

Savoring Puebla

LOCAL MUST-TRY DISHES

Puebla's abundant culinary heritage is on proud display throughout the city, from humble street-side food stalls to elegant colonial-style restaurants.

The crowing glory is **mole**, a complex sauce of chilis, nuts, chocolate and warm spices, usually smothered over chicken. Unlike *mole negro* (black) from Oaxaca, the red-brown *poblano* variety leans on raisins rather than chocolate for a sweeter, subtle flavor. Similarly, the 'green *mole*' **pipian verde** uses pumpkin seeds instead of chocolate.

Local street snacks include **chalupas** (thick tortillas bathed in salsa and garnished with shredded chicken) and **cemitas** (Puebla's chunky avocado and schnitzel sandwiches). Lebanese immigrants brought the shawarma after WWI and it evolved into **tacos arabes**, pork spiced with Middle Eastern ingredients and stuffed into pita bread rather than tortillas.

Puebla also offers an array of seasonal, local delicacies:

Escamoles (March to June) Ant larvae; looks like rice and is usually sautéed in butter.

Gusanos de maguey (April to May) Worms that inhabit the maguey plant, typically fried in a chili and *pulque* (a low-alcohol brew made from the maguey plant) sauce.

Huitlacoche (June to October) Inky-black corn fungus with an enchanting, earthy flavor. Sometimes spelt *cuilacoche*.

Chiles en nogada (July to September) Green chilies stuffed with *picadillo* (ground meat and dried fruit), covered with a creamy walnut sauce and red pomegranate seeds.

Chapulines (October to November) Grasshoppers purged of digestive matter then dried, smoked or fried in lime and chili powder.

And dessert? Stores along Avenida 6 Oriente sell traditional handmade Puebla sweets such as **camotes** (candied sweet-potato sticks) and **jamoncillos** (bars of pumpkin-seed paste).

I LIVE HERE : WHERE TO MINGLE



Alejandro Osorio, 'talavera pop' artist and local shares his recommendations for the best bars for socializing. Instagram @alejandroosorio.mx

Azotacalles

This place near the Cholula pyramid attracts alternative music-industry people, talented DJs and cultural influencers. Weekends are for dancing, meeting new artists and talking about their work.

San Pedrito

This bar in the heart of San Pedro Cholula has a wide variety of mezcals, great music and delicious Mexican food. The terrace has a stunning view of the Cholula pyramid, illuminated at night.

Hormiga Negra Bar

A good variety of drinks and craft beers, where the party never ends. People here always have a positive attitude and want to have fun.



GETTING AROUND

Most hotels and places of interest are within walking distance of Puebla's *zócalo*, so there's little need for other transportation.

Within the CAPU bus station, buy a ticket at a kiosk for an authorized taxi to El Centro (city center), or order an Uber, which can make pick ups here, despite what taxi drivers might yell at you. Never take a cab from the street.

Alternatively, take RUTA bus line 3 just on exiting CAPU to station Clínica 2, three blocks southeast of the *zócalo*. You need a prepaid card, but you can usually pay the fare directly to the guard, who will tap you in.

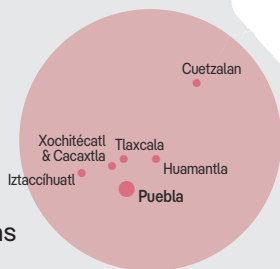
The tourist train has ceased operations to Cholula's Pirámide Teapanapa, but Uber was more convenient and often cheaper anyhow.



Beyond Puebla

Slow down and take in village magic, visit ruins all to yourself and stand in the shadow of volcanoes.

Embark on a journey to the heart of Puebla state's rural landscape, home to around 500,000 indigenous people and their rich cultures. Experience the thrill of hiking and climbing snowcapped, volcanic Iztaccíhuatl peak. Discover ancient, gruesome battle murals and sacrifice rituals at sister sites Cacaxtla and Xochitécatl, and explore Tlaxcala's colonial charm and quirky celebrations. Plan ahead for the otherworldly spectacle of Huamantla's traditional festival, where literally nobody sleeps. Or really get out there into the wild nature around Cuetzalan, known for vibrant markets and the death-defying airborne performances of the *voladores* (fliers). Things get adventurous beyond Puebla city.



TOP TIP

Puebla is the crossroads to all the destinations covered here (except Cuetzalan). It is often faster to return to Puebla rather than seek out direct, but slow, routes between towns.



Xochitécatl (p158)

VICTORIA TORI DM/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Iztaccíhuatl

Encounter Volcanic Life Climbing Iztaccíhuatl

CLIMB THE THIRD-HIGHEST PEAK IN MEXICO

Mexico's third-highest peak, Iztaccíhuatl is an extinct volcano lying 40km west of Puebla. It has the shape of a sleeping woman, and each section is named after a body part: from La Cabellera (The Hair) and La Cabeza (The Head) in the north, to Los Pies (The Feet) in the south. Izta's highest peak is El Pecho (The Chest; 5220m). From this vantage point, there are panoramic views of the plateau, glaciers and across to partner mountain Popocatepetl. Lower-altitude trails weave through pine forests and grassy meadows with breathtaking glimpses of nearby peaks.

The forests shelter nearly 1000 species of plants, comprising 45% of the reported species in the Valley of Mexico, including Mexican mountain juniper and kaleidoscopic fungi. Animals teem here. You might spot hummingbirds, frogs, *zacamotche* (the Mexican volcano rabbits) or coati (of the raccoon family). Migratory birds pass through here too on their way between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific.



VOLCANIC LOVERS

According to legend, Iztaccíhuatl resembles a sleeping woman who died of grief, believing Popocatepetl (the volcano 20km to the south) was dead, but who later returned from war to find her gone and is still now explosively angry about his loss.

The major bursts of activity from Popocatepetl between 1994 and 2001 resulted in the evacuation of 16 villages and warnings for the 30 million people living in its proximity. In recent years, ash explosions from the volcano have disrupted flights to and from Mexico City and Toluca. In 2017, a mild eruption of smoke and steam occurred on the same day as a major earthquake, adding to the eerie tale of the volcanoes.



WHERE TO EAT IN CHOLULA

La Norberta

A family-friendly cantina serving tacos and *aguachile* (lime-cured prawns) to pair with mezcal and *pulque* (fermented brew). \$

Recaudo

Organic vegetarian and omnivore delights, such as goat's cheese *tostadas* and bean burgers, in a courtyard. \$

La Casa de Frida

Courtyard with handicrafts, musicians, flame-grilled steaks and a weekend buffet featuring satisfying *mole*. \$\$



LIVING DOLL

What would you do if a baby-Jesus doll miraculously began walking, as if alive? This apparently happened in Tlaxcala in 1914 and the people dubbed him El Santo Niño Milagroso de Tlaxcala. Today he sits still but you can check for yourself (and pick up a portrait) along with true believers seeking miracles. The doll is housed in the orange-stucco and blue-tile **Parroquia de San José** (set to reopen after earthquake damage). Various stories claim he has answered prayers and cured gunshot victims and the gravely ill. The wooden doll is celebrated on February 14 when devotees gift toys, flowers and candy and the church is decked out with balloons as if for a child's party.



Museum, Tlaxcala

All routes to the summit require a night on the mountain. It can be windy and well below freezing any time of year, yet visitors of all abilities, from novice children to expert retirees, take on the challenge to witness Izta's stunning beauty.

Before making the ascent, climbers must register and pay the park entrance fee at the Parque Nacional Iztacihuatl-Popocatepetl office. The park website offers excellent maps, a handy downloadable English-language climbing guide and the registration form in English.

Artistic Joys in Tlaxcala

FRIDA KAHLO AND GIANT MURAL

Tlaxcala, the capital of Mexico's smallest state, exudes a relaxed confidence. Despite its small size, the city is teeming with cultural activity thanks to its sizable student population, delicious dining options and a wealth of museums. Tlaxcala, which is just a short drive from Puebla, is often overlooked by visitors, but offers a serene day trip for art lovers. Despite having no major tourist attraction, the city is worth exploring for its vibrant culture.

There are big names here, too. Frida Kahlo anyone? **Museo de Arte de Tlaxcala** is a fantastic little contemporary-art



WHERE TO EAT UP THE TLAXCALA VIBE

Pulquería Tía Yola

House-made *pulque*, people watching and Tlaxcalteca *mixiote* (barbecue) in a Día de Muertos-decorated courtyard. \$

Fonda del Convento

Home-style favorite serving traditional Tlaxcalteca cuisine, including rabbit in *pulque* and a *pipián* (pumpkin-seed sauce). \$

Posada La Casona de Cortés

Affordable boutique hotel set around a lush colonial courtyard seems almost too good to be true. \$\$

museum showing modern Mexican art and an excellent cache of early Kahlo paintings that were returned after years on loan around the world.

Outside, Tlaxcala's leafy *zócalo*, called **Plaza de la Constitución**, is dominated by the 16th-century **Palacio Municipal**, a former grain storehouse, and the **Palacio de Gobierno**, which holds the biggest drawcard in town – the color-rich murals of Tlaxcala's history by Desiderio Hernández Xochitotzin. His delightful style is vividly detailed and reminiscent of modern graphic novels. The 500 sq meters of work, painted between 1967 and 2007, was the last of the large-scale murals of Mexico's muralist movement. Guides are available and are worthwhile because there's a lot of storytelling to be done.

Facing Tlaxcala's southern square, Plaza Xicohtécatl, is the well-presented history museum, **Museo de la Memoria Tlaxcala**, where indigenous festivals and folklore are reimagined through a multimedia lens.

Time to shop. The handicrafts at **Casa de Artesanías** focus on high-quality pieces from the Tlaxcala and Puebla region.

Embrace Nature in Cuetzalan

LUSH TOWNSCAPE AND MOUNTAIN GARDENS

The remote, lush town of **Cuetzalan** (Place of the Quetzals) is built on a precipitous slope. After a three-hour drive north-east from Puebla, you'll need a couple of days taking in its famed vibrant festivals, weekend *voladores* (fliers) performances, and Sunday *tianguis* (street market) that attracts crowds of indigenous people in traditional dress. On the clear-est days, you can see all the way from the hilltops to the Gulf coast, 70km away.

From the heart of Cuetzalan, its **zócalo** plaza, three structures rise above the skyline: the clock tower, the Gothic spire of the **Parroquia de San Francisco** and the tower of the French Gothic **Santuario de Guadalupe**, with its unusual rows of *jarritos* (clay vases) and design based on the sanctuary at Lourdes. Palm trees flourish in the humidity. Head out of town by car or *colectivo* and things get even more wild.

Jardín Botánico Xoxoctic is a small but delightful botanical garden in a mountain forest with fine views 4km north-east of central Cuetzalan. Local giant ferns, tropical cherries, a butterfly house and exotic orchids are highlights. It's a pleasant stop as you make your way to **Yohualichán**, the ceremonial pre-Hispanic site inhabited by Los Totonacas. Its niche 'pyramids' are in varying states of ruin, similar to El Tajín's in Veracruz. The site is impressive, with bonus great views from this side of the valley.

LOS VOLADORES

In the *danza de los voladores* (dance of the 'fliers'), airborne performers whirl around a 30m pole, suspended by their ankles while playing flutes. On most weekends in Cuetzalan, *voladores* twirl outside the church at the *zócalo* several times a day in an exciting spectacle. This Mesoamerican ritual was recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage by Unesco in 2009. The dance emerged during the pre-Classical period (1000 BCE to 250 CE) in Veracruz. Four dancers represent the cardinal points and a fifth represents the sun. They spin 13 times, a number derived from 52 (the number of years in a pre-Hispanic century) divided by four ropes, to represent the dawn of a new sun.



WHERE TO STAY IN HUAMANTLA

Hacienda Soltepec

Hacienda outside of town that is a former María Félix movie set with views of La Malinche.

\$\$\$

Hotel Centenario

Clean and spacious salmon-pink rooms with black-out curtains and modernized bathrooms near the *zócalo*. \$

La Aurora Hotel Boutique

Like staying in an apartment within a sprawling family house, complete with ping-pong table. \$\$



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN HUAMANTLA

Xuni

Set around a colorful courtyard and crafting tasty *tacos gobernador* (shrimp and avocado) and popular set lunches. \$

El Quinto Toro

This family diner barbecues traditional Mexican rural rabbit *mixiote*, and lamb *barbacoa* (pit roast). \$\$

El Herradero

Huamantla's swankiest spot, with sleekly presented breakfasts, Mexican grills or cocktails on the spacious rooftop. \$\$

Restaurant Bar de Cantera

Tlaxcalan dishes such as *huazontle* (Aztec broccoli) and its Sunday buffet bring crowds to this restaurant's terrace. \$

About 5km southeast of town, there's a pair of lovely waterfalls, **Cascada Las Brisas** and **Cascada del Salto**. The shallow natural swimming pools beneath the falls are cold but enticing – bring your bathing kit, and footwear for the sharp underwater rocks.

Marvel at the Carpeted Streets of Huamantla

FESTIVAL OF COLORED SAWDUST CARPETS

The most alluring – and famous – reason to visit colorful Huamantla is for its *tapetes*. For two weeks in August, the **Feria Huamantla** festival features parades, cyclists and music, culminating in the spectacular **La Noche Que Nadie Duermes** (The Night That Nobody Sleeps) on August 14, when locals blanket the town's streets with elaborate *tapetes* – 'carpets' of flowers, seeds and colored sawdust. They are reminiscent of Tibetan sand mandalas and feature festive images of saints, birds and geometric shapes. Festivities, crowds and candlelit processions in honor of la Virgen de la Caridad (Our Lady of Charity) continue into the wee hours; at 7am the carpets are swept clean.

In 2022, the town broke the Guinness World Record (dethroning Guatemala) for the longest uninterrupted sawdust rug in the world – six linear kilometers, created by 240 artisans.

Outside of festival season, Huamantla is a pleasant base camp for exploring the surrounding countryside to get you past its sprawling suburbs. There are also workshops at which you can make your own *tapete*. Most escapees who make the 54km trip northeast from Puebla will just stay in town around the charming *zócalo*, with dormant volcano La Malinche providing a dramatic backdrop. The paint job inside Huamantla's church, **Parroquia de San Luis Obispo**, isn't quite colored sawdust but is still eye-popping.

Exploring Ruins at Cacaxtla & Xochitécatl

OUTDOOR FRESCOES AND CIRCULAR PYRAMID

The sister sites of Cacaxtla and Xochitécatl, about 32km northwest of Puebla, are among Mexico's most intriguing ruins.

Cacaxtla (ca-casht-la) displays high-quality, vividly painted depictions of daily life. Climb a scrubby hill with wide views of the surrounding countryside to get to the fading murals.

Only at Cacaxtla can you see murals that clearly show Maya influence among the symbols from the Mexican highlands.

Mural de la Batalla (Battle Mural), from before 700 CE,



WHERE TO SHOP FAIR TRADE IN CUETZALAN

Mercado de Artesanías Matachij

Meet the artisans who make quality weavings and other crafts at this fair-trade market.

Hotel Taselotzin

Clean, 10-room lodge with a restaurant run by 100 Nahuatl craftswomen who campaign for fair trade.

Tianguis dominical

Sunday market where locals sell everything from *guajes* (gourd vessels) to *yolixpa* (medicinal liqueur) and coffee.



Pirámide de las Flores

shows a ferocious battle. The Olmec-Xicallanc (the jaguar warriors) are clearly repelling invading Huastecs (the bird warriors with jade ornaments).

The second major mural group (c 750 CE) shows a figure in a jaguar costume and a black-painted figure in a bird costume (believed to be the Olmec-Xicallanca priest-governor) standing atop a plumed serpent.

The much older ruins at **Xochitécatl** (so-chi-*teh*-catl), 2km away and accessible from Cacaxtla on foot, include a circular pyramid, **Pirámide de la Espiral**, built between 1000 and 800 BCE and possibly used as an astronomical observation post. The path then passes three other pyramids.

Basamento de los Volcanes is all that remains of the first pyramid. The colored stones used to build Tlaxcala's municipal palace appear to have come from this site.

The most impressive feature of **Pirámide de la Serpiente** is the huge water pot found at its center, carved from a single boulder, hauled from another region.

Pirámide de las Flores was probably used for rituals honoring the fertility god. Near the pyramid's base – Latin America's fourth-widest – is a pool where 30 infants were likely washed before being sacrificed.

BLOODTHIRSTY CEREMONIES

Who ruled Puebla? Cacaxtla was the capital of a group of Olmeca-Xicallanca, or Putún Maya, who arrived in central Mexico as early as 450 CE. After the decline of Cholula (which they probably helped bring about) in around 600 CE, they became the chief power in southern Tlaxcala and the Puebla valley. Cacaxtla peaked from 650 to 950 CE and was abandoned by 1000 CE in the face of possibly Chichimec newcomers.

Atop a higher hill, Xochitécatl was chiefly used for gory Quecholli ceremonies honoring Mixcoatl, god of the hunt. Cacaxtla primarily served as living quarters for the ruling class, but held such ceremonies, too – the discovery of the skeletal remains of hundreds of mutilated children attest to Cacaxtla's bloody past.



GETTING AROUND

There are direct buses to Tlaxcala or Huamantla from Mexico City's TAPO or Puebla's CAPU terminals. There are no direct buses to Cuetzalan from Puebla, only from

Mexico City. Ask at hotels in Puebla for drivers who can take you. The gorgeous drive to Cuetzalan is one of the most exhilarating trips in the region and an adventure in itself.

CUERNAVACA

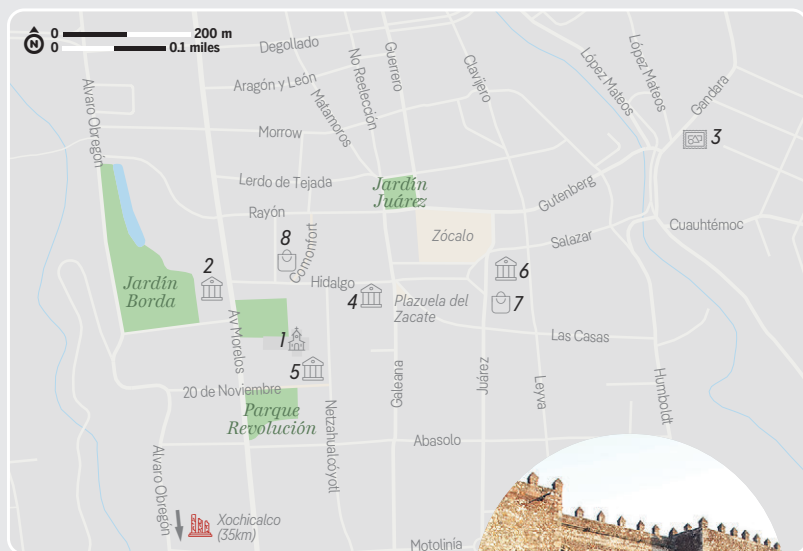
Mexico City  Cuernavaca 

Nestled in the lush hills of Morelos state, Cuernavaca – known as the ‘City of Eternal Spring’ – beckons visitors with its mild weather, rich cultural heritage and opportunities for relaxation. Take a leisurely stroll through the colonial town center, dine with views across the *zócalo*, marvel at the handicrafts collection of the wealthy (while starting your own collection) and discover the well-preserved ruins of nearby Xochicalco.

Once a destination favored by the elite, with grand haciendas and sprawling estates dotting the landscape, Cuernavaca continues to attract visitors from all walks of life with its alluring warmth, rich history and beautiful architecture. Although urban sprawl has lessened the once pristine air, it still remains a popular destination that maintains its air of glamor and allure, making it an easygoing weekend getaway from Mexico City.

TOP TIP

In the center of Cuernavaca, the lively road connecting the cathedral and the *zócalo*, Miguel Hidalgo, is lined with hotels and restaurants. Light sleepers beware that to its southeast is also the bar and club zone, pumping music sometimes till dawn on weekends.



SIGHTS

- 1 Cathedral
- 2 Jardín Borda
- 3 MMAC
- 4 MMAPO
- (see 1) Museo de Arte Sacro
- (see 6) Museo Regional

- Cuauhnáhuac
- 5 Museo Robert Brady
- 6 Palacio de Cortés

SHOPPING

- 7 Mercado de Artesanías
- 8 Weekend Book and Crafts Market

Palacio de Cortés

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO EAT IN CUERNAVACA



Mariela Martínez, creative designer and Cuernavaca resident, shares her recommendations for the best restaurants in town. @mar.sinsal

Casa Hidalgo

Open-air restaurant with stunning views facing Palacio de Cortés and the *zócalo*. The great, varied Mexican dishes and wines are best enjoyed sitting at a balcony.

Las Mañanitas

The restaurant is just perfect. The highlights are the very delicious *sopa de tortilla* and the beautiful garden with peacocks walking around. Staff are very nice, and there's a bar just for drinks.

La Hacienda de Cortés

After a very nice meal and wine with good service, you can walk around the hacienda. The old-world vibe makes you imagine what it was like to live here.



Museo Robert Brady

Lifestyles of the Rich & Shameless

MANSIONS AND ART COLLECTIONS

Cuernavaca has been a vacation home for wealthy escapees from the capital for centuries, and many of its museums were once lavish homes. Take the digs of **Museo Robert Brady**, where lovers of design can live vicariously through a collection of more than 1000 artworks and artifacts. American artist Robert Brady (1928–86) lived in Cuernavaca for 24 years and has become a gay icon. His collections range from India to Haiti and South America, and include personal photos and artworks of Josephine Baker and Peggy Guggenheim. Every gorgeous room and garden is bedecked in paintings, carvings, textiles, antiques and folk art from all corners of the Earth, including Mexico. Treasures encompass works by Mexican artists Tamayo, Covarrubias, Rivera and Kahlo.

Privilege and excess go way back to the 1783 Versailles-inspired **Jardín Borda**. This extravagant family home features gardens laid out in terraces with fountains. Duck into the house to see how Mexico's 19th-century aristocracy lived, in the exhibits of **Museo de Sitio**. One infamous painting depicts Emperor Maximilian in the garden with La India Bonita,



WHERE TO STAY IN CUERNAVACA

Hotel Hacienda de Cortés

A 16th-century former sugar mill where each room boasts its own private garden and terrace. \$\$\$

Home Sweet Home

Yes, a homely and tranquil unrenovated house near the cathedral with ample space. \$\$

Hotel Bajo El Volcán

A quiet, leafy, 1980s vacation-apartment vibe with spacious tiled rooms set around a clean pool. \$



BEST BARS IN CUERNAVACA

Mercado Comonfort

This secluded courtyard with terraced bars and restaurants is where cool locals sip mojitos.

La Verdad Sospechosa

Sleek bar with lo-fi electronica serving best-in-town cocktails. Its namesake drink mixes mezcal, orange and chili.

Enigma

Gay bar with drag shows by local star La Gorda.

Feis Buk

Grungy beer-cafe, pronounced 'Facebook', where the city's students and alternative crowd hang out.

Penny Lane Pub

A small 'pub' with satisfying *cerveza de barril* (beer on tap) and live local rock music.



Pirámide de Quetzalcóatl

the 'pretty indigenous girl' who became his lover. From 1866, Maximilian used the house as a summer residence.

The powerful have resided here since Cuernavaca's creation. Hernán Cortés' imposing medieval-style, stone **Palacio de Cortés** was constructed in 1535 on the base of the city pyramid that he destroyed after taking Cuauhnhuac. On the palace walls (currently closed), a fascinating **mural** by Diego Rivera, *Historia del Estado de Morelos*, depicts the oppression and violence that have characterized Mexican history, and, ironically, the roots of Cuernavaca's privilege.

Art & Handicrafts of Morelos

MODERN AND TRADITIONAL ART

If the white skin, upturned chin and fancy suit of the *chinelos* (costumed dancers of Morelos) resemble a Spanish conquistador, that's no accident. The traditional costume arose when indigenous workers in the region wanted to anonymously dance while parodying their slave-driving Spanish landholders. Now you'll see (and hear) *chinelos* dancing all over Cuernavaca and Tepoztlán. You can get up close to life-sized *chinelos* at **MMAPO**, which showcases handicrafts from Morelos. Most pieces are displayed out in the open so you can admire the handiwork. The attached store sells quality items that you won't see in **Mercado de Artesanías**, though the 200 stalls in this market are fantastic for affordable *chinelo* dolls and masks and other Morelos handiwork such as *casitas* (small houses) carved from *pochote* (sacred Mexican tree) spines, maracas fashioned from local *huaje* (gourd) and paintings on *amate* bark.



WHERE TO EAT A LAID-BACK LUNCH IN CUERNAVACA

La Maga Café

A bohemian cafe with a buffet of fruit, salads and hot Mexican dishes, including ample vegetarian options. \$\$

Emiliano's

A casual Cuernavaca institution known for good-value set lunches and its *pozole* (hominy stew). \$

Café Alondra Centro

Relax on a patio facing the cathedral with delicious *pan de elote* (corn cake) or *enchiladas*. \$\$

If religious art is your thing, visit the small **Museo de Arte Sacro** (in Cuernavaca's main **cathedral**), which displays 92 religious paintings, ornaments and sculptures from the 16th to 20th centuries. Across the road, the **Weekend Book and Crafts Market** takes over two streets.

Museo Regional Cuauhnáhuac in Palacio de Cortés highlights Mexican cultures and history. On the ground floor, exhibits focus on pre-Hispanic cultures, including the local Tlahuica and their relationship with the Aztec empire. Return to the modern age at **MMAC**, a contemporary-art museum with temporary exhibits and a permanent collection showcasing 1200 paintings and costume designs of modern Mexican artist Juan Soriano. A highlight is Soriano's sculptures in the shady garden, which makes a tranquil alternative to the Plaza de Armas main square.

Convene at Ancient Xochicalco

ANCIENT OBSERVATORY, RUINS AND PYRAMID

Atop a three-tiered grassy plateau with views for miles around lies a Unesco World Heritage site and one of central Mexico's most important archaeological centers. **Xochicalco** (so-chee-cal-co) is Náhuatl for 'place of the house of flowers' and is an impressive and relatively easy day trip from Cuernavaca. Sprawling Xochicalco is large enough to make the 38km day trip worthwhile, but not so well known as to be overrun by tourists.

The collection of white stone ruins, many still to be excavated, covers approximately 10 sq km. Every turn is a surprise. The ruins represent the various cultures – Tlahuica, Toltec, Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec and Aztec – for which Xochicalco was a commercial, cultural and religious center. When Teotihuacán began to weaken around 650 to 700 CE, Xochicalco began to rise in importance, achieving its peak between 650 and 900 CE, with far-reaching cultural and commercial relations.

The site's most famous monument is the **Pirámide de Quetzalcóatl**. Archaeologists have surmized from its well-preserved bas-reliefs that astronomer-priests met here at the beginning and end of each 52-year cycle of the pre-Hispanic calendar. Signage here is in English and Spanish, but in Spanish only in the excellent museum.

Around 650 CE, Zapotec, Maya and Gulf coast spiritual leaders convened here to correlate their respective calendars. A cave known as **El Observatorio** served as the 'observatory' for scientists studying the stars. From April 29 to August 13, a single shaft of sunlight pours in through the ceiling of El Observatorio, illuminating the cave like a message from the heavens.

INDIGENOUS-BUILT CATEDRAL DE CUERNAVACA

Cuernavaca's cathedral complex was built by indigenous people. The forced labor began five years after Cortés seized Tenochtitlán from the Aztecs. Franciscans commissioned the mission in 1526, using labor from indigenous people and rubble from Cuauhnáhuac (now Cuernavaca).

The cathedral stands in a fortress-like *recinto* (compound) to intimidate and defend against recently conquered locals. The **side door** blends indigenous and European features. Above, the skull and crossbones are a Franciscan symbol; the stones commemorate fallen workers. Inside, the **barrel-vault ceiling** was assembled by indigenous people.

To the right, the open-air **Capilla Abierta San José** was built to lure indigenous people who didn't trust enclosed spaces, while **Templo de la Tercera Orden** features baroque carvings of feathered indigenous people by indigenous artisans.



GETTING AROUND

Cuernavaca's bus stations are confusing as different companies leave from multiple locations in the city. Make enquiries about

onward journeys when buying your ticket at terminals in Mexico City.

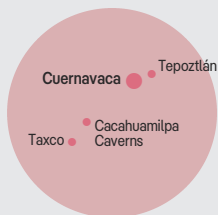


Beyond Cuernavaca

Tepoztlán isn't the only town nearby with magical energy. The scattered white houses of Taxco and nearby caves might also beguile.

Cuernavaca is just the beginning of an adventure spanning the state of Morelos and Guerrero. Climb to an Aztec pyramid on a hill in the mystical Tepoztlán. Wander the cobbled streets of the picture-perfect silver-mining town of Taxco, and enter the surprising Grutas de Cacahuamilpa caves complex.

The state of Morelos, which encompasses Cuernavaca and Tepoztlán, is one of Mexico's smallest and most densely populated. You'll see the same traditions all over. The irreverently costumed *chinelos* dance their way through festivals across the region. Even still, valleys at different elevations have a variety of microclimates, and you can sample the many fruits, grains and vegetables that have been cultivated here since pre-Hispanic times.



TOP TIP

Weekdays are significantly quieter than weekends in this region, yet you might prefer the energy and buzz on Saturdays, especially in Taxco.



Taxco



Tepoztlán

Find Yourself in Tepoztlán

HEALTH-RETREAT TOWN AND PYRAMID

A weekend in **Tepoztlán** is magical. As the birthplace of Quetzalcóatl, the omnipotent serpent god of the Aztec, Tepoztlán is a major Náhuatl center and a magnet for New Agers who believe the area has a creative energy. The beautifully situated small town (just 45 minutes from Cuernavaca) indeed feels extraordinary, with soaring jagged cliffs framing a well-preserved historic center. As a health retreat, there are scores of natural-remedy practitioners, along with meditation, yoga and massage.

This *pueblo mágico* retains indigenous traditions, with some elders still speaking Náhuatl and younger generations learning it in school – rare near CDMX. Fast-food chains and 7-Elevens are banned. Instead, in the market, you can eat pre-Hispanic seven-seed *tortitas* (croquettes) at **El Tlecuil**. Indigenous **temascal** remains popular, too. The 1000-year-old Mesoamerican healing ritual happens inside a pitch-black sweat lodge, where a shaman guides groups through chanting while splashing water infused with medicinal leaves onto sizzling hot rocks. You're then asked to offload intimate feelings with strangers.



WHERE TO EXPERIENCE TEMASCAL IN TEPOZTLÁN

Temazcal Tepoztlán

Fiercely hot, well-crafted temascal in landscaped gardens just outside of town.

Temazcal El Shaddai Tepoztlán

Tranquil backyard setting on the road to Tepozteco; run by a shaman at reasonable prices.

Uitetl Nantli Tlali Spa & Temazcal

Patient and perceptive guide in a grassy garden with cliff views. Massages available, too.



TEPOZTLÁN'S BEST PICTURESQUE RESTAURANTS

El Ciruelo

Long-standing favorite serves an upscale menu with live music and impressive views of the cliffs and pyramid. \$\$\$

Los Colorines

Ambience: fiesta at grandma's pink ranch. Piñatas, homely regional dishes and terrace views. \$\$

Tepoznieves

A colorful homegrown ice-cream emporium with 100 flavors, including cactus and pineapple-chili. \$

La Veladora

Pre-Hispanic fusion dishes are served in a splendid grassy garden in the quiet backstreets. \$\$\$

La Sibarita

Cinematic views across town to the pyramid make the first-class Euro-Mexican menu even better. \$\$\$



BEST MUSEUM ODDITIES IN TAXCO

Museo Casa Figueroa

Envy-inducing 1767 home-museum with oddities such as Jesus statues of human hair, a panic room and a photo of visiting Elvis.

Museo Guillermo Spratling

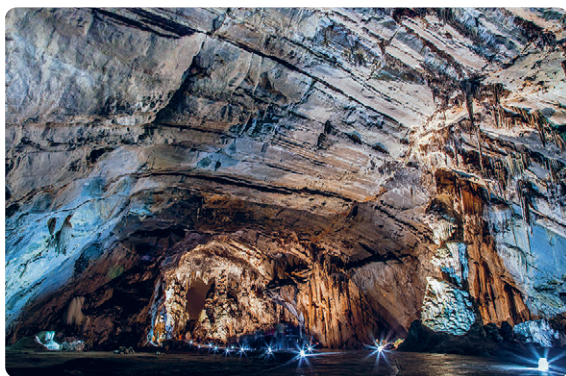
Archaeology museum showing US silversmith William Spratling's collection of pre-Hispanic wares, including phallic cult pieces.

Museo de Arte Virreinal

Charming religious-art museum explaining the Manila Galleons that pioneered trade between the Americas and Far East.

Casa Borda

This house's rear window peers over a four-story drop, though the entrance is at ground level.



VLADIMIR KOROSTIY/SHELVY/SUTTERSTOCK ©

Cacahuamilpa caverns

The enchantment is concentrated at Tepoztlán's main sight, the 10m-high **Pirámide de Tepozteco**, perched atop a sheer cliff at the end of a steep paved path. Built in honor of Tepoztécatl, the Aztec god of harvest, fertility and *pulque*, the pyramid is impressive for its location with panoramic valley views. Things intensify each September 7 with the all-night **Fiesta del Templo** near the pyramid, where copious *pulque* drinking honors Tepoztécatl. If that sounds excessive, check out **Museo de Arte Prehispánico** for a calmer look at stone rabbits – recalling the 400 rabbit gods of drunkenness – discovered around Tepozteco, plus ancient handicrafts from Maya to Olmec.

Taxco From Every Angle

PANORAMIC VIEWS OF SILVER TOWN

The sight of Taxco's white buildings scattered across the steep valley as you approach is breathtaking, and the former silver-mining town is one of the best weekend trips from Cuernavaca or the capital. Surrounded by dramatic mountains and cliffs, its perfectly preserved colonial architecture makes for one of the most beguiling views anywhere in the central highlands.

Start in the central plaza of the *zócalo*, dominated by **Templo de Santa Prisca**. To reach a balcony opposite the church, climb the **Plazuela de los Gallos** path left of the fountain, and turn right. The Churrigueresque belfries of the baroque masterpiece of Santa Prisca will appear, with a view over the *zócalo*.

Backtrack along Gallos but this time follow it to the narrow intersection with **Delicias**. Vintage white Volkswagen Beetles are everywhere in Taxco, and at this steep intersection, a parade of VWs putt-putt around the sharp corner like only Beetles can.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN TAXCO

Sotavento

The courtyard and Santa Prisca views enhance excellent Mexican dishes and Sunday breakfast buffets. \$\$

Casa Spratling

Mexican-European fusion such as chicken mole pizza or *chilaquiles* (fried-egg-topped corn chips) and European breakfasts. \$

Bar Berta

Bliss is a Berta (tequila cocktail) on the balcony over the *zócalo* at this kitsch-chic institution.

For postcard vistas, the terrace of **Pueblo Lindo** and its **Rosa Mexicano** restaurant has impossibly spectacular views. The white houses seem almost touchable.

Zoom out: take a VW taxi or combi 20 minutes uphill to the **Cristo Monumental** statue of Christ. The vista of white houses strewn before you is heavenly. If they look pleasingly antiquated, it's because new buildings must conform to the old in style, and Taxco has not been engulfed by industrial suburbs, despite going from silver-mining boom to bust since the 16th century.

Switch angles: from Taxco's north, a **teleférico** (cable car) ascends to the Hotel Monte Taxco resort, which provides fantastic views of Taxco and the surrounding mountains from the hotel pool.

Cacahuamilpa Caverns

CAVE STALACTITES NEAR TAXCO

One of central Mexico's most stunning natural sights, the **Cacahuamilpa caverns** are a must-see for anyone visiting Taxco or Cuernavaca. The scale of the caves is hard to imagine, with vast chambers up to 82m high leading 2km beneath the mountainside, inside which are mind-blowing stalactites and stalagmites.

Unfortunately, individual access to the (perfectly safe) pathway through the caves is not allowed. Instead, visitors are allocated free guides who lead large group tours (departures each hour on the hour), with constant stops to point out shapes (Santa Claus, a kneeling child, a gorilla) in the rock. At the end of the hour-long tour, you can wander back to the entrance – with the lights now off – at your own pace. Most guides do not speak English.

From the cave exit, it's possible to follow a steep path for 15 minutes to the fast-flowing Río Dos Bocas. There are spectacular views year-round and tranquil pools for **swimming** during the dry season. Bring bug spray.

Weekends are often very crowded, with long lines and large group tours, making midweek a more pleasant time to visit. There are restaurants, snacks and souvenir stores near the entrance. Between the entrance and the caves, it's possible to take a short **zip-line** across the treetops, or you can just walk the 150m around.

Buses to the caverns take 40 minutes from Taxco on Estrella Roja, and two hours from Cuernavaca.

WHY I LOVE TAXCO



Phillip Tang, writer

I never know what's around the corner in Taxco. Cobble streets rise, wind and drop in all directions like a labyrinthine MC Escher illustration.

One moment I'm chasing the towers of Santa Prisca, the next I'm standing agog at the white houses that have strewn themselves across the landscape. I'm still delighted, even after more than a decade of visiting. Taxco is like flipping through the pages of a pop-up book – I'm eager to see what's next, yet I never want it to end.



GETTING AROUND

Punctuality isn't great in these parts. Add about 15% to any travel times that you're quoted at bus stations.

To reach Taxco, you have two choices: from Cuernavaca's Estrella Blanca station, or Mexico City's south terminal.

Buses to the Grutas de Cacahuamilpa leave from Taxco's main bus station, the shared Futura/Estrella Blanca terminal, nearest the

zócalo. The Primera Plus/Estrella de Oro (EDO) terminal has more buses to the capital and is 750m away, at the south end of town along the main road.

Ometochtli runs 2nd-class direct buses to Tepoztlán from Cuernavaca's local-bus station, four blocks northeast of the **zócalo**. If you want 1st-class buses, you have to depart from Mexico City's Terminal Sur for ADO/OCC.

MALINALCO

Malinalco  Mexico City

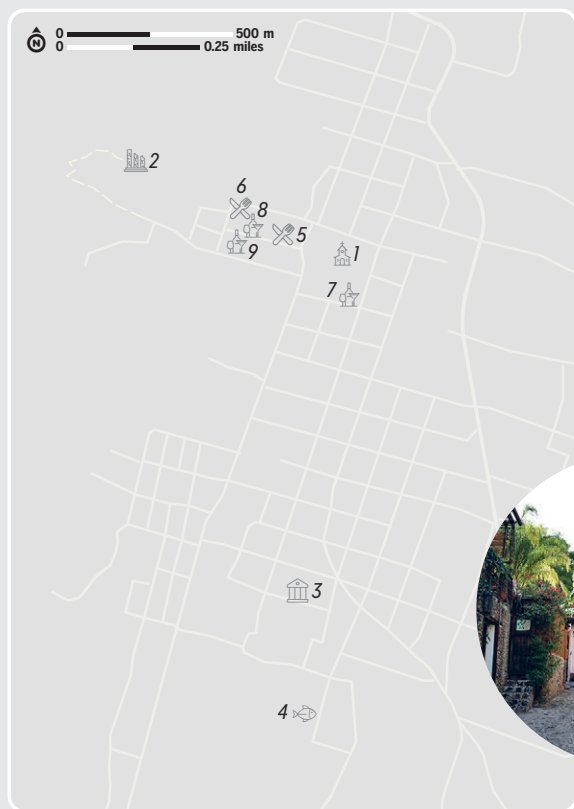
Nestled in a valley of dramatic cliffs and ancient ruins, this *pueblo mágico* continues its awakening as the next Tepoztlán or Valle de Bravo. Weekends see crowds, but still far fewer than those that descend on more easily accessible weekend escapes. The drive to Malinalco is one of the most enjoyable to be had in the area, with dramatic scenery lining the road south of Toluca.

The village has a charming colonial core comprising a well-preserved convent, a lively *zócalo* with a rotunda, and a small plaza with obligatory giant 'Malinalco' letters. Weekends add food and craft stalls.

A mezcal denomination of origin nod has invigorated bar life in town, there's a clutch of boutique 'hippie' stores, an interactive bug museum to delight kids, and a surprising number of upmarket hotels with pools. The town is far from fully developed, though, and midweek you'll often have the quiet backstreets all to yourself.

TOP TIP

You won't find the most basic budget accommodations listed online, but they are here, dotted around the *zócalo* central plaza. Most other decent accommodations are in the mid to high price range. Spa hotels tend to be a bit further out of the town center.



SIGHTS

- 1 Augustine Convent
- 2 Aztec Temples
- 3 Museo Vivo

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 4 Criadero las Truchas

EATING

- 5 Casa Colibrí
- 6 Mixe Cocina Tradicional y Mezcalería

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 7 Arca De Noe
- 8 Casa Diablitos
- 9 Pulques Nawa?!





Museo Universitario Dr Luis Mario Schneider

Mezcal Crawl in Malinalco

ARTISANAL LOCAL DRINKS

In 2018, mezcal producers in 12 municipalities around Malinalco gained official denomination of origin to use the ‘mezcal’ name for the smoky, artisanal cousin of tequila. Bars around the *zócalo* have taken this on with gusto.

Ease your way into things with dinner at **Casa Colibrí**, right in the center. There is only one mezcal choice, the mezcal *divino*, but thankfully it is ‘divine’, as are the views of the mountains from the outdoor terrace, and its specialty *jabalí* (roasted wild boar).

Then take on one of the originals, **Casa Diablitos** on Guerrero. Give in to your *diablito* (little devil) with the *cata* (tasting flight) of mezcals that include *chicatana* (flying-ant) infusions.

Across the road, **Pulques Nawa911** serves a *pachita* (quarter bottle) of *maracuya* (passion fruit) infused local mezcal, which is frankly perilous but helps wash down the dehydrated *gusano de maguey* (maguey worm) snacks.

A block north on Hidalgo, **Mixe Cocina Tradicional y Mezcalería** pairs local and Oaxacan mezcal and cocktails with a rotating menu prepared by local cooks each week-



BEST OUTDOOR EATING IN MALINALCO

Los Placeres

Artsy garden restaurant making *tortitas de huazontle* (Aztec-broccoli croquettes). \$

La Casa de Valentina

Cafe-restaurant serving burgers, pasta and homemade ice cream in the courtyard or cosy nooks. \$

Casa Vieja

Spacious patio draws groups for hearty set lunches and trout dinners. \$

Mestizo

Oaxacan-accented bistro whips up *tlayudas* (crispy tortilla pizzas) in the quiet garden. \$\$

Tianguis

Grab lunch from outdoor food stalls on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday and eat in the adjacent *zócalo*. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN MALINALCO

El Asoleadero

A courtyard pool with million-peso mountain views on a budget, just uphill from the *zócalo*. \$\$

Casa Hotel MaliKwalli

Feels like a motel, but the pool, garden and cleanliness are rare near the *zócalo*. \$\$

Hotel Casa Pixan

A sprawling estate and garden for city escapes, an 18-minute walk from town. \$\$\$

FLORAL FRESCOS

Facing Malinalco's *zócalo* is a well-restored 16th-century convent with a Renaissance-style facade. The earthquake-damaged main buildings remain closed for repairs, but the cloister has reopened. Here, absolutely sumptuous frescoes in plant and geometric designs curl across every wall and vaulted ceiling. Flower-based paints were used to depict the flora and birds of the era, such as *huacalxochitl*, a medicinal herb used in Aztec ceremonies. Three medallions represent Jesus Christ, Mary and the Augustine emblem. The convent was founded by Augustine monks and constructed by indigenous people by 1580.

Services continue even now. The essential contents of the church – pews, pulpit, and paintings of the Virgen de Guadalupe – have been emptied into the covered quadrangle.



Temple III, Malinalco

end. Or you can just try the *chapulines* (grasshopper) pizza with the *cata*.

A few blocks southeast on Galeana is a cantina from old Malinalco. Until recently, mezcal was just the humble drink of villagers, and that atmosphere lives on at **Arca De Noe** with plastic chairs, rag-tag locals and quality mezcal without the steep prices added for decor.

Trout Fishing & Bug Holding

INTERACTIVE ANIMAL ACTIVITIES AND FISHING

Malinalco has some unusual educational activities where kids (and big kids) can get hands-on with animals, or with dinner, about 10 blocks south of the *zócalo*.

Trout (*trucha*) is big in these parts, but it's nearly all farmed. At **Criadero las Truchas** you can fish for your own *trucha* from the wide outdoor pools. You pay for the *masa* (fish bait), the simple equipment and by the kilo (under M\$200 a kilo) for anything you catch. Then you take your catch to any of the local restaurants to have it cleaned and cooked however you like – try it wrapped in banana leaves with *nopal* (cactus) and *epazote* (pre-Hispanic medicinal herb). If you don't



WHERE TO DRINK MEXICAN COFFEE IN MALINALCO

Carajillo Malinalco

Its signature *carajillo* is mezcal poured over an excellent espresso made from house-toasted arabica beans. \$

La Galería

This *zócalo* cafe-bar serves mezcal, lattes and cold-brew coffee on the rear terrace with mountain views. \$

La Cereza Cafetería Y Repostería

Local coffee, *elote* (corn) cakes and *rajas con crema* (cream and chili) quiche. \$

fancy fishing, you can pick your victim from the tanks at the farm.

If you don't want to eat any animals, head to nearby **Museo Vivo** for a collection of live and mounted insects and other creepy crawlies. It's a giggly delight. You can join a continual circuit tour where you can cradle a tarantula, shoulder a snake, eat a meal worm and sniff at Mexican plants. Kids and adults are encouraged to rethink attitudes to nature – it's all in Spanish, though interactive elements are universal.

Ascend to Aztec Temples

CUAUHCALLI MOUNTAIN-CARVED TEMPLE

An invigorating 358-step hike up the mountainside above Malinalco takes you to one of the country's few reasonably well-preserved temples (even surviving recent earthquakes), from where there are stunning views of the valley and beyond. The small, fascinating site includes the mural *El paraíso de los guerreros*, which once covered an entire wall and depicts fallen warriors becoming deities and living in paradise.

The Aztec conquered the region in 1476 and were busy building a ritual center here when they were conquered by the Spanish. Temple I, El Cuauhcalli, survived because it was hewn from the mountainside itself. This monolith was the Temple of the Eagle and Jaguar Knight, where sons of Aztec nobles were initiated into warrior orders. The planning is astounding – Cuauhcalli is one single carving: the entrance in the form of a fanged serpent, statues and 13 steps.

Temple IV, located on the far side of the site, continues to baffle archaeologists. As the room is positioned to allow the first rays of sunlight to hit it at dawn, there has been speculation that this place was part of a Mexican sun cult, a solar calendar or a meeting place for nobles – or some combination of these.

Situated 50m before the site entrance, the **Museo Universitario Dr Luis Mario Schneider** explores the region's history and archaeology in a beautiful, modern museum space.

From the *zócalo*, follow signs to the *zona arqueológica*, taking you up the hillside on a well-maintained, signed footpath. To dodge the crowds, avoid Sundays (when entry is free for Mexican residents with ID).

CREVICE CAMPING

Malinalco is surrounded by forests for outdoor experiences. There's gentle glamping in a luxury biodome at **MaliKualli**, which also offers paragliding, rock climbing and canyoning. Or yoga and temascal in the dreamy spa complex of **Ollinyotl**. To go extreme and really enjoy the mountains, **MailEmociones** offers *camping en la grieta*, which is literally 'camping in a crack'. The reality is sleeping 20m off the ground in a crevice. You trek up a mountain for an hour and set up your bedroll in the crawl space of a cave at the edge of a drop, harness attached. The views are unforgettable. In the morning, you rappel back down.



WAR DRUM

Museo de Antropología e Historia (p174) in Toluca displays the original wooden *tlalpanhuéhuetl* (ceremonial war drum) that was found in Temple I, El Cuauhcalli. It's worth seeking out for the striking engravings on the instrument.



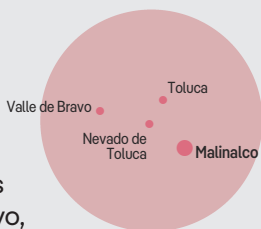
GETTING AROUND

Flecha Roja runs direct daily buses from Mexico City's Terminal Poniente to the centre of Malinalco. There are three services on Saturday and Sunday, and two on weekdays. Note that there's no toilet aboard. Pay attention to where you are dropped off because return buses depart from the

same spot and there's no sign. It's near the Santander bank. The alternative is to take a bus to Mexico City from the nearby town of Chalma, which is unpleasant, unreliable and takes much longer than the bus companies claim.



Beyond Malinalco



Natural wonders sit alongside boutique stores as you head further northwest to Valle de Bravo, with lakeside water sports and a volcano to climb.

Valle de Bravo (also known as Valle) is the chicest colonial small town near Malinalco (or even Mexico City) and the best reason to venture further northwest. It's located on the shores of a large, artificial reservoir. To get here, you need to pass through Toluca, at the crossroads with Malinalco to the south, Valle to the west and Mexico City immediately to the east. If you brave Toluca's highways, you'll be rewarded with the unique Cosmovital Jardín Botánico, a dazzling stained-glass greenhouse. Otherwise, travelers mostly bypass Toluca en route to the towns or the countryside surrounding it – a landscape of scenic pine forests, rivers and a huge extinct volcano, Nevado de Toluca.

TOP TIP

There are adventure sports to try on the edges of each town, but you'll need your own wheels or to join a tour.



Nevado de Toluca (p175)



Valle de Bravo

Lakeside Living in Valle de Bravo

WATER VIEWS AND COLONIAL CENTER

With one of the loveliest colonial centers in central Mexico, the *pueblo mágico* of Valle de Bravo is an utter charmer and a wonderful spot for an escape from Mexico City or onward journey from Malinalco. The setting is reminiscent of the northern Italian lakes, with thickly wooded, mist-clad hills and red terracotta roofing used throughout the town.

Valle is famous for being the weekend retreat of choice for the capital's well-connected upper classes.

There are stunning views along the shore of **Lago Avándaro** – an artificial lake, the result of the construction of a hydro-electric station. Popular activities are boating or parasailing on the lake and camping and hut stays in the hills.

Hiking opportunities to haciendas, butterfly farms, waterfalls and even a Buddhist temple are possible through tour operators or self-guided. The most popular trail takes you up to **La Peña** viewing point for a panoramic vista taking in the whole lake, and from where you can also launch into paragliding. Ask at the tourist information stand on the *zócalo* for options.



VALLE DE BRAVO'S TOP RESTAURANTS

La Michoacana

Near the *zócalo*, with smashing terrace views of the town and lake. Try salmon in almond sauce. \$

Restaurante Paraíso

Fantastic lake views and a sprawling menu of seafood specialties, plus imaginatively prepared local trout. \$\$

La Chiquita

Rustic bistro whipping up authentic Oaxacan *tlayudas* (Mexican tortilla 'pizza') and chicken *mole*. \$\$

El Punto

Chic cafe-bakery courtyard for organic Euro and Mexican breakfasts accompanied by juices, kombucha and pastries. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN VALLE DE BRAVO

Hotel San Sebastian

Some of the best lake and terracotta-tile views are from the balconies of the small rooms at this fresh hotel. \$\$

Hotel San José

Ranch-style hotel near the *zócalo* with hill views and large, basic rooms with extremely comfortable beds. \$

Hotel y Club de Golf Avándaro

This forested estate epitomizes Valle escapism with a pool, golf course, spa, tennis and neat cabins. \$\$\$



BEST MUSEUMS IN TOLUCA

Museo Taller Nishizawa

Exhibits Japanese-Toluca muralist Nishiwa, who infused his Japanese heritage into landscapes.

Centro Cultural Mexiquense

This cultural center, 4.5km west of central Toluca, houses the following three, free standout museums.

Museo de Arte Moderno del Estado de México

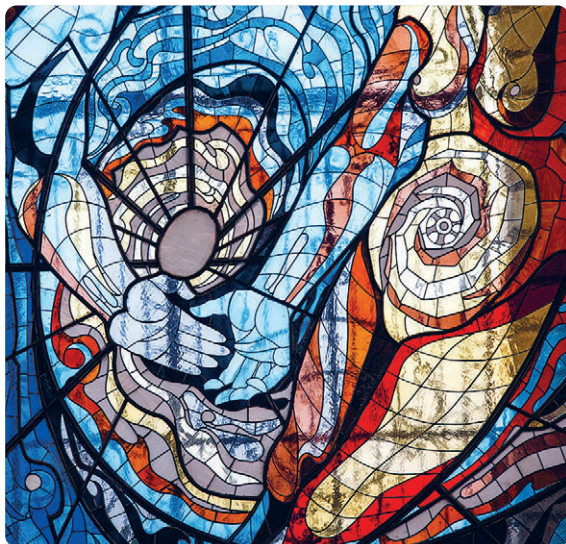
Challenging contemporary art by Tamayo and Orozco, plus a mural about slavery.

Museo de Antropología e Historia

Traces pre-Hispanic cultural influences till the modern day in tools and textiles.

Museo de Culturas Populares

Wonderfully varied collection of Mexico's traditional arts and crafts.



ERLUOCHO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cosmovital Jardín Botánico

Even if you just wander through the beguiling and largely intact colonial center, an overnight visit is rewarding. Valle is set up well for visitors, while still feeling lived in.

Trace Life in a Stained-Glass Greenhouse in Toluca

COSMIC ORIGIN STORY AND MUSEUMS

Most people pass through Toluca on the way to Malinalco, Valle de Bravo or Mexico City – all 1½ hours away – but this dynamic city is brimming with riches to explore, including attractive plazas, lively shopping arcades, art galleries and museums.

One gem is a destination in its own right: the spectacular **Cosmovital Jardín Botánico**, a botanical garden with stained-glass panels. The stunning and unique greenhouse was built in 1909 as a market. The building now houses 3500 sq meters of lovely gardens, lit through 48 stained-glass panels designed by Toluca artist Leopoldo Flores with the help of 60 artisans. The 500,000 pieces of glass come in 28 different colors from seven countries, including Japan, Belgium and Italy.



WHERE TO EAT IN TOLUCA

Petra Fonda

Creative, modernized Mexican dishes in an exquisite glasshouse-chic setting. \$\$

La Gloria Chocolatería y Pan 1876

Family-run cafe serving tacos and sandwiches but *churros* are the crowd pleasers. \$

La Vaquita Negra del Portal

Among the famous *portales* 'archways', this 1943 stalwart serves up first-rate *torta* 'sandwiches' with delicatessen goodies. \$

Depicted in the stained glass is the evolution of humans across history and our relationship to the stars, reflected in the ‘cosmo’ aspect of the name. Also shown are the dualities at work in our universe – creation and destruction, life and death, day and night. The eastern section shows a man and a woman in relation to the Andromeda nebula; at the center, the creation of the universe is brought to life in colored glass.

You might find that you want to stay in Toluca longer than a day, after all.

Nevado de Toluca

MAGNIFICENT VIEWS FROM TWO SUMMITS

Breathtaking views of snow-fringed crater lakes Sol and Luna can be seen from the two summits of Nevado de Toluca, also known as Xinantécatl. This long-extinct volcano is one of the highest peaks in the region and the fourth-tallest in Mexico. The lower summit, **Pico del Águila**, at 4620m, is the more popular day hike and is easily accessible from the parking area. For a more challenging hike, the main and highest summit, **Pico del Fraile** at 4704m, requires an additional three to four hours of walking. The earlier in the day that you reach the summits, the better the chance of clear views. The summit area can be snowy from November to March, and is sometimes good for cross-country skiing, but the Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Nevado de Toluca (formerly Parque Nacional Nevado de Toluca) is closed during the heaviest snowfalls.

The Mexican government’s 2013 redesignation of the national park as a ‘*zona protegida*’ (protected area) legalized and legitimized the previously unregulated mining activity occurring inside the park. Despite this change, most people continue to refer to the area as a national park.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WONDERS

Nevado de Toluca is home to 18 archaeological sites situated on the crater’s walls and peaks. During pre-Hispanic periods, the area served as a ritual center where the indigenous people held ceremonies and sacrifices. The **lakes** themselves are also considered archaeological sites, as numerous offerings, particularly copal, were deposited in them and can be found on the lakebed.

One of these sites, **Xicotepec**, has yielded green obsidian blades and multicolored ceramic artifacts. **Pico Sahagun**, found on the north side of the crater, has produced ceramic pieces, while **El Mirador**, is believed to be connected to the marking of the sun’s zenith, with a stele to support this theory.



GETTING AROUND

Most visitors are better off returning to Mexico City for a first-class bus to Valle de Bravo. There are no direct buses between Malinalco and the locations here without passing through Toluca or Mexico City, though a combination of bumpy smaller *peseros* (public mini vans) may be possible.

Toluca is a transport hub with Toluca International Airport, the chaotic bus station

and much-postponed train (Tren Interurbano de Pasajeros Toluca-Valle de México) linking to Mexico City’s metro *Observatorio* station. Drivers escaping the capital also need to pass along Toluca’s highways to reach Valle de Bravo and Malinalco. All but the most experienced mountain climbers are better off organising a tour with transport to the isolated Nevado de Toluca.



STACVATU/ROU/SUTTERSTOCK ©

Above and opposite: Tlacotalpan



VERACRUZ

MOUNTAINS, BEACHES AND COFFEE TOWNS

An underrated region fed by the sea and forest along Mexico's central Gulf coast.

Sprawling across most of Mexico's Gulf coast, the long and diverse state of Veracruz is a place of historical depth. It was here where the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs began, and where the mother of all Mesoamerican cultures – the Olmec – thrived and flourished. The succession of indigenous civilizations that lived here left a legion of archaeological marvels, including colossal Olmec stone heads at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and the niched pyramids of El Tajín.

Mexico's oldest European-founded settlement, Veracruz City, is home to the country's busiest port and a string of Gulfside beaches and pristine islands. Further inland, the country's highest peak – the soaring, snowcapped Pico de Orizaba – stands in

its full glory, within reach from the appealing *pueblo mágico* (magical town) of Orizaba. Encircling the state's capital city of Xalapa is a meld of coffee plantations and cobbled villages, including Xico and Coatepec. Down south along the coast, the sultry Laguna Catemaco and the nearby Biosphere Reserve of Los Tuxtlas entice with unique, lush vegetation and dreamy waterfalls.

With over 720km of coastline, 24 rivers and 15 lagoons, Veracruz truly offers incredible diversity, and yet it is routinely overlooked by travelers. Yes, the beaches are better in the Yucatán and the towns in next-door Oaxaca are richer in culture – but Veracruz's biggest draw is its quietness. Wherever you go in Veracruz, you'll find yourself well off the beaten path.



ABERU/GO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE MAIN AREAS

VERACRUZ CITY

Home to Mexico's oldest and biggest port. **p182**

XALAPA

Vibrant urban setting. **p192**

ORIZABA

European flair and mountain setting. **p201**

PAPANTLA

An indigenous town famed for 'flying' voladores. **p206**

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA LOS TUXTLAS

Volcano and island fun. **p211**

Find Your Way

Covering a large part of Mexico's Gulf coast, Veracruz may be a small state, but it packs a diverse range of sights, from beaches to highland towns and sultry lakes. We've curated the most worthwhile places to visit, whether you're after a slice of history, culture or nature.

Papantla, p206

An indigenous city famed for the ancient pyramids at El Tajin and the iconic *voladores* (fliers) of Papantla.

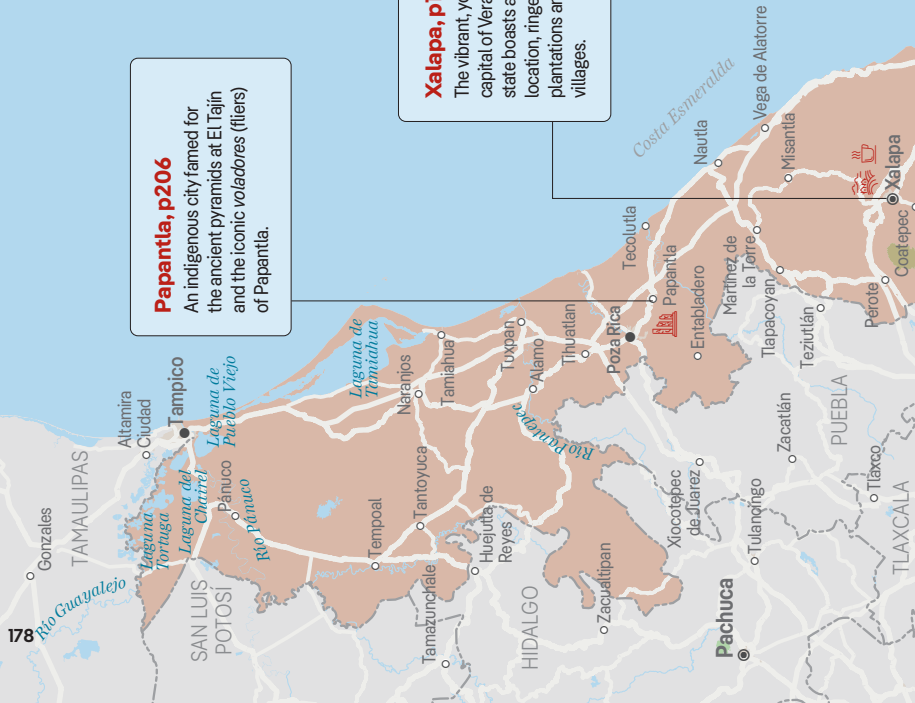
Xalapa, p192

The vibrant, youthful capital of Veracruz state boasts a highland location, ringed by coffee plantations and colonial villages.

Veracruz City, p182

Mexico's oldest European-founded settlement has an intriguing combination of grimy old-world flair and lively beach vibes.

Gulf of Mexico

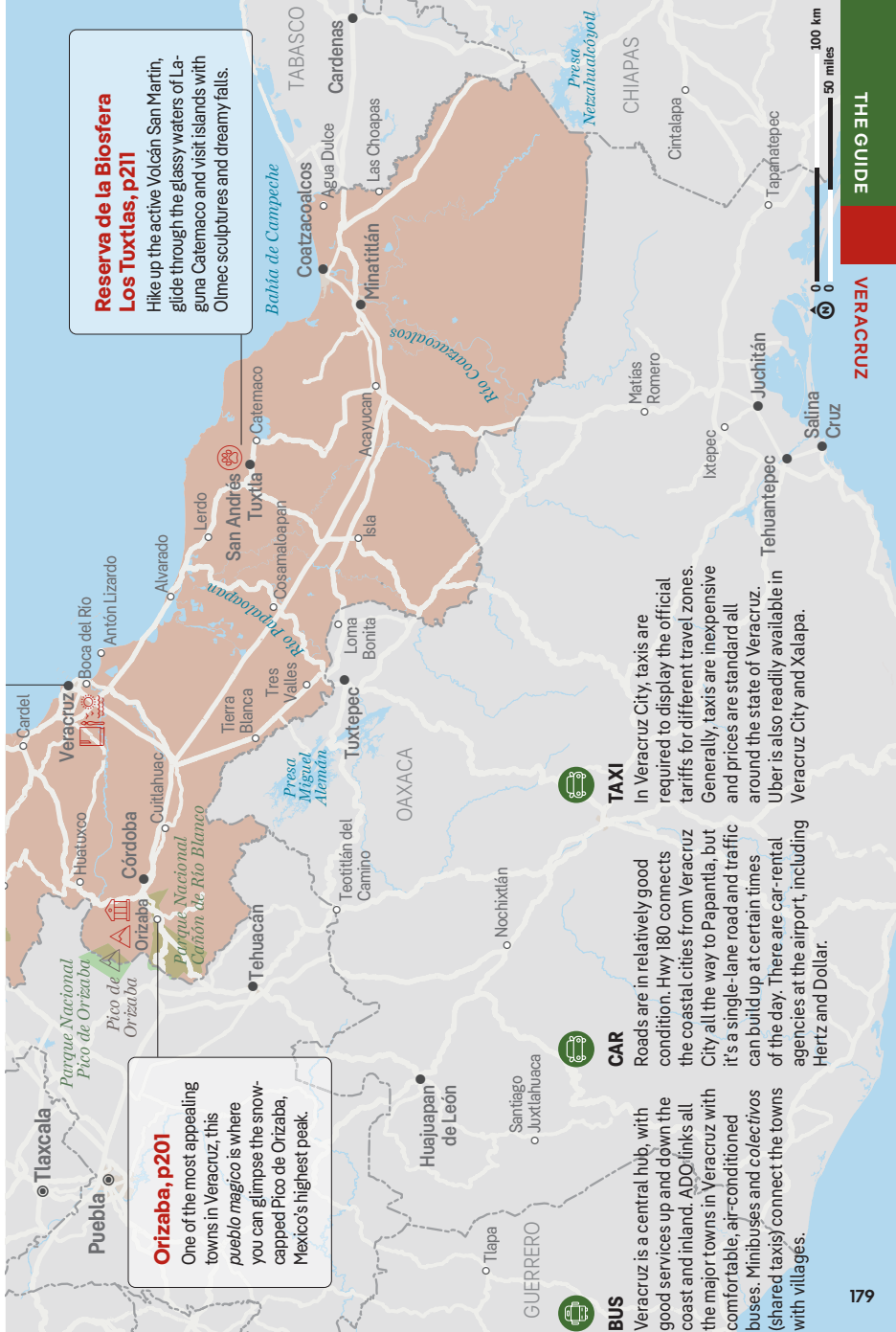


Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas, p211

Hike up the active Volcán San Martín, glide through the glassy waters of Laguna Catemaco and visit islands with Olmec sculptures and dreamy falls.

Orizaba, p201

One of the most appealing towns in Veracruz, this *pueblo mágico* is where you can glimpse the snow-capped Pico de Orizaba, Mexico's highest peak.



BUS

Veracruz is a central hub, with good services up and down the coast and inland. ADO links all the major towns in Veracruz with comfortable, air-conditioned buses. Minibuses and *colectivos* (shared taxis) connect the towns with villages.



CAR

Roads are in relatively good condition. Hwy 180 connects the coastal cities from Veracruz City all the way to Papantla, but it's a single-lane road and traffic can build up at certain times of the day. There are car-rental agencies at the airport, including Hertz and Dollar.



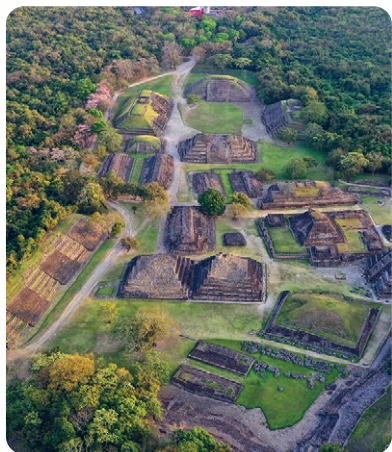
TAXI

In Veracruz City, taxis are required to display the official tariffs for different travel zones. Generally, taxis are inexpensive and prices are standard all around the state of Veracruz. Uber is also readily available in Veracruz City and Xalapa.

0 50 100 km
0 50 miles

Plan Your Time

Distances are short in Veracruz: it only takes two hours to get from the beach to the highlands. Plan your time well and you can easily roam colonial towns, wander coffee plantations and hike in highland forests – all in one week.



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El Tajín (p208)



Seasonal Highlights

The best time to visit is between December and May when there's hardly any rain. Carnival is peak season in Veracruz City, but the electrifying celebrations make it worthwhile to jostle the crowd during this time.



JANUARY

Tlacotalpan celebrates **Día de la Candelaria** with bull-running in the streets and a flotilla of boats on the river.



FEBRUARY

The **Veracruz Carnival** kicks off the biggest party on Mexico's eastern coast, with flamboyant parades, fireworks, samba music and folklore shows.



APRIL

The **Spring Equinox** is commemorated with traditional Totonac dance as the first rays of sunlight hits the pyramids of El Tajín.

Day 1

● You'll most likely land in Veracruz City, so start your day in the historic core. The **zócalo** (main square) is a hive of activity, particularly on Sunday when locals flock to the **Catedral de Veracruz** (p184) for mass. Stop for a cup of *lechero* (milky coffee) at the emblematic **Gran Café de la Parroquia** (p185), and tap your spoon to get your coffee, as the locals do.

● Take a deep dive into Veracruz's maritime history at the **Museo Histórico Naval** (p185), then continue on to the waterfront lighthouse, **Faro Carranza** (p185), for the navy's parade ceremony (only on Monday). The *malecón* (beach promenade) starts from here, passing piers, statues of famous politicians, and miles of grey-sand beach.

Day 2

● Venture west to **Orizaba** (p201) and ogle at Gustave Eiffel's art nouveau **Palacio de Hierro** (p202), which now houses a collection of small museums. Hop onto the **Teleférico de Orizaba** (p204), and ride the cable car up Cerro del Borrego for panoramic views. A loop walk leads to viewpoints where you can glimpse Mexico's highest peak, Pico de Orizaba, on a clear day.

● Back in town, take a relaxing stroll along the banks of Río Orizaba – head downriver to the **Paseo del Arte** (p203) for eclectic mural art, or upstream to see animals from the **Reserva Animal Citlaltépet** (p203) along the Paseo del Río.

Day 3

● With more time on hand, continue northeast to **Xalapa** (p192), Veracruz's state capital. The main pull for visitors is the **Museo de Antropología** (p195), which showcases seven out of the 17 gargantuan Olmec stone heads found in Mexico. Soak up Xalapa's highland air at the numerous green parks speckled around the city; **Parque Ecológico Macuitépet** (p195) is the most popular spot for sunset views.

● Journey further north to **Papantla** (p206) to explore the wonderfully evocative and often empty ancient ruins of **El Tajín** (p208). Just outside the ruins, the Totonac *voladores* put on a regular show, flinging themselves off a 30m-high wooden pole and swinging around it in a trance.



MAY

The **Feria de Corpus Christi** is a big event in Papantla: *voladores* (fliers), parades, bullfights and *charreadas* (Mexican rodeos) take over the city.



JUNE

Papantla puts on a show on June 18 for the **Festival de Vanilla** with indigenous dance, gastronomic delights, and all kinds of vanilla products on sale.



JULY

Xico honors its patron saint between July 15 and 24 for the **Fiesta de Santa Magdalena** with a running of the bulls event.



NOVEMBER

As temperatures rise and rains decrease, peak tourist season begins. Veracruz celebrates **Día de los Muertos** by building *ofrendas* (altars) and visiting cemeteries.

VERACRUZ CITY

Mexico City ✪

Veracruz

THE GUIDE

VERACRUZ

Arranged around Mexico's Gulf coastline, Veracruz City (also known as Heroica Veracruz) is Mexico's oldest European-founded city. Hernán Cortés arrived here on April 21, 1519, and began his siege of Mexico.

For 400 years, Veracruz provided Mexico's primary gateway to the outside world. Countless sackings by the French, Spanish and Americans ravaged the city, leaving a cluster of crumbling colonial architecture in the historic center. Austere churches stand alongside art deco buildings and modernist landmarks – all in various states of romantic decay. But Veracruz's beauty lies in its grit rather than its grandiosity.

A carefree spirit reigns in the *zócalo*, particularly on weekends, when the park turns into an outdoor stage for traditional dances. A few blocks east is the *malecón*, a 20km long boardwalk that alternates between quiet stretches backed by art deco buildings, and bustling strands packed with beach bars. Further south, modern skyscrapers and massive malls mark the start of the off-shoot town, Boca del Río.

TOP TIP

Veracruz City has a small but shiny international airport, 18km southwest of the center. Frequent flights to Mexico City, Monterrey, Cancún and Houston depart from here. There's no bus service from the airport to town, but ADO runs official taxis for M\$270 to downtown. Buy a ticket upfront at the arrivals hall, before heading out of the terminal.



TIAO J. FERNANDEZ/GETTY IMAGES © RIGHT: MATT OUSH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Zócalo (p184)

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Altar de la Patria
- 2 Baluarte de Santiago
- 3 Catedral de Veracruz
- 4 Faro Carranza
- 5 Monumento al Emigrante Libanés
- 6 Museo Histórico Naval
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- 8 Playa Ostiones
- (see 5) Plaza del Migrante Libanés
- 9 Torre de Pemex
- 10 Zócalo

ACTIVITIES

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DRINKING

- 12 Gran Café de la Pamoquia

SHOPPING

- 13 Mercado de Artesanías

**Baluarte de Santiago (p185)**



BEST RESTAURANTS IN VERACRUZ

Antojitos Miguel Alemán

Hugely popular with locals, this joint has gained a loyal following with its *picadas* (small tortillas with pinched-up rims). \$

Fussion Restaurante & Taller

With dishes such as tuna *tataki* in *mole* and octopus risotto, Fussion delivers a contemporary take on Mexican cuisine. \$\$

Emilio Restaurante

Locals adore this intimate place and its creative dishes that mix Mexican, Italian and Spanish flavors. \$\$

Namik

Veracruz's fanciest restaurant, helmed by Chef Erik Guerrero, serves upscale gourmet food that's proudly Veracruzano. \$\$\$



ERIKSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Palacio Municipal

Hit the Zócalo

JOIN THE WEEKEND PARTY

All roads in Veracruz City lead to the *zócalo* (also called the Plaza de Armas), the palpating heart of the historic center. Framed by tall palm trees, the handsome square features the city's most stunning colonial buildings, beautiful *portales* (arcades), and a row of ever-lively, price-hiked restaurants that spill out to the square.

To the southeast of the square stands the 18th-century **Catedral de Veracruz** (Nuestra Señora de la Asunción), built out of coral and quarry stone. Its whitewashed neoclassical facade provides a perfect contrast against the striking bluish-green mosaic tiles on its domed roof. In front of it stands the 17th-century **Palacio Municipal** (city hall), marked by a watchtower that was once used to spot ships arriving at the port.

Every weekend night, the *zócalo* turns into a staging ground for an outdoor party, where cultural dance performances create a carnival-like atmosphere. The square becomes thick with music, marimba bands, merrymakers and balloon-sellers. The *jarochos* (a colloquial word for Veracruzanos) take their traditional dances seriously, in particular the *danzón*, an elegant tropical dance with Cuban roots.



WHERE TO STAY IN VERACRUZ CITY

Múcara Hotel

Conveniently located next to the Cathedral, this excellent budget option has simple but sparkling clean rooms. \$

Gran Hotel Diligencias

Overlooking the main square, this landmark hotel is the fanciest option in Veracruz. \$\$\$

Hotel Emporio

Splurge on sea-view rooms at this arty, stylish hotel located on the most picturesque stretch of the *malecón*. \$\$\$

Forts & Museums

JOURNEY THROUGH MARITIME HISTORY

To take a deep dive into Veracruz's history, head to the high-tech **Museo Histórico Naval**. Occupying a former naval academy, the museum has impressive interactive displays and exhibits that offer a titanic lesson in Mexico's maritime heritage. Don't miss the ship simulator on the 2nd floor. The displays are only in Spanish.

Behind the museum stands the regal **Faro Carranza**. It was at this waterfront lighthouse where the 1917 Mexican Constitution was drafted. Today, it's home to the Maritime Secretariat but the ground floor is open to the public. Every Monday morning, the Mexican Navy holds an elaborate ceremony in front of the building.

A few blocks southeast, the **Baluarte de Santiago** gives a glimpse of what Veracruz must have been like as a walled city surrounded by medieval defenses. Built in 1526 by what was then the waterfront, it is the only surviving fort of nine. The crumbling fort looks slightly out of place on a quiet backstreet of the historic quarters.

Your journey into Veracruz's naval history culminates at **San Juan de Ulúa**, remnants of the city's colonial fortress at the northwestern end of the modern port. The earliest fortifications here were originally built in 1565 on an island connected to the mainland by a thoroughfare. Today, the fort is an empty jumble of bridges, battlements and passageways. We recommend booking a guided tour at the ticket office.

Taste Veracruz's Famous Lechero

MILKY COFFEE AND SPOON-TAPPING TRADITION

You can't come to Veracruz without popping into the **Gran Café de la Parroquia** (laparroquia.com), an institution and household name since 1808. The cafe not only spread the coffee-drinking culture in Veracruz, but it also pioneered the spoon-tapping tradition in the city.

To get your drink, simply tap your spoon on the coffee glass to attract attention. A white-jacketed waiter quickly appears, carrying two huge brass kettles, one filled with coffee and the other with steamy hot milk. An espresso measure is poured into the bottom of a glass while a stream of hot milk poured from high tops up the glass with scientific precision. *Et voila!* Parroquia's famous milky coffee, *lechero*, is served.

Besides coffee, the joint also slings breakfasts and light meals, with eggs prepared at least a dozen different ways. The Parroquia has inspired several imitators around town, including



AFRO-CUBAN INFLUENCES IN VERACRUZ

The Veracruzanos' heritage is a blend of cultures and identities influenced by the Afro-Cubans brought in as slaves during the colonization era. The *jarocho*s (Veracruzanos locals) are descendants of African slaves who married Europeans or indigenous locals. The Afro-Cuban influence is evident in all aspects of the *jarocho* culture – from their music and dance to their rituals and food.



OTHER MUSEUMS IN VERACRUZ

Museo de la Ciudad de Veracruz

Housed in a charming colonial-era building, this museum recounts Veracruz's history from the pre-Hispanic era.

Museo Agustín Lara

The old home of one of Veracruz's most famous musical icons displays a range of Lara's furniture and memorabilia.

Centro Cultural La Atarazana

This beautifully converted colonial warehouse features a striking mural by *veracruzano* artist, Melchor Peredo.



BEST COFFEE SHOPS IN VERACRUZ

Impetus

Sip coffee concocted by award-winning baristas at this creative, third-wave coffeehouse.

Antonino's

A small caffeine haunt that's said to brew the best third-wave coffee in town.

Finca Sierra del Mar

This outpost of the Sierra del Mar coffee farm serves quality gourmet coffee and breakfasts.

Gran Café del Portal

A gorgeous vintage coffee house slinging piping hot *lechero*, with polished vintage interiors and even a memorabilia nook.

Gran Café de la Parroquia

The OG *lechero* coffeehouse in Veracruz with centuries-old spoon-tapping traditions.



ESKYSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Waterfront

several right next door. It's worth checking the newer, beachfront branch of the Parroquia (Av George Washington & Blvd Manuel Ávila Camacho) along the *malecón*.

Stroll Along the Malecón

MONUMENTS AND SCULPTURES ON THE HARBOR BOARDWALK

As a busy oil port, Veracruz city may not have the prettiest stretch of coastline, but its 8km-long waterfront **Paseo del Malecón** makes for an interesting walk. Ramble in the shadow of Art deco buildings, beach bars and seafood *palapas* (thatched-roof shelters) to get a sense of how eclectic the city can be.

Start at the **Mercado de Artesanías** and browse the kaleidoscope of souvenirs and handicrafts. You'll then pass the nondescript **Torre de Pemex** building owned by Mexico's largest oil company. The edifice is an early example of modern Mexican architecture.

Following the coast, the waterfront path passes several light-house piers, statues of renowned politicians, and monuments dedicated to the city's defenders and sailors who died at sea. The most prominent statue is the **Monumento al Emigrante Libanés**, erected in honor of the immigrants that have passed



LIVE MUSIC & BARS IN VERACRUZ

Bar Prendes

This bar occupies prime real estate for evening dances at the *zócalo* and serves great *botanas* (snacks) with ice-cold beers.

La Barricas

Jarochos rave about this live-music venue that plays everything from reggaeton to rock.

La Casona de la Condesa

Located close to the seafont, this club offers thumping live music and an energetic crowd.



MUST-TRY DISHES IN VERACRUZ

Veracruz's location by the ocean means seafood is king here. Almost every restaurant or eatery will have some kind of seafood dish on its menu. Combining seafood with the pre-Hispanic diet of rice and beans, *veracruzanos* have married Spanish and Afro-Caribbean influences to create these genre-blending dishes.

Arroz a la tumbada A soup-based seafood rice.

Huachinango a la veracruzana Fried red snapper drenched in a spicy tomato sauce.

Chilpachole de jaiba A spicy stew of crabs and chilies.

Pollo encacahuatado Chicken served with a rich peanut gravy.

Picada An *antojito* (street snack) made of a small tortilla with a pinched-up rim to hold cream, cheese, onions and salsa.



Encacahuatado

through here. Two blocks inland from the *malecón* is the **Altar de la Patria**, an obelisk marking the burial remains of those who defended Veracruz during its numerous battles.

Heading south, the *malecón* widens into a pedestrian walkway that locals call *bulevar*. Benches and umbrella-covered tables line **Playa Ostiones**, the first of the many gray-sand beaches stretching across the coastline.

Beaches & Islands

SPLASHING AROUND THE GULF COAST

While Veracruz has managed to remain under the radar for foreign travelers, its beaches are a magnet for Mexican holidaymakers. As you veer further south of the city center, you'll find reasonably pleasant stretches of beach all the way down through to Boca del Río. As a rule of thumb, the further from the oil rigs, the better the beaches.

Alternatively, you can catch *lanchas* (motorboats) by the aquarium to the outlying islands for pristine, crystal-clear waters. A popular spot is **Cancuncito**, a sand bar off the coast that is sometimes completely submerged. Rent snorkeling gear to explore the underwater world here. Most boat



BEST SEAFOOD RESTAURANTS IN VERACRUZ

Palapa Perea Seafood

This rustic place, with figures of sharks dangling from its straw roof, is a locals' favorite serving affordable yet fresh seafood. \$

La Cevicheria

Raved about as the go-to joint for ceviche (marinated raw fish) and *coctel de marisco* (seafood cocktail). \$\$

Villa Rica Mocambo

A hugely popular seafood chain that's long been a fixture in Veracruz's dining scene. \$\$

I LIVE HERE: BEST PLACES FOR KIDS



Sara Tyler, a world-schooling mum and owner of Nomad Publishing, shares with us her list of favorite places to hang out in Veracruz with kids.

Parque Zaragoza

My family's favorite spot in town is this leafy, local park south of *centro* (downtown). The green space is safe for kids to run free. There's a market adjacent to the park, with fantastic *picadas* (tortillas with pinched-up rims).

Paseo del Malecón

In the evenings, the waterfront boulevard is a great spot for a stroll. My kids love to ride their bikes here.

Isla de Enmedio

For picture-perfect white-sand beaches, this is the ultimate paradise just a short hop from Veracruz City. We often spend our weekends here.



MATT GUSH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Boca del Río

tours will whisk you past **Isla de Sacrificios**, an island once used for Totonac human sacrifice and later as a leper colony. It's now part of a protected marine reserve called **Parque Marino Nacional Sistema Arrecifal Veracruzano**, and boats no longer land here.

A secret whispered among locals, **Isla de Enmedio** is touted to have the best beaches in Veracruz. The highly protected island forms part of the national park, and its clear-as-glass water teems with coral reefs and technicolored fish. Traipse carefully while you're on the island, as there's an abundance of turtle eggs buried in the powdery sand. A turtle camp has been set up to protect the eggs here. The island is a 25-minute speedboat ride from Antón Lizardo, 30km southeast of Veracruz City.

The off-shoot town of **Boca del Río** has an inviting strand with shallow waters and small ripples suitable for young kids. In recent years the area has been revived with glass-walled skyscrapers and modern buildings, including the **Foro Boca**, a futuristic concert hall built in 2017. A smattering of brightly colored seafood restaurants here overlooks the mouth of the Río Jamapa on Blvd Camacho; one of the best is Villa Rica Mocambo. *Lanchas* offering boat tours to mangrove forests leave from here.



GETTING AROUND

Veracruz's city center is easy to navigate on foot. To get to the beach, catch any of the buses marked 'Mocambo-Boca del Río' from the corner of Avenida Zaragoza and Arista, near the *zócalo*; they go via Parque Zamora and Blvd Camacho to Playa Mocambo (20

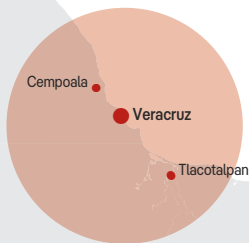
minutes) and on to Boca del Río (30 minutes). The bus station is located 3km south of the *zócalo*. To get downtown, take a bus marked 'Díaz Mirón y Madero'. It will head to Parque Zamora then up Avenida Madero.



Beyond Veracruz City

Geographically, Veracruz City makes the perfect spot to explore the ancient ruins in the north and the magical towns down south.

The coastline of Veracruz is speckled with historical sites, ancient ruins and *pueblos mágicos*. The area north of Veracruz City in particular has a weighty historical significance but remains remarkably wild and unexplored. The impressive archaeological sites Cempoala and Quiahuiztlán are highly worth a visit for their unique square-niched pyramids, and can easily be combined into a day trip from Veracruz. To the south of Veracruz City, the picture-perfect colonial town of Tlacotalpan is perhaps Mexico's least-known World Heritage site.



TOP TIP

Buses to the various towns and ruins near Veracruz City leave from the main bus terminal, making it convenient and easy to explore on your own. For those who prefer a guide, Tours y Tickets Veracruz (turicket.com) runs small-group day tours in comfortable vehicles.



Cempoala (p190)



THE QUIAHUIZTLÁN RUINS

Perched like a mini-Machu Picchu on a plateau beneath a horn-shaped mountain, **Quiahuitlán** (Place of the Rains) is a pre-Hispanic Totonac town and necropolis 34km north of Zempoala. Enjoying an elevated view of the Gulf coast, the site has two pyramids, more than 70 tombs, and some carved monuments. A short trail leads to the main plateau that overlooks the ocean to a higher site with four tombs.

In spite of its lofty location, the settlement was subjugated first by the Toltec between 800 and 900 CE, and then by the Aztec around 1200. You can contemplate this amid nature and in solitude, as you're likely to have the place entirely to yourself.

Under-Visited Totonac Ruins

ANCIENT TEMPLES AND PYRAMIDS

Dating to around 1200 CE, the archaeological remains of **Cempoala** sit on the outskirts of modern-day Zempoala town, roughly 48km north of Veracruz. Once a Totonac town of 30,000 people, Cempoala was an advanced city with defensive walls and underground drainage pipes. The temples and buildings at this quiet, grassy site have undergone extensive renovation works, and most are studded with smooth, rounded riverbed stones, though many were originally plastered and painted. Human sacrifices were held in its temples.

Before entering the site, have a look inside the adjoining small museum first. Apart from interesting clay figurines, polychrome plates, obsidian flints and pottery used in ceremonies, there are photos and descriptions (in Spanish) of every major building on the site. By the entrance, the **Templo del Muerte** (Temple of the Dead) once contained the tomb of Mixtecachihuatl, the goddess of dead women. Unearthed in 1972, the **Templo Mayor** (Main Temple) is an 11m-high pyramid with a wide staircase leading to a shrine.

When Cortés first encountered Cempoala, he and his men stayed the night in the **Templo de Las Chimeneas**, which had battlement-like teeth thought to be chimneys – hence the name. The circle of stones in the middle of the site is known as the **Círculo de los Guerreros**, where lone captured soldiers were made to fight against groups of local warriors. Few won.

The west side is made up of two main structures: the **Templo del Sol** was where sacrifices to the sun god were made; to its north, the **Templo de la Luna** has a structure similar to Aztec temples dedicated to the wind god, Ehécatl.

Roam Colorful Tlacotalpan

UNESCO WORLD-HERITAGE TOWN

Pastel-colored historic buildings, elegant European-style pavilions and a perfect checker-box layout gave this appealing town Unesco World Heritage status in 1998. At 100km south of Veracruz City, Tlacotalpan was once an important river port but lost its power when the railroad was constructed.

Today, Tlacotalpan is the kind of place where the greatest pleasure is found in wandering the multihued streets and taking in the atmosphere. The color palette is extraordinary: the lucid sunsets over the adjacent **Río Papaloapan** add subtle oranges and yellows to the rainbow of colonial houses, bringing to mind a more subdued Havana. A fantastic way to explore the (flat) town is on two wheels: rent a



WHERE TO EAT IN TLACOTALPAN

Las Brisas del Papaloapan

This is the most popular choice among the riverfront fish restaurants, serving catch of the day and *arroz a la tumbada*. \$\$

Restaurant Doña Lala

The smartest eating option in town with a wide-ranging selection of Mexican dishes. \$\$

Rokala

With its unbeatable position under the arches on Plaza Zaragoza, this friendly place buzzes all year round. \$\$



Tlacotalpan

bike from **Bicicleteando**, and head out on a leisurely ride down to the riverfront.

The town has two attractive squares: **Parque Hidalgo** and **Plaza Zaragoza**, directly adjacent to each other. Poke inside the pale-salmon **Capilla de la Candelaria** at Parque Hidalgo. Its mid vault is made of Veracruz coral stone. Then head into the **Parroquia San Cristóbal**, an 18th-century neoclassical church gorgeously painted in blue and white.

Of all the ho-hum museums in Tlacotalpan, the **Museo Salvador Ferrando** is the only one worth your time. Named after a Tlacotalpan artist, this mini-museum displays eclectic exhibits ranging from vintage Singer sewing machines to paintings of local notables. Step into the gorgeous French-style **Teatro Netzahualcóyotl**, built in 1891, and ask the caretaker to turn on the auditorium and stage lights so you can take in its full splendor.



THE ROAD TO ALVARADO

En route to Tlacotalpan from Veracruz, you will pass through the fishing town of Alvarado. Founded in the 16th century, the town was named after Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. Today it's a pleasant place for a brief stopover to admire the regal Palacio Municipal and the 1770 Iglesia de San Cristóbal. One of the most striking sights here is the **Monumento a los Héroes de Sotavento**, a tribute to the defenders of Alvarado. Don't leave without trying the proudly *jarocho arroz a la tumbada* (soupy seafood rice) here.



GETTING AROUND

To head north of Veracruz City, catch a bus to Cardel from the terminal. You'll find frequent buses leaving from beside Hotel Cardel for

Zempoala and Quiahuitlán. Southward buses also leave from the main bus station; TRV buses to Tlacotalpan run frequently.

XALAPA

Xalapa springs many surprises on the unsuspecting traveler. Few have heard of this city – and even less people know it's Xalapa (and not Veracruz city) that is the state capital. In Mexico though, Xalapa (pronounced ha-la-pa) is widely known for giving the country's favorite spicy green chili its name.

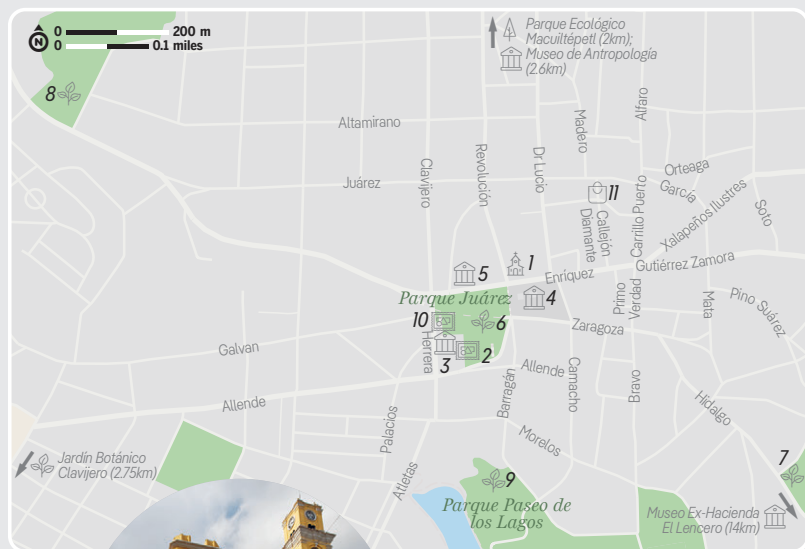
But this town is as different from the jalapeño pepper as can be. Despite its location just 107km northwest of sweaty Veracruz city, Xalapa has a highland location that gives it a temperate climate all year round. Regardless of when you're visiting, carry a light jacket and pack walking shoes to tackle the steep roads that wend up and down the hilly city.

Coolness takes on new meaning in Xalapa: the city has a hop-pin' nightlife and a thriving cultural scene fueled by its large student population. The pleasant *centro* (downtown) is chock full of hipster bars, indie bookstores and quality coffee joints.

Mexico City ✪ Xalapa

TOP TIP

ADO buses depart hourly from the main bus station in downtown Veracruz City to Xalapa, covering 107km in two hours. Xalapa's modern bus station, Central de Autobuses de Xalapa (CAXA), lies 2km east of the center. To catch a taxi to downtown, buy a ticket at the bus station first (which costs no more than M\$50 one way). Driving here can be challenging as Xalapa's notorious for its traffic-asphyxiated roads.



**Catedral
Metropolitana**

SIGHTS

- 1 Catedral Metropolitana
- 2 El Ágora de la Ciudad de Xalapa
- 3 Museo Casa de Xalapa
- 4 Palacio de Gobierno
- 5 Palacio Municipal
- 6 Parque Juárez

- 7 Parque Los Berros
- 8 Parque Los Tecajetes
- 9 Parque Paseo de los Lagos
- 10 Pinacoteca Diego Rivera

SHOPPING

- 11 Callejón del Diamante



Xalapa

Xalapa's Main Square

MUSEUMS, PALACES AND MURAL ART

Xalapa's main square, **Parque Juárez**, is a large green space lined with manicured hedges and monkey puzzle trees, where shoe shiners, street-food vendors, and balloon sellers gather from day to night. Perched on the hilltop, the park feels like a terrace overlooking the valley below. Head to the south side for views of the multicolored, haphazardly arranged city skyline and the snow-capped cone of Pico de Orizaba in the distance.

By the *mirador* (viewpoint) is the modern gallery **El Ágora de la Ciudad**, which hosts exhibitions and film screenings. On the lower level, you'll find a giant mosaic sculpture of the feathered serpent deity Quetzalcoatl that doubles as a kids' climbing frame and slide; and the sculptures of the Virtues: strength, justice, prudence and temperance.

On the west side of the square, take the stairs down to find the **Pinoteca Diego Rivera**, a small gallery that showcases a modest collection of Rivera's works and pieces from modern Mexican artists. Next door is the **Museo de Casa Xalapa**, a small but lovingly put-together museum that tells the story of Xalapa's past. Exhibits (in Spanish) run the gamut from



XALAPA'S BEST RESTAURANTS

Fonda El Itacate

Dig into local favorites like *chile relleno* (stuffed pepper) at this wholesome, well-loved cafeteria. \$

La Candela

This brightly decorated place attracts a crowd of loyal regulars who come for the inventive Mexican cuisine and great steaks. \$\$

Macario Local Cuisine

An edgy, intimate gastrobar serving a string of contemporary *xalapeño* dishes and sexy *mezcalitos* (mezcal-based cocktails). \$\$

El Brou

Housed in a chic, high-ceilinged, colonial lounge, El Brou gives an artsy take on Mediterranean, Lebanese and Mexican cuisine. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN XALAPA

Posada del Cafeto

A welcoming, cozy B&B housed in a colonial-style building arranged around a lush courtyard. \$

Mesón del Alférez Xalapa

This gorgeous place is a classy retreat with split-level rooms and the best breakfast in town. \$\$

Hotel Boutique San Antonio

Old-world charm with newly renovated rooms featuring wooden-beamed ceilings and teak furnishings. \$\$\$



BIRDWATCHING IN XALAPA

Despite being a relatively big, traffic-clogged city, Xalapa is rimmed with patches of forests and wilderness areas. The high-elevation pine forests at Las Minas, roughly 7km northeast of the city, are particularly great for birdwatching. Commonly spotted species include the mountain trogon, tufted flycatcher, and bumblebee hummingbird.

Wildside Nature Tours (wildsidenaturetours.com) offers birdwatching tours in the area, led by experienced naturalist guides.



AURORA ANGELES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Olmec sculpture, Museo de Antropología

prehistory to the growth and urbanization of Xalapa, the city's culture and commerce, and a replica *xalapeño* kitchen.

Continue to the north side of the main square, where the austere **Palacio Municipal** stands with its grey colonnade exterior. Next to it is the prominent **Catedral Metropolitana** which glows in a contrasting shade of honey yellow. Lacking a second tower, the masterpiece may be unfinished but it still impresses with its grandeur. Its interiors boast a melange of neo-Gothic and baroque features, as well as a stunning bronze crucifix centerpiece. Two blocks northeast of the cathedral lies **Callejón del Diamante**, a narrow alleyway filled to the gills with street vendors hawking cheap jewelry, hats and paraphernalia.

Across the road from the cathedral stands the stunning **Palacio de Gobierno** featuring brown-rimmed arches and overhanging balconies. This is the seat of Veracruz's state government. The street in front of the government building is often the staging ground for student protests and peace marches. On the stairway on the eastern side of the building is a fine mural depicting the history of justice.



XALAPA'S VERDANT SPACES

Parque Los Tecajetes

Enter a world of mossy temperate forests and flowing canals in this luscious city park.

Parque Paseo de los Lagos

A serene riverside park with running paths and paddleboat rides.

Parque Ecological Macuiltépeti

A hilltop cloud forest with bird-viewing opportunities and the best sunset views in town.

Parks, Lakes & Lookouts

FOREST BATHING IN THE CITY

Built essentially on a sea of temperate forest, Xalapa is incredibly lush and chock full of verdant green spaces. Therein lies the appeal of this lively university city – there is no shortage of greenery.

Just south of Parque Juárez sprawls the serendipitous **Parque Paseo de los Lagos**, with over 3km of delightful walking paths running alongside the tranquil lake. At its northern end is the **Centro Cultural los Lagos**, which hosts cultural events and drop-in yoga classes. To the east of the lake, **Parque Los Berros** is a tree-lined park popular with families for the horse-drawn carriages, playgrounds and memorial statues.

Just 1.5km northwest of the center, **Parque Los Tecajetes** is a lush, green space where moss-covered aqueducts, flowing fountains, and serpentine canals splay out from a freshwater spring. Towering cedar trees and moss gardens provide shade for young students who are often seen lounging around the park. At the **Jardín Botánico Clavijero**, on the southwest edge of the city, you can stroll among tall eucalyptus trees and weave past cypresses draped with Spanish mosses. Sprawling across 38 hectares of an old coffee plantation, the botanical garden is located in a hillside cloud forest perched at an altitude of 1400m above sea level.

For the perfect sunset ramble, watch the city glow in gold at **Parque Ecológico Macuiltépetl**, a cloud forest that sits atop an extinct volcano 5km north of the center. Spiraling to the top is a series of paths frequented by the city's robust fraternity of joggers. The 40-hectare park is also a great spot for birdwatching, with unique species like the blue mockingbird often spotted in its woods.

Giant Olmec Stone Heads

COLOSSAL OLMEC STONE HEADS

Rightfully the main reason that draws travelers to Xalapa, the **Museo de Antropología** has the second-finest archaeological collection in Mexico (after Mexico City's gargantuan National Anthropology Museum). Set 4km northwest of the center, this world-class museum stands in a series of interconnecting galleries that flow like a gradual slope down the side of a hill, with manicured gardens and outdoor display areas spread out along the way.

The museum's archaeological treasures are just as impressive as its well-engineered layout. Three main pre-Hispanic civilizations that lived along the Gulf coast are represented here: the Ol-

THE OLMEC CIVILIZATION

Considered 'the mother culture' of civilizations in Mesoamerica, the Olmecs invented many of the region's cultural hallmarks, including the massive stone heads and the legendary ball game. Their civilization flourished from around 1200 to 900 BCE in San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, southern Veracruz, and from 800 to 400 BCE in La Venta, Tabasco. Seventeen Olmec stone heads have been found mostly in the Olmec heartland within the states of Veracruz and Tabasco, an area covering roughly 275km east to west.



CULTURAL VENUES IN XALAPA

Tierra Luna

A sanctuary for artsy types, this bohemian venue has a changing roster of poetry readings, theater shows and music gigs.

Centro Recreativo Xalapeño

This colonial-style cultural center holds jam sessions, dance classes, art expos and art-house movie screenings.

Teatro del Estado

The impressive state theater hosts the Orquesta Sinfónica de Xalapa and the Ballet Folklórico of the Universidad Veracruzana.



BEST CAFES IN XALAPA

Flor Catorce

A huge hit with local college students, this charming joint brims with secret little corners and a lush backyard. \$

Cafetal-pan

An outpost from the Coatepec *finca* (farm), this cafe is an unpretentious place that prioritizes the quality of its coffee. \$

Bolena

Xalapa's newest cafe is ridiculously stylish, serving gourmet coffee and ancestral concoctions in an upscale arthouse setting. \$\$

Cafercial

Enjoy the stripped-back simplicity of this third-wave coffee bar serving brews with tasting notes. \$\$



JORGE DUARTE ESTEVAO/GETTY IMAGES ©

Church, Xalapa

mecs, the Totonacs and the Huastecs. The exhibits are displayed in chronological order, starting with the larger-than-life Olmec stone heads that will blow your socks off. Out of the 17 Olmec sculptures found in Mexico, seven of them are on display here.

Everything is superbly displayed, though the explanatory text is in Spanish only. There are laminated English information sheets attached to the wall in certain rooms. You're better off hiring audio guides or joining an English tour to make better sense of the displays. To get here, hop on a 'Camacho-Tesorería' bus from Enríquez near Parque Juárez. A taxi costs M\$50.

Time Travel at a Hacienda

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Twelve kilometers southeast of Xalapa just off the Veracruz highway is **Museo Ex-Hacienda El Lencero**. Almost as old as New Spain itself, this former *posada* (inn) was initiated in 1525 by Juan Lencero, a soldier loyal to Hernán Cortés, and served as a resting place for travelers toiling between a newly Europeanized Mexico City and the coast. Years later, the inn expanded to include a cattle farm, a pottery barn, as well as a sugar cane plantation.

Now a museum, it incorporates a superbly restored house furnished with antiques and memorabilia from the 16th century. It also has a colonial chapel, a parish named Casa de las Monjas, a weapons room, and some delightful gardens with a small lake and a 500-year-old fig tree. Catch a 'Miradores' bus from Xalapa's Plaza Cristal shopping center; the museum is a 10-minute walk from the highway.



GETTING AROUND

Xalapa is a transportation hub with excellent connections throughout the state and beyond, but it is notorious for its traffic-choked streets. Driving is not recommended; just navigating the sprawling suburbs to the hilly center

can be difficult. For buses from CAXA bus terminal, catch any bus marked 'Centro' from the bus stop downhill on the main Avenida 20 de Noviembre. Taxi trips within the center usually cost around M\$50 to M\$150.

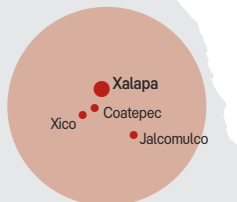


Beyond Xalapa

Xalapa's surrounds offer coffee *fincas* (farms) and provincial towns, serving up a dose of rural charm.

Mystic cloud forests, raging rivers and dramatic waterfalls cradle the mountains around Xalapa. This is coffee country: the elevation and the wet, temperate weather are perfect conditions to cultivate gourmet beans. Since the early 18th century, coffee has been grown here, bringing wealth to the area and establishing settlements with cobbled squares and lavish colonial buildings.

Just a few kilometers south of Xalapa, a plethora of charismatic mountain towns strung along Hwy 7 makes for excellent urban escapes. Coatepec is a popular starting point for coffee-farm excursions and waterfall hikes. Ten kilometers further south is Xico, quieter and hillier than Coatepec and a magnet for lovers of the *mole* (a rich savory-sweet traditional sauce). Outdoorsy types can get a dose of adventure on a rafting adventure along the rapids of Río Antigua in Jalcomulco.



TOP TIP

Traveling out of Xalapa is fairly straightforward. Buses to Coatepec and Xico regularly leave from Mercado de los Sauces, 1km west of the center. Catching a taxi usually costs no more than M\$200 each way. Regular bus services to Jalcomulco depart from the Azteca bus terminal in Xalapa.

AUREA ANGELES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Coatepec (p198)



BEST CAFES IN COATEPEC

La Vereda

Overlooking the main square, this lively coffeehouse serves locally grown coffee that pairs perfectly with its decadent cakes. **\$\$**

El Café de Avelino

Owner Avelino Hernández, known as the Poeta del Café (Coffee Poet), brews the best coffee in Coatepec. **\$**

Santa Cruz

Restaurante Café
A highly original cafe serving organic coffee and creative dishes in a terracotta farmhouse setting. **\$\$**

M Cafe

Drop in for a cup of joe at the stylish cafe in Museo de Cafe Botica, even if you've got no time for the tour. **\$\$**



WIRESTOCK CREATORS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cascada de la Monja

Mexico's Coffee Capital

TASTING COFFEE AT ITS SOURCE

Cradled in the foothills of the Sierra Madre, the mountain town of **Coatepec** – a mere 15km south of Xalapa – boldly lays claim to the title of ‘Mexico’s coffee capital.’ The minute you step off the bus and inhale, it becomes instantly clear that they’re not joking. Coffee has been grown in the nearby cloud forests since the town was founded in 1701. And it’s not just any coffee – premium-quality Arabica beans are grown here at an altitude of 900m to 1200m above sea level, the optimum conditions for coffee cultivation.

To learn about the different techniques of coffee roasting and brewing, head straight to the **Museo de Cafe Botica** along Constitución. Converted from a 200-year-old *botica* (apothecary), this chic boutique coffee house has a small museum that you can visit on a guided tour. The incredibly knowledgeable barista takes you through the entire process of coffee production and will let you taste Coatepec’s best.

Slightly further out of town, **El Cafetal Apan** (elcafetalapan.com) is an old-school coffee producer with its very own *fincas* just 4km south. Tour the hacienda, browse antique coffee-making tools, then hop on a truck to the coffee farm and



WHERE TO STAY IN COATEPEC

Casa Aroma de Café

This colonial-style hotel has a courtyard as well as spacious rooms furnished with chandeliers and leather recliners. **\$\$**

Posada Coatepec

Coatepec’s resplendent colonial-era hotel has an atmospheric central courtyard overflowing with plants. **\$\$\$**

Hotel Mesón del Alférez Coatepec

A small-scale old townhouse with a secret courtyard and rooms featuring timber furnishings and colonial accents. **\$\$**

hike amid coffee plants before dipping in dreamy waterfalls. *Finca* tours must be booked at least 48 hours in advance through the website.

Coffee production may be the *raison d'être* for Coatepec, but there are a couple of other interesting sights out of town, especially for outdoorsy types. Work off the caffeine by taking the cobbled steps north up Independencia to **Cerro de las Culebras** (Snake Hill). At the top is a lookout tower with a white statue of Christ and glorious mountain views. After the hike, take a refreshing dip in the **Cascada Bola de Oro**, 5km north of town. The waterfalls are located within a coffee estate, which also has a natural swimming pool and various hiking trails.

Bucolic Xico

LAID-BACK COUNTRY LIVING

Emerging from the shadow of Coatepec, **Xico** has an unhurried atmosphere in the air. Compared to neighboring Coatepec (8km north), Xico is much quieter, hillier and more laid-back. The town draws in weekenders with its specialty *mole* and artisanal handicrafts, rather than coffee. Every July, even more people flock here for its patron saint's day, **Fiesta de Santa Magdalena**, which is celebrated with a running of the bulls event akin to the one in Pamplona, Spain.

In 2011 Xico joined the ranks of Mexico's government-sanctioned *pueblos mágicos*. Its cobblestoned main street, Avenida Miguel Hidalgo, leads to the yellow-and-white **Parroquia de Santa María Magdalena** perched on the top of the hill. Right by the parish is the city's main square, **Parque Xico**, where you'll find a smattering of food kiosks and candy stalls. Tucked at the back of the church is the esoteric **Museo del Vestido**, which displays a revolving collection of festival dresses that have been worn for Santa Magdalena since 1910.

Around the corner on Aldama and Juárez is the **Casa-Museo Totomoxtle**, a tiny museum highlighting the town's artisanal figures made from *hojas de maíz* (maize leaves). The dolls are slightly creepy, but the old colonial home it's located in is worth a look.

A pleasant 3km walk down the Coatepec-Xico road leads to two dreamy waterfalls: the 80m **Cascada de Texolo** and the **Cascada de la Monja**. The 1984 movie *Romancing the Stone* was actually filmed at the Cascada de la Monja. Both are inviting spots to cool off – but the water can be chilly (even when the sun's out) and currents are strong.



WHERE TO EAT IN XICO

Restaurant Mesón Xiqueño

Xico's best-known restaurant is a great place to sample the town's famous *mole xiqueño*. \$\$

Los Portales Texolo

Dine alfresco while tucking into delicious *xiqueño* specialties. \$\$

La Casona de Don Gonzalo

This atmospheric place serves the usual range of meats doused in local *mole*. \$\$

El Campanario de Xico

This charmer of a restaurant, tucked within the emblematic red bell tower, dishes out traditional classics in its multilevel interior. \$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN XICO

Posada los Naranjos

Right in the center of town, this no-frills place has rooms with high ceilings (some are windowless). \$

Hotel Coyopolan

It's all about bright colors and lively Mexican design at this budget hotel beside the river, south of the town center. \$\$

Las Magdalenas

Xico's most impressive boutique hotel, dripping in contemporary style amid an old-world setting. \$\$\$

TLAPACOYAN RIVER RAFTING

Another fantastic rafting spot is located in Tlapacoyan, 165km north of Jalcomulco, at the mouth of the Río Filobobos (known as Río Bobo). **Aventurec** (aventurec.com) runs a variety of whitewater rafting and kayaking trips. Besides rafting, you can also choose to go zip-lining or hiking, or explore the two archaeological sites nearby, Caujilote and Vega de la Peña, both very much off the beaten track.



DOUGLAS SPIES/SHUTTERSTOCK © BOTTOM RIGHT: ABERUGO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Rafting, Río Antigua

Jalcomulco Rapids

RAFTING ADVENTURES

Sitting in a lush valley, 30km southeast of Xalapa, tiny Jalcomulco hugs Río Antigua and is encircled by jungle-covered hills. The area is rich with caves and luscious swimming spots, but it's most famous for its rapids – some of Mexico's best – which are suitable for all levels of white-water enthusiasts.

Jalco Expediciones (jalcoexpediciones.com.mx) offers rafting packages that typically include other adventure activities, such as rappelling, horseback riding, mountain biking, canyoning, zip-lining, and sweating it out in a temascal (traditional bathhouse). Book ahead as often there are minimum numbers needed for each activity. Based in jungly grounds 4km north of town, **México Verde** (mexicoverde.com) is a more experienced outfitter offering similar packages, including glamping options in luxury safari tents. It also has a restaurant, a pool, a spa and a temascal.

On weekends, Jalcomulco comes to life with numerous adventurers descending here, but the rest of the time it remains a soporific village amid mango plantations and sugarcane fields.



GETTING AROUND

The area around Xalapa is well-connected by frequent buses and *colectivos*. You can easily go on hikes independently and book coffee tours at the museums (no advanced

reservations needed), but any outdoor activity at Jalcomulco should be reserved with a tour operator in advance as minimum numbers are required.

ORIZABA

Mexico City

Orizaba

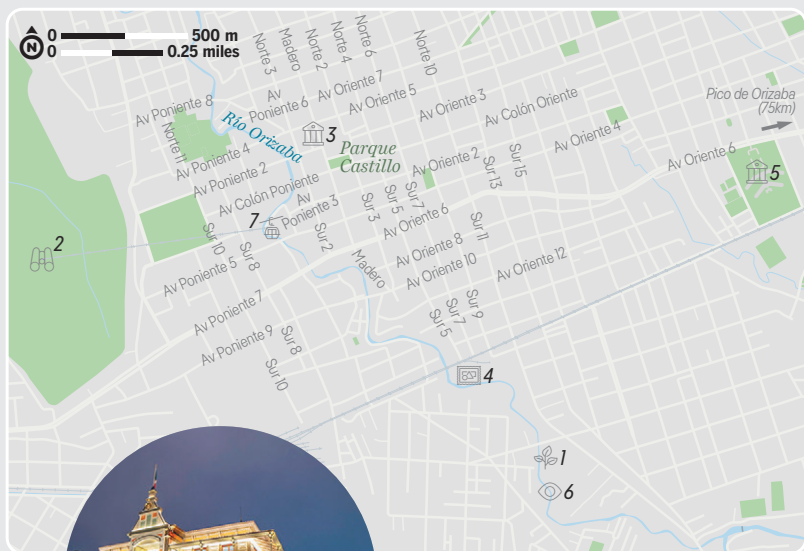
Orizaba is likely to work its captivating magic on you quickly and irreversibly. Lurking in the shadow of the snowcapped Pico de Orizaba – Mexico’s highest peak – and surrounded by a succession of mountains, the town has an air of elegance and a sense of vintage beauty oozing from its beautifully laid-out downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

Orizaba trumps other Veracruz cities such as Córdoba and Xalapa with its unique European flair. During the Porfirian era (the last two decades of the 1800s), Orizaba was considered the richest and most industrial city in Veracruz state. An influx of people from Italy, France, Germany and Sweden brought a lot of European influence to the city, which is still evident today.

Dominating the main square, Parque Castillo, is the city’s most striking sight: Gustave Eiffel’s eclectic Palacio de Hierro, brought all the way from Belgium. Its art nouveau facade, wrought-iron details, fluted water fountains and manicured grounds all make the historic core look like a film set from old France.

TOP TIP

Orizaba is located 132km southwest of Veracruz City and 144km south of Xalapa. The city’s modern ADO station stands along the city’s main thoroughfare, Hwy 150 (Av Oriente 6), at just 350m southeast of the historic center. Most hotels are located along the same road, within easy walking distance from most sites.



Palacio de Hierro

SIGHTS

- 1 Biori Jardín Botánico
- 2 Cerro del Borrego
- 3 Palacio de Hierro
- 4 Paseo del Arte

- 5 Poliforum Mier y Pesado

- 6 Rio Orizaba

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 7 Teleférico de Orizaba



WHERE TO EAT IN ORIZABA

Super Tortas Orizabeñas

A locals' favorite, this joint has simple yet fresh *tortas* (sandwiches). \$

Gran Café de Orizaba

Sip a cup of joe at this old-school cafe inside the Iron Palace. \$

El Artista Bistro

An atmospheric, intimate bistro with a sophisticated menu and elegant dishes. \$\$

Romantxu Cocina & Bar

Located inside the Poliforum, this popular spot specializes in Mediterranean flavors and Mexican classics. \$\$

Marron Cocina

The most well-known restaurant in Orizaba has a great lineup of grilled meat, pasta and pizzas. \$\$

A Slice of Europe

A FRENCH-DESIGNED CENTERPIECE IN THE CITY

An iconic landmark in its own right, the **Palacio de Hierro** (Iron Palace) sure steals the show with its eye-catching steel structure, olive iron walls, and multilayered steel roof. The old Palacio Municipal was designed by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, whom the Eiffel Tower was named after. Orizaba's mayor bought the building in 1892 in a bid to impress the rest of Mexico with a European-style city hall. The 600-ton building was shipped from Belgium, piece by piece, and then assembled in Orizaba.

For 97 years, the Palacio de Hierro functioned as the town hall, up until 1991 when the government moved its office to the Palacio de Orizaba. The Iron Palace has since been converted into a tourist office and a number of small museums. Get your *boleto* (ticket) at the office; the M\$50 ticket allows entry to 14 museums in the city.

The **Museo de las Raíces de Orizaba** showcases a collection of archaeological artifacts, and the **Museo de Geográfico de Orizaba** has interesting info on the geography of the area. Those with kids will enjoy the **Museo Interactivo**, with a small planetarium and several engaging science experiments. Grown-ups can pop into the **Museo de la Cerveza** to learn about Orizaba's biggest brewery and sample a free glass of beer. After roaming through the exhibits, sit back and enjoy coffee brewed in old-school roasters on the verandah of the Gran Café de Orizaba.

Next to the Iron Palace is the departure point of the **Tren Chipi Chipi** (M\$60), a tourist train that brings visitors around the historical sites of the city in an hour. The train is pet-friendly and has an access ramp for wheelchair-bound travelers.

Hilltop Thrills & Views

CATCH THE CABLE CAR

Of all the hills surrounding Orizaba, Cerro del Borrego is the most accessible and makes for an easy excursion from the center. Opened in 2014, the **Teleférico de Orizaba** (cable car) brings you from the riverside base across the Palacio de Orizaba to the top of the Cerro del Borrego (1240m). In just five minutes, it travels nearly 1km and climbs around 320m in height. If altitude makes you nervous, try not to look down!

The journey itself is an experience, but wait till you reach the top. A short loop trail encircles the eco-park, leading to various viewpoints, plus there's a zip-line (M\$100 per ride), the ruins of a historic fort and a small military museum. The



WHERE TO STAY IN ORIZABA

Estacion Alameda

Offering incredible value for money, this bargain hotel has spacious rooms and a big central courtyard. \$

Gran Hotel de France

This newly renovated boutique hotel has slick, modern rooms and a swanky rooftop pool and terrace. \$\$

Casona 142 Hotel Boutique

The fanciest place in Orizaba, this historic colonial building has tastefully designed and contemporary suites. \$\$\$



Teleférico de Orizaba

fort was in fact a battleground for the Mexican and French armies in 1862. The French army had surprised the Mexican troops at dawn and defeated them, taking over Borrego hill. Occasionally, there are reenactments of the battle; check with the tourist office for dates and times.

Continue on the trail to find a lookout tower that you can climb for unobstructed views of the mountains. When the clouds part, the snowcapped Pico de Orizaba makes a majestic appearance.

Get Lost in the Poliforum

ORIZABA'S MOST IMPRESSIVE CULTURAL SPACE

Pulling into Orizaba from Xalapa or Veracruz, you will most likely pass the massive **Poliforum Mier y Pesado** along the main artery of the city (Hwy 150). Dating from 1944, the palatial-style building is set in manicured grounds about 2km east of central Orizaba. What was once an asylum was named a 'national artistic monument' by the Mexican government in February 2014.

It now houses several excellent museums, the best being the **Museo de Traje**, devoted to traditional costumes from around Mexico. The **Museo de Ayer y Hoy** walks you through the history of Orizaba, with cool paintings and black-and-white photos of the city from the past. Kids will be charmed by the **Museo de Francisco Gabilondo Soler** and its cartoon-character-filled displays that play homage to the children's song composer who was born in Orizaba. The complex also houses several popular cafes and restaurants.

CAÑÓN DEL RÍO BLANCO

A lesser-known but more pristine natural area in Orizaba is the Parque Nacional Cañón del Río Blanco, just 5km east of the center. Declared a national park in 1938, this patchwork of greenery can be accessed via a 3.7km-long loop trail. The three bodies of water in the national park – the Tuxpango dam, Laguna Los Sifones, and Laguna Puerto del Aire wetlands – are home to hundreds of bird species including the blue-winged teal, brown heron and red-eyed ibis.



HIKES AROUND ORIZABA

Laguna del Chirimoyo

This leisurely 900m walk takes you on a loop around the small lake 4.5km north of the city center.

500 escalones

An uninterrupted flight of 500 steps leads up to a flag pole and monument, popular with local athletes.

Cerro de Escamela

A 5.1km round-trip hike up the Escamela hill from Ignacio de la Llave.

KID-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES IN ORIZABA

Those traveling with kids will find Orizaba an incredibly family-friendly destination, with a melange of educational, interactive entertainment centers. Here's our pick on the best spots for families to visit in Orizaba.

Planetario Orizaba

A high-tech planetarium equipped with a VR room and astronomical observatory.

Ojo de Agua This natural lagoon has been transformed into a lively water park.

Aeroparque Aviation nerds will go crazy at this museum and theme park housed inside a Boeing 727.

Parque Alameda

The city's biggest and liveliest park with a huge jungle of bouncy castles, air-filled slides and playgrounds.

Expo Parque de los Dinosaurios A small park backed by mountains and littered with large dinosaur figures.



NAILQTL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Pico de Orizaba

Mexico's Highest Summit

A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME ADVENTURE

At a cloud-scraping and breathless 5636m above sea level, snowcapped **Pico de Orizaba** is Mexico's tallest mountain. Pico de Orizaba is called Citlaltépetl (Star Mountain) in the Náhuatl language for good reason: from its summit, you can take in views of three mountains to the west – Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl and La Malinche – and the Gulf of Mexico to the east.

For a view of Pico de Orizaba, you'll need to take the cable car up to Cerro del Borrego and keep your fingers crossed for clear weather. Several guide companies offer a variety of day-trip packages that can get you closer to the mountain, including, weather permitting, up to 4520m near Fausto González Gomar hostel, the highest point that can be reached by car.

Reaching the summit is a serious undertaking suitable only for experienced, well-equipped mountain climbers prepared for extreme cold and possible altitude sickness. Traversing ice fields in the last section of the ascent is particularly arduous. It's necessary to acclimatize over several days before you attempt the climb. Besides Orizaba, other common starting



OTHER ATTRACTIONS IN ORIZABA

Museo de Arte del Estado

Holds Mexico's second-most-important permanent Diego Rivera collection, with 33 of his original works.

Catedral de San Miguel Arcángel

The yellow and ochre Catedral de Orizaba stands right next to the Palacio del Hierro.

Teatro Ignacio de la Llave

This 1875 theater is considered one of the best in the state of Veracruz due to its great acoustic quality.

points for the expedition include the old colonial town of Coscomatepec (37km north of Orizaba) and the small town of Tlachichuca in Puebla.

The recommended climbing season is October to March, with the most popular time being December and January. Book your expedition well in advance and allow four to seven days to acclimatize, summit and return. Do not attempt to rush up this mountain because altitude sickness at these heights can be deadly.

City of Pleasing Waters

GLORIOUS RIVER WALKS

Orizaba got its name from the Nahuatl word *Āhuilizāpan*, meaning ‘place of pleasing waters.’ Lying at an altitude of 1200m, Orizaba stands at the confluence of several rivers – one of which, **Río Orizaba**, flows through the western edge of the historic center. Unusually for a Mexican city, Orizaba has a pleasant river walk that runs alongside the gushing stream, flanked by mural art and even an unexpected collection of wild and domesticated animals.

Thirteen bridges span across the river as it carves its way through the city. The notable ones include the suspension bridge and the arched **Puente La Borda** that dates from 1776. Start your walk from the cable-car base station, where a rickety bridge rattles and sways over the gushing waters. If you head downstream of the raging river, the 5km-long stone-paved pathway, **Paseo del Arte** (Art Walk), begins within a few meters. From this point, both sides of the river bank are splashed with mural art and eclectic sculptures produced by local artists.

At the end of the Art Walk, you’ll find the **Biori Jardín Botánico**, the biggest botanical garden in the state of Veracruz. The gardens showcase the most iconic flora from five different continents, including Oceania orchids displayed in unique greenhouses, multicolored tulips planted around a Dutch mill and bamboo plants standing alongside Asian temples. The garden hosts workshops and a yoga program for visitors on weekends.

Heading upstream of the river will bring you along the **Paseo del Río** (River Walk), which doubles as the **Reserva Animal Citlaltépetl**. A handful of cages is spread out along the river, housing monkeys, parrots, deer, hippos and even a bear. All in all, the reserve has 46 species of 800 animals that are all registered and protected by SEMARNAT (secretary of natural environment and resource) in Mexico.

CLIMBING GUIDES

It’s advisable to hire a guide, even if you’re an experienced trekker. **Servimont** (servimont.com.mx), based in Tlachichuca, is a long-established adventure-tour operator that runs guided climbs to the summit of Pico de Orizaba with an English-speaking guide. If you’re keen to see the mountain up close (but not summit it), **Turismo Aventura** (turismoaventuraorizaba.com) offers a variety of day-trip packages that can get you, weather permitting, up to 4520m near Fausto González Gomar hostel.



GETTING AROUND

Orizaba is a midsized town and its historical center is relatively easy to navigate on foot. Driving is not advisable as streets are narrow and often steep. The ADO bus terminal is

within walking distance from the main square, Parque Castillo. To get to hiking spots in the surrounding hills, taxis are readily available and affordable (no more than M\$150).

PAPANTLA

Mexico City ✪

Papantla

Northern Veracruz is largely made up of rolling pastureland and wetlands, as the Sierra Madre Oriental makes its descent towards the Gulf coast. The biggest attraction here is El Tajín, which paints a bold picture of the Classic Veracruz civilization and yet remains refreshingly untouristy compared to some of Mexico's renowned archaeological sites.

The gateway town of Papantla de Olarte (more commonly known as Papantla) is now emerging as a destination on its own, flaunting its rich indigenous heritage and central location in the world's best vanilla-growing region. The *pueblo mágico* has a history, look and feel that stares firmly back in time to a pre-Hispanic, or more precisely, Totonac period of grandeur.

Perhaps Papantla's most intriguing Totonac tradition is the 'flying' *voladores* ceremonial dance. For centuries, Totonac *voladores* (fliers) have been flinging themselves off wooden poles in an elaborate ceremony accompanied by drum and flute music.

TOP TIP

Papantla is 220km north of Veracruz City and 250km northeast of Xalapa. ADO runs regular services from both major cities to the bus station in Papantla (Juárez and Venustiano Carranza), a short, steep walk from the center. Taxis from the bus station to the center cost around M\$30. The nearest airports are in Veracruz City and Tampico (240km) in the state of Tamaulipas.



INSPIRED BY MAPS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Papantla



TOTONAC'S PAPANTLA CEREMONY

According to a Totonac legend, the Gods told men: 'Dance, we will watch.' To appease the gods, the Totonacs created the bizarre yet mystical *voladores* tradition, flinging themselves off 30m-high wooden poles (without any safety equipment) and descending gracefully around it in a trance-like rotation. The main man (musician) dances at the top of the pole, playing the *chirimía* drum that has a flute attached to it; the drum represents the voice of God while the flute the song of birds. The ritual is the highlight of Papantla's Corpus Christi celebrations in May. These days, you can see the dance performed at El Tajín (daily) and at Papantla's cathedral (Friday to Sundays).

Rove Around Papantla Center

TOTONAC MURALS AND MONUMENTS

There always seems to be something going on in Papantla's *zócalo*, officially known as **Parque Israel C Téllez**. Terraced into the hillside, the main square is strewn with ladies arm-in-arm and couples lip-to-lip. It's particularly lively on Friday evenings, when anyone is welcome to watch or join in the *danzón* (a tropical dance with Cuban roots).

Facing the square is the prominent 50m-long bas-relief **Mural a la Cultura Totonaca** (behind the colorful Papantla letters). The artfully carved mural depicts Totonac and Veracruz history – a serpent weaves along the mural, bizarrely linking a pre-Hispanic stone carver, El Tajín's Pirámide de los Nichos and an oil rig. A proud Papantla artist Teodoro Cano designed this in 1979; his other work – along with several Totonac artifacts – are on display at the small but satisfying **Museo de la Ciudad Teodoro Cano**.

Right above the mural stands the mighty **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** overlooking the *zócalo* from its high platform. Construction began in 1570, though many features were added over the subsequent centuries, including the bell tower that was completed in 1875. Outside of the



WHERE TO STAY IN PAPANTLA

Hotel Vista Inn

With rooms facing the square, this fuss-free hotel has clean, affordable rooms promising glorious views. \$

OYO Hotel Totonacapan

This chain hotel is a great deal for those looking for comfort on a budget. \$

Hotel Tajín

Just off the *zócalo*, this hotel may be worn and dated, but it has an Italianate pool and nice views from its rooftop terrace. \$



THE MYSTERIOUS TONAC

Most people know of the Aztecs and the Maya and might have heard of the Olmec civilizations, but the Totonacs have remained an enigma. No one knows where the name 'Totonac' came from. Some believe it came from *Nahuatl*, meaning 'man from the hot earth'; others think it means 'three hearts' in one of the Totonac dialects. The Totonac family of languages is not related to any other language on earth, making it difficult to connect the Totonac people to any other people in Mesoamerica. One thing is for sure, the Totonacs were the first indigenous people in Mexico to have met the Spaniards. Today, there are around 300,000 Totonac people living mostly in the states of Veracruz and Puebla.

cathedral stands a 30m-high pole where the Totonac *vola-dores* do their ritual dance. Mesmerizing performances usually take place every two hours between 9am and 5.30pm from Friday to Sunday (daily in high season – January, February and holidays).

At the top of the hill above the *zócalo*, Papantla's **Monumento al Volador** towers over the city. The 1988 statue by Teodoro Cano portrays a musician playing his flute and preparing for the fliers to launch. The monument is a short but steep walk uphill from Calle Centenario in front of the cathedral.

El Tajín Ruins

UNEARTH THE LITTLE-KNOWN ANCIENT TONAC CITY

The ancient city of **El Tajín** is one of the best preserved and most important pre-Hispanic cities in Mesoamerica. Its pyramids and temples burst off a plain surrounded by low, lush hills 10km west of Papantla. Covering an area of roughly 10 sq km, the wonderfully evocative ancient city is an impressive reminder of the Classic Veracruz civilization. In 1992, the pre-Hispanic site was inscribed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

Originally, El Tajín (Totonac for 'thunder', 'lightning' or 'hurricane') was thought to have been settled between 100 BCE and 1200 CE, but the latest research shows it reached its peak between 800 and 900 CE. The site was abandoned around 1200 CE, possibly after a fire and attacks by Chichimec. Eventually, it was engulfed by the jungle and lay unknown until it was 'discovered' by an officious Spaniard in 1785.

El Tajín's most emblematic structure, the perfectly proportioned 18m-tall **Pirámide de los Nichos** (Pyramid of the Niches), is what makes El Tajín so special. The six lower levels of the pyramid contain rows of small square niches, that are believed to symbolize day and night, and life and death, in a universe of dualities. Archaeologists believe that there were originally 365 niches, hinting that the building may have been used as a calendar. In its heyday, it was painted red with black niches.

Seventeen ball courts have been excavated at El Tajín. On the northern side of the Pirámide de los Nichos, you'll find the **Juego de Pelota de las Pinturas** (Ball Court of Paintings), so named for the two immaculately preserved red-and-blue geometric friezes on its north-facing side.

El Tajín Chico was the government square of the ancient city, and was home to the ruling class. Many of the buildings here have geometric stone mosaic patterns. **Edificio I** was probably once a palace, and still has beautiful carvings. One



WHERE TO EAT IN PAPANTLA

Mercado Miguel Hidalgo

The *zócalo*-facing market is packed with Totonac ladies hawking home-cooked *chiles rellenos* (stuffed peppers). \$

Plaza Pardo

The delightful balcony is the best spot in Papantla to absorb the atmosphere and spoil yourself with inventive foods. \$\$

Ágora Alta Cocina

This high-end restaurant delivers nicely executed fusion dishes and a sky-high panorama. \$\$\$



Pirámide de los Nichos

of the site's most important structures is the unreconstructed **Plaza de las Columnas** (Square of the Columns), northwest of the square. Some of the reassembled carved columns are displayed in the museum.

Of all the ball courts at El Tajín, the most famous is the **Juego de Pelota Sur** (Southern Ball Court). Dating from around 1150, this ball court has six relief carvings on its walls, depicting the brutal human sacrifices made during the ball games.

The panel on the northeast corner is the clearest: in the center, three players perform a post-game sacrifice with one player ready to plunge a knife into the chest of another, whose arms are held by the third player. Death gods and a figure preside over the ritual.

EL TAJÍN TOP TIPS

The **voladores ritual** is performed several times per day outside El Tajín's main entrance. Donations are expected but not obligated (M\$50 will suffice).

To see everything, you'll need to walk a few kilometers over a couple of hours. It's not strenuous or hilly, but the site is not wheelchair-friendly.

There's little shade and it can get blazingly hot, so aim to arrive early or late, when temperatures are milder.

Most pyramids and temples are labeled in English and Spanish, but hiring a guide can make a world of difference. English-speaking guides are available for hire at the visitor center.

The on-site museum at the main entrance has an excellent model of the site and some impressive relics.



GETTING AROUND

Papantla is a small town and you can easily walk everywhere. To get to the ruins, catch the bus labeled 'Pirámides Tajín' from Calle 16 de Septiembre. Taxis cost around M\$100 each

way. There are usually taxis waiting outside the ruins; otherwise negotiate with your driver a return fee that includes waiting.



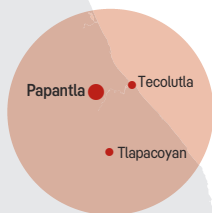
Beyond Papantla

The wild coast off Papantla is strewn with seaside towns, raging rapids and waterfalls.

Just south of Papantla, the **Costa Esmeralda** (Emerald Coast) stretches roughly 25km between Tecolutla and Nautla, drawing in hordes of Mexican holidaymakers every summer despite the unappealing strands. Hwy 180 runs along the coast, stringing together a handful of villages.

The nearest beach town to Papantla is Tecolutla. Its main draw is **Vida Milenaria** (vidamilenaria.mx), a turtle conservation center that has been protecting and releasing turtles for over 35 years. You can watch baby-turtle releases most mornings.

South of Nautla, turn inland on Hwy 129 to reach **Tlapacoyan**, where the turbulent Río Filobobos offers thrilling whitewater rafting and the Cascada de Encanto provides a sublime swimming spot post-rafting. Aventurec (aventurec.com) offers packages that includes food, accommodations, and zip-lining or hiking.



TOP TIP

To get to the coast, catch an ADO bus from the terminal to Tecolutla before catching a nondirect bus on Hwy 180 to any seaside town along Costa Esmeralda.



Newborn turtles, Costa Esmeralda

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA LOS TUXTLAS

Mexico City ✪

Reserva de
la Biosfera
Los Tuxtlas

THE GUIDE

VERACRUZ

With a meld of languorous wetlands, volcano-dappled rain-forest and breathtaking lakes, the Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas is a wild wonder for those who love the offbeat.

Formed in 2006 under Unesco protection, Los Tuxtlas is, in fact, a conglomeration of various nature reserves around Catemaco. The wilder, volcanic portion of the reserve is accessed via San Andrés Tuxtla, while the bird-watching hot spot of Laguna Catemaco can be reached by the eponymous town. At the foothills of Volcán San Martín (1748m), Ruíz Cortines is a tiny community and starting point for hikes to caves and guided ascents of the volcano. The Olmec civilization flourished in this area over 2000 years ago – several Olmec stone heads have been discovered at the archaeological site Tres Zapotes.

TOP TIP

San Andrés is the transportation hub for Los Tuxtlas, with good bus connections in various directions. Frequent ADO and AU buses run from Veracruz City and Xalapa to San Andrés and arrive at their respective stations on Juárez just off the highway, about a 10-minute walk to the center. The same bus companies run regular services to Catemaco's lakeside bus terminal.



WITOLD SKRZYPCZAK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Los Tuxtlas

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA LOS TUXTLAS



WHERE TO EAT IN SAN ANDRÉS

Restaurant Winni's

You're hard pressed to find a table at lunch hour as it's a hot favorite among locals. \$

El Merendero

Located along Hwy 180, this simple diner serves succulent steaks and other Veracruz classics. \$

La Estación Oaxaqueña

A colorful, exciting place serving Oaxacan dishes at great prices. \$\$

Start in San Andrés Tuxtla

CASCADES, VOLCANOES AND CIGARS

The main gateway to Los Tuxtlas is San Andrés, the largest town in the region. The busy and built-up modern town is best used for link-ups to more attractive sights in its periphery, such as the **Volcán San Martín**. That said, San Andrés' town center is well laid out and organized, with a conspicuous orange-and-yellow-tiled church sitting in the middle of the main square.

Cigar smokers will be thrilled to learn that San Andrés is Mexico's cigar capital, as tobacco grows abundantly in the outlying fields. Head to the famous **Puros Santa Clara** (santaclarapuros.com) a block from the bus station, and watch as *torcedores* (cigarmakers) skillfully hand roll cigars of all shapes and sizes, including the 48.3cm Magnum that holds the Guinness Book of World Record for the largest marketed cigar. You can buy any of the *puros* produced here at bargain prices.

But what truly makes San Andrés worth a visit is the impressive **Salto de Eyipantla**, a 50m-high, 40m-wide waterfall that tumbles down a rocky cliff into the raging Catemaco River. The water volume is at its highest during the rainy season (August to October), when the streams merge to form a



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN ANDRÉS

OYO Finca Tabacalera Tafisa

Part of a nationwide chain, this is the most affordable option in the area. It's 5km northeast of the center. \$

Hotel Michelle

An old-school guesthouse on the western edge of the town center, with a pool and dated but well-priced rooms. \$

Piedra Alta Classic

Modern and newish, the town's nicest hotel is a fabulous deal, offering exceptional breakfasts and cozy rooms. \$\$



Restaurante Colonial

spectacular water curtain. Take the 250 steps to the bottom of the falls (M\$10) and feel the spray on your face, or simply take in panoramic views from the lookout at the top (free). Scenes from Mel Gibson's movie *Apocalypto* were filmed here. The falls are 12km southeast of San Andrés, in the eponymous village, and frequent TLT buses and taxis run from the corner of Cabada and 5 de Mayo in San Andrés.

Adventure seekers can head an hour north of San Andrés Tuxtla to **Ruiz Cortines**, a tiny village with rustic *cabañas* and outdoor activities like horseback riding and hikes to caves. Most travelers base themselves here to hike up Volcán San Martín (1580m), the only active volcano in the state of Veracruz, though it hasn't erupted in centuries. The last eruption (1793) spewed ash more than 320km from the volcano. It's generally safe to hike around the volcano and make an ascent. Take a guide with you, as the ascent up to the volcanic massif is not easy (you'll need to be fit). Selva de los Colibríes (selvadeloscolibríes.com.wordpress.com) organizes guided ascents and three-hour hikes in the cloud forests; you can also stay overnight at its lodge. A taxi from San Andrés to Ruiz Cortines costs M\$150, while a *pirata* costs M\$40 each way.



WHERE TO EAT IN SANTIAGO TUXTLA

Mercado Municipal

The market next to Museo Tuxteco is a senses-assaulting labyrinth of street-food stands. \$

La Tamehua

This local eatery is highly recommended by locals for the best *alambre* (grilled beef with bacon, peppers and cheese) and *queso fundido* (melted cheese) in town. \$

Restaurante Colonial

Uphill from the ADO station, this is the smartest place in town, with a selection of seafood and meat on its menu. \$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN SANTIAGO TUXTLA

OYO Hotel Santiago Plaza

On the main square, this budget chain hotel offers immaculate rooms at a great price. \$

Mesón de Santiago

This well-preserved colonial-style hotel has nicely decorated rooms and a peaceful courtyard. \$

Hotel Mirador Santiago

A secluded hotel set in landscaped gardens on a hillside overlooking the city; you'll need a vehicle. \$\$

THE OLMEC TRIO

Around 160km southeast of Tres Zapotes lies another Olmec city: **San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán**. This site was a major Olmec center from 1200 BCE to 900 BCE, along with La Venta and Tres Zapotes. A number of Olmec stone heads were discovered here, including the biggest one that stands in Santiago Tuxtla's center. Archaeologists believe that the heads were carved out of large boulders transported over 150km from Los Tuxtlas to San Lorenzo, and placed to form a north-south line running across the site. The last discovered colossal head and a collection of sculptures also discovered here are on display in the on-site museum.



Catemaco

Learn Olmec History

IMBIBE ALL THINGS OLMEC

Fifteen kilometers to the west of San Andrés, **Santiago Tuxtla** is far more laid-back and considerably more inviting than its neighbor. The small town has a languid atmosphere, centered on a lovely and leafy main square that's one of the state's finest. Crowned with soaring palm trees, **Parque Olmeca** is overlooked by the white-and-crimson **Iglesia de Sagrado Corazón** and the yellow-and-maroon-rimmed arches of **Palacio Municipal**.

The biggest appeal of the central square is the Olmec stone head that stands in the western half of the plaza. The Olmec were the earliest Mesoamerican civilization, renowned for sculpting giant human heads. On display here is the biggest known Olmec head found, measuring 3.4m in height and weighing a massive 40 tons. What makes it unique from other stone heads is that its eyes are closed. The stone monolith is named 'Cobata Head,' after the estate where it was discovered.

Across the road from Parque Olmec, **Museo Tuxteco** is a must-see for those curious about the Olmec civilization. The museum displays important artifacts including an Olmec stone head, ceramic plates used in human-sacrifice ceremonies on the Isla de Sacrificios, and a Tres Zapotes altar replica.



WHERE TO EAT IN TRES ZAPOTES

Restaurante Doña Chole

A down-to-earth local diner serving *comida típica* (home-style food) at low prices. \$

Taqueria Emanuel

This hole-in-the-wall joint slings decent tacos *al pastor* (spit-cooked marinated pork). \$

Pollería Beraca

This no-frills place hits the spot with perfectly roasted chicken that's crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. \$

Dig up History in Tres Zapotes

THE CRADLE OF THE OLMEC CIVILIZATION

At 21km west of Santiago Tuxtla, Tres Zapotes is one of the most important archaeological sites in Veracruz. The site was an Olmec settlement for over 2000 years, from around 1200 BCE to 1000 CE. It was probably first inhabited while the great Olmec center of La Venta (Tabasco) was still flourishing. After La Venta was destroyed (about 400 BC), the city carried on in what archaeologists call an 'epi-Olmec' phase, during which the Olmec population declined and other civilizations (notably Izapa and Maya) came to the fore.

Even though Tres Zapotes is now just a series of mounds in cornfields, the archaeological museum displays important artifacts dug up from the site. The centerpiece of the museum is a 1.5m-tall giant Olmec stone head, dating from 100 BCE. Another notable piece is Stela A, which depicts three human figures in the mouth of a jaguar. Other artifacts include a sculpture of what may have been a captive with hands tied behind his back.

To get to Tres Zapotes, take a local bus or taxi from the Sítio Puente Real, on the far side of the pedestrian bridge at the foot of Zaragoza. The road to Tres Zapotes goes southwest from Santiago Tuxtla; a 'Zona Arqueológica' sign indicates the way from Hwy 180.

Glide Through the Waters of Catemaco

WILDLIFE WATCHING AND ISLAND HOPPING

The scruffy, sleepy town of Catemaco only sees a trickle of backpackers, but it's an obvious base for exploring Los Tuxtlas. At 11km east of San Andrés, Catemaco sits on the shore of the 16km-long **Laguna Catemaco**, ringed by verdantly cloaked and softly shaped volcanic hills. With a long tradition of witchcraft, a gorgeous lakeside setting, and proximity to some swimming holes and pristine, isolated beaches, Catemaco makes a peaceful and interesting spot to veer off the tourist trail.

Laguna Catemaco – actually a lake and not a lagoon – is best explored on a *lancha* (motorboat). Head to Catemaco's *malecón* (waterfront boulevard) where most boat captains offer one- or two-hour-long boat trips around the lake, making stops at various islets along the way. Early mornings and late afternoons (before 4pm as some islands close at 5pm) are the best time to take to the glassy waters and see the rich birdlife.



WHERE TO EAT IN CATEMACO

La Casita

Locals swear by this no-frills spot for its wide-ranging menu that runs the gamut from cheap tacos to fried fish. \$

La Casa de los Tesoros

Part gallery and part handicraft store, this hippy joint serves massive breakfasts by day and decadent burgers at night. \$\$

La Palapa de Jose

At the eastern end of the *malecón*, the cheery restaurant is our personal favorite for the delectable *tegogolo* (snails). \$\$

Restaurante & Bar La Moyotera

Indulge in impressive seafood towers at this overwater restaurant with its own boardwalk. \$\$\$



BEST HOTELS IN CATEMACO

Hotel Posada Koniapan

Steps from the bus terminal, this budget hotel has well-priced rooms, a large waterfront pool and lots of green spaces. \$

Hotel Las Brisas

A centrally located budget hotel with sparkling clean rooms that range from twins to eight-bed family suites. \$

Hotel La Finca

This dated hotel is Catemaco's most comfortable choice, with lake-view balconies and a pool with slides. \$\$



BEWITCHED

On the first Friday of March every year, Catemaco becomes a staging ground for hundreds of *brujos* (shamans), witches and healers from all over Mexico. They gather here to perform a mass cleansing ceremony on Cerro Mono Blanco, slightly north of the town, to rid themselves of the previous year's negative energies. Hordes of Mexicans also stream into town at this time for a shamanic consultation or *limpia* (cleansing) in a bizarre mix of otherworldly fervor and hedonistic indulgence.

You can visit several islands on the lake; the largest, **Isla Tenaspi**, is an archaeological site where Olmec sculptures have been discovered. **Isla de los Changos** (Monkey Island) shelters red-cheeked monkeys brought in from Thailand by the Universidad Veracruzana in 1974. They have sadly grown morbidly obese from tourists feeding them – please avoid giving any them food. **Isla Agaltepec** is home to endangered (and very loud) howler monkeys.

To the east of Catemaco are a few modest gray-sand beaches along the lakeshore where you can take a dip in cloudy water. Morelet's crocodiles are known to live in the lake, but they have yet to attack a human to date. Also found in the lake are *tegologo* snails that are usually eaten as an aphrodisiac and cooked with chili and tomato. Many street stalls dotting the main square sell *tegologo* in the evenings. The restaurants lining the *malecón* are excellent spots to try the local favorite, *huachinango a la Veracruzana* (red snapper cooked with a tomato-based sauce) and *chipalchole* (shrimp or crab-claw soup).

Anchor at Nanciyaga

SPIRITUAL JUNGLE RETREAT

On the northeast shore of the Laguna Catemaco, the well-run **Reserva Ecológica de Nanciyaga** (nanciyaga.com) preserves a small tract of dense rainforest 8km from town. Pushing an indigenous theme, the eco-reserve has hiking trails that weave through its rainforests, passing replicas of Olmec sculptures, a crocodile pond, a *temascal* (sweat lodge) and an ancient planetarium.

Day visitors are welcome on guided nature walks, but staying overnight will allow you to experience the jungly island in its entirety. A night's lodging in solar-powered rustic cabins includes a mineral mud bath, a massage, a guided walk and free use of kayaks. Rooms are open-air with mosquito nets as windows, and the shared bathrooms are a walk away. It's not for everyone, but it provides an incredible experience in nature.

There's a very pleasant lakeside restaurant serving healthy dishes, including vegan options. To get here, take a taxi or boat from Catemaco's main square.

Where the Lagoon Meets the Sea

MANGROVES, LAGOONS AND SWIM HOLES

From Catemaco, a mostly paved, 92km-long road runs toward the coast, passing through what's dubbed 'the Switzer-



RUSTIC ECO RETREATS NEAR CATEMACO

Cabañas Ixaya

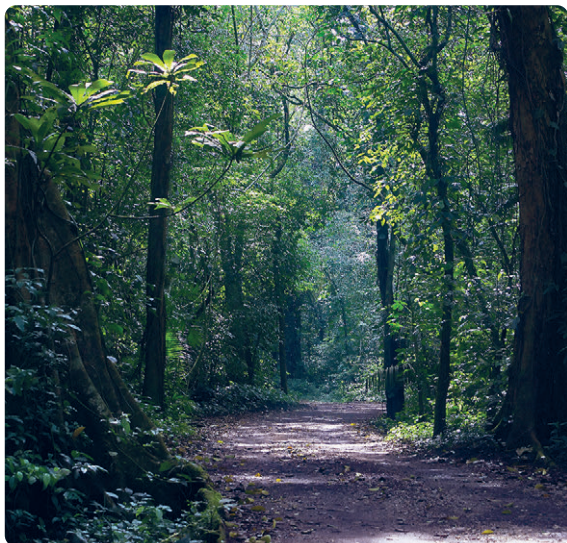
Find peace in these jungle-backed bamboo cabins, midway between Catemaco and Sontecomapan. \$

Ecobiosfera

Swinging hammocks, *palapa* huts, and a small pool at this family-friendly ecolodge in Dos Amates near Catemaco. \$\$

Cabañas Cascadas Encantadas

On the southeastern end of Laguna Catemaco, these secluded cabins offer simple rooms with spectacular views. \$\$



Reserva Ecológica de Nanciyaga

land of Mexico' (presumably because of the green hills and cows) before it reaches the lagoon-side town of **Sontecomapan**. Fifteen kilometers north of Catemaco, Sontecomapan is a launchpad for bird-watching boating trips through the mangroves at the **Reserva Ecológica Manglares del Toztlán** and to anywhere on Laguna de Sontecomapan.

Just a five-minute walk from the boat landing, the idyllic **Pozo de los Enanos** (Well of the Dwarves) is a natural swimming hole that provides a refreshing respite for locals. Don't mind the youths plunging Tarzanlike from ropes into the water. The best place to stay is **Los Amigos Ecoturismo** (losamigos.com.mx), a peaceful retreat close to where the lagoon meets the ocean, with lovely cabañas perched into the verdant hillside.



THE GOLD COAST

Just 16km northeast of Sontecomapan is the **Costa de Oro** (Gold Coast), one of the most beautiful stretches of the Veracruz coast. Any of the *lanchas* in Sontecomapan can take you to the fishing village of **La Barra**, with its pleasant beaches and seafood restaurants. Northwest of La Barra is a wreck of a road that leads to **Playa Escondida** (Hidden Beach), which earned its name from the mostly empty blond strand. On a weekday at low season, you'll mostly likely have it to yourself.



GETTING AROUND

Inexpensive *piratas* will bring you to small communities dotted around Los Tuxtlas and toward the coast. From Catemaco, they leave from a corner five blocks north of the bus station. In San Andres, frequent *colectivo* taxis

leave from the market. Local TLT buses depart from Santiago's bus stops on Morelos. Private taxis are also an inexpensive way to get from one community to another.

YUCATÁN PENINSULA

BEACHES, WILDLIFE AND ANCIENT RUINS

Palm-fringed beaches, awe-inspiring Maya temples and culturally rich cities set the stage for memorable adventures on the Yucatán Peninsula.

Only one Mexican destination can dazzle you with ancient Maya ruins, azure Caribbean waters and photogenic colonial cities in one fell swoop: the Yucatán Peninsula. Comprising three separate states – Yucatán, Quintana Roo and Campeche – Mexico's southeasternmost corner has a staggering array of natural and human-made wonders.

Conjured out of thin air in the 1960s, the city of Cancún, with its powdery beaches and tropical resorts, is but one of many seaside destinations along Mexico's 400km of Caribbean shoreline. You'll also find buzzing cities, sleepy fishing towns and lagoon-fronting villages, not to mention enchanting island getaways like Cozumel and Isla Mujeres. All give access to a colorful underwater realm beneath the surface – part of the world's second-largest barrier reef.



Beyond the Caribbean coast, the forested interior holds fabled archaeological treasures. The towering pyramids of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and Calakmul are but a few of the dozens of impressive ancient Maya sites dotting the peninsula. The Spanish also left their mark in cobblestone-lined, pastel-hued city centers first laid out over 400 years ago.

Flash-forward to the present, and you'll find plenty of modern attractions, from art galleries and artisan markets to street performers and nightlife – a fine counterpoint to the Yucatán's wilder side. In the daytime, you can snorkel with sea turtles, bask in vine-draped cenotes (water-filled sinkholes) or kayak through biosphere reserves, and at night you can indulge in the culinary wealth of Yucatecan cooking at a jungle-clad backyard restaurant, perhaps followed by drinks by the seaside.

THE MAIN AREAS

CANCÚN

Glitzy tourist mecca. **p224**

ISLA MUJERES

Island paradise. **p229**

ISLA HOLBOX

Wind sports, beaches and nature. **p233**

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Nightlife, shopping and sandy shores. **p240**

ISLA COZUMEL

Legendary snorkeling and diving. **p244**

TULUM

Maya ruins and captivating beaches. **p249**



Above: Cenote Ik-Kil (p289); Opposite: Izamal (p274)

BACALAR

Beautiful lagoon and laid-back getaway. **p261**

MÉRIDA

Historic, culturally rich capital. **p266**

UXMAL & THE RUTA PUUC

Dramatic ruins amid the forests. **p276**

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Awe-inspiring Maya temples. **p287**

CAMPECHE

World Heritage-listed fortified city. **p290**

CALAKMUL

Jungle-backed Maya ruins. **p293**

**BUS & COLECTIVO**

It's easy to get between towns and cities on the Yucatán Peninsula, with an extensive network of buses running throughout the day. In some places (along the Caribbean coast, for example), *colectivos* (shared vans or taxis) provide fast, inexpensive transportation.

**CAR**

Having your own wheels allows you to visit remote ruins (such as Calakmul) and less developed areas on the north coast. Keep in mind that driving is challenging here: narrow roads, bad potholes (and speed bumps), and pricey car rentals and fuel.

**TRAIN**

The controversial 1525km railway project known as the Tren Maya (Maya Train) will loop around the Yucatán Peninsula, linking Cancún, Tulum, Bacalar, Chichén Itzá, Valladolid, Mérida and other key destinations. It's slated for completion in 2024.

Mérida, p266

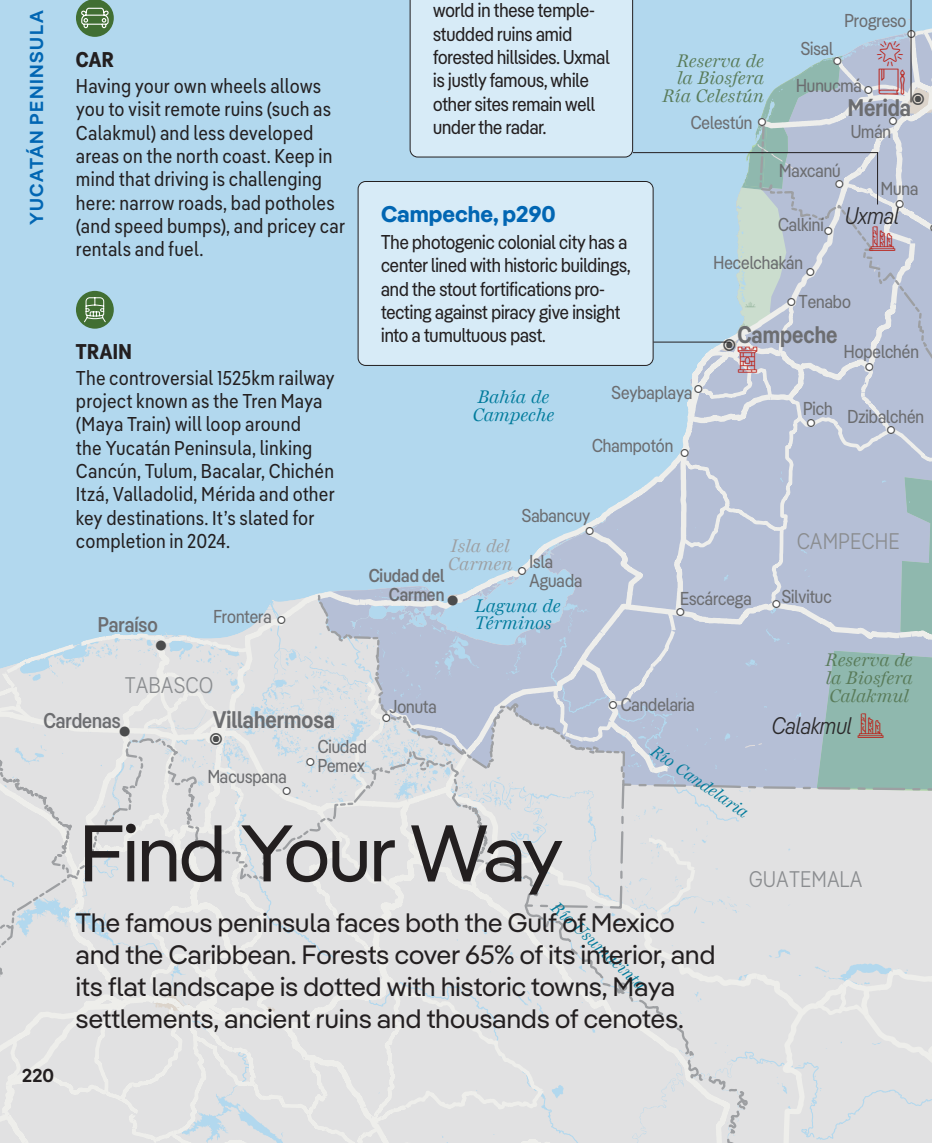
The cobblestone streets are lined with grand cathedrals and leafy parks, and the culture-loving capital has a crammed calendar of performances.

Uxmal & the Ruta Puuc, p276

Delve into the Maya world in these temple-studded ruins amid forested hillsides. Uxmal is justly famous, while other sites remain well under the radar.

Campeche, p290

The photogenic colonial city has a center lined with historic buildings, and the stout fortifications protecting against piracy give insight into a tumultuous past.



Find Your Way

The famous peninsula faces both the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Forests cover 65% of its interior, and its flat landscape is dotted with historic towns, Maya settlements, ancient ruins and thousands of cenotes.

Isla Holbox, p233

Off-the-map spot with beaches so soft they seem made of cornstarch. There are fine breezes for kitesurfers, and incredible whale-shark viewing.

Cancún, p224

Resort epicenter, with something for everyone: pretty beaches, great nightlife, fantastic food and appealing day trips.

Playa del Carmen, p240

The most vibrant city in the Riviera Maya has pretty beaches and a long pedestrian boulevard packed with restaurants, shops and bars.

Isla Cozumel, p244

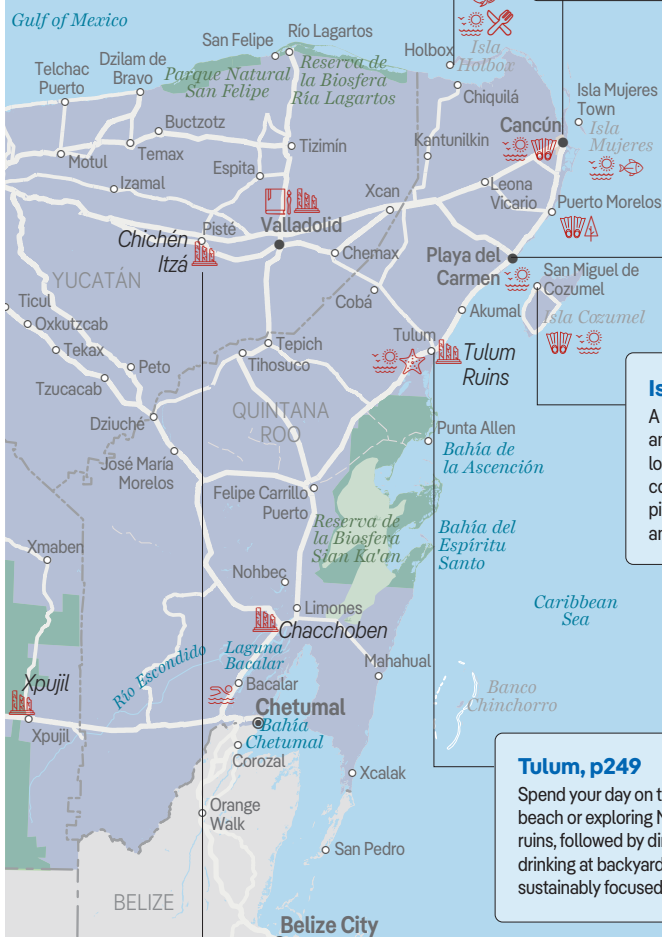
A major draw for divers and snorkelers, with fabulous dive sites. The scenic coastal road is dotted with picturesque shores, ruins and beach bars.

Tulum, p249

Spend your day on the beach or exploring Maya ruins, followed by dining and drinking at backyard bars and sustainably focused eateries.

Chichén Itzá, p287

Mexico's most visited archaeological site dazzles with its pyramids, mystifying ball courts and sacred cenotes. By night, there's a fantastical light-and-sound show.



Plan Your Time

Spend a few days on the beach, or more than a week visiting some of the region's highlights, dividing your time between Maya temples, nature reserves and vibrant city neighborhoods.



WAGNER SANTOS DE ALMEIDA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Tulum ruins (p250)



SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS

You'll always encounter steamy days here in the tropics, but November to March are slightly cooler months. The biggest festivals are from January through April, while hurricanes threaten from June to November.



JANUARY

During Mérida Fest, the capital hosts free outdoor concerts along with art exhibits, dance performances and book presentations.



FEBRUARY

Merriment erupts in Cozumel and other places during a week of Carnival season, with costumes, parades and live music.



APRIL

Sargassum seaweed begins washing onto beaches (through to September), though resorts and beach clubs do their best to clean it up.

If You Have Only One Day

- Head straight for **Tulum** (p249) to visit one of Mexico's prettiest shorelines. In the morning, hire a bike and pedal to the **Tulum ruins** (p250) for a look at an impressive collection of 800-year-old temples.
- Head to **Playa Pescadores** (p252) for a frolic in the waves and lunch in a beach club.
- After a siesta, hop in a *colectivo* to **Akumal** (p256) for a guided snorkeling trip among sea turtles, rays and tropical fish.
- Take a shopping stroll back in Tulum, then have dinner in a verdant courtyard followed by the world's best mojitos at **Batey** (p254).

3 Days to Travel Around

● After a day in Tulum, get an early start at **Chichén Itzá** (p287), one of Mexico's most important and well-preserved Maya sites. Spend a few hours exploring, then go to **Valladolid** (p280). Take a stroll around the historic center, browse the boutiques along **Calzada de los Frailes** (p283) and have dinner overlooking the main square.

● Continue on to **Mérida** (p266), home to a vibrant historic district. Peer back through the years at the **Casa de Montejo** (p268) and the **Palacio de Gobierno** (p268), then immerse yourself in Maya culture at the **Gran Museo del Mundo Maya** (p270).

If You Have More Time

● Start at **Cancún** (p224), home to stunning Caribbean beaches.

● Drop down to **Playa del Carmen** (p240) and ferry out to **Cozumel** (p244) for memorable snorkeling amid spectacular coral reefs. Next up is **Bacalar** (p261), an easygoing village by an enchanting lagoon.

● Head west across the peninsula to the remote jungle ruins of **Calakmul** (p293), then continue to **Campeche** (p290) to walk a historic fortified city center.

● Find your way to the fabled **ruins of Uxmal** (p276) before beelining to the west coast for a paddle through the wildlife-rich **Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún** (p272).

● End the trip with a Yucatecan feast in food-loving **Mérida** (p266).



MAY

Whale-shark season (through to September) brings wildlife fans to Isla Holbox and the northeast coast.



SEPTEMBER

It's the height of hurricane season, but that doesn't dampen the revelry of Mexican Independence Day.



OCTOBER

Late October to early November features Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations. Live music, processions and festive gatherings in cemeteries.



DECEMBER

Holidays bring huge crowds and higher prices, and a 'norte' (northerly wind) can occasionally interrupt diving and snorkeling plans with rough seas.

Mexico
City
★

Cancún

CANCÚN

TOP TIP

When you need a break from the sun, head to the Museo Maya de Cancún. On display are hundreds of pieces found at key sites around the peninsula (including Chichén Itzá), ranging from sculptures to ceramics and jewelry. There are also temporary Maya-themed exhibits.

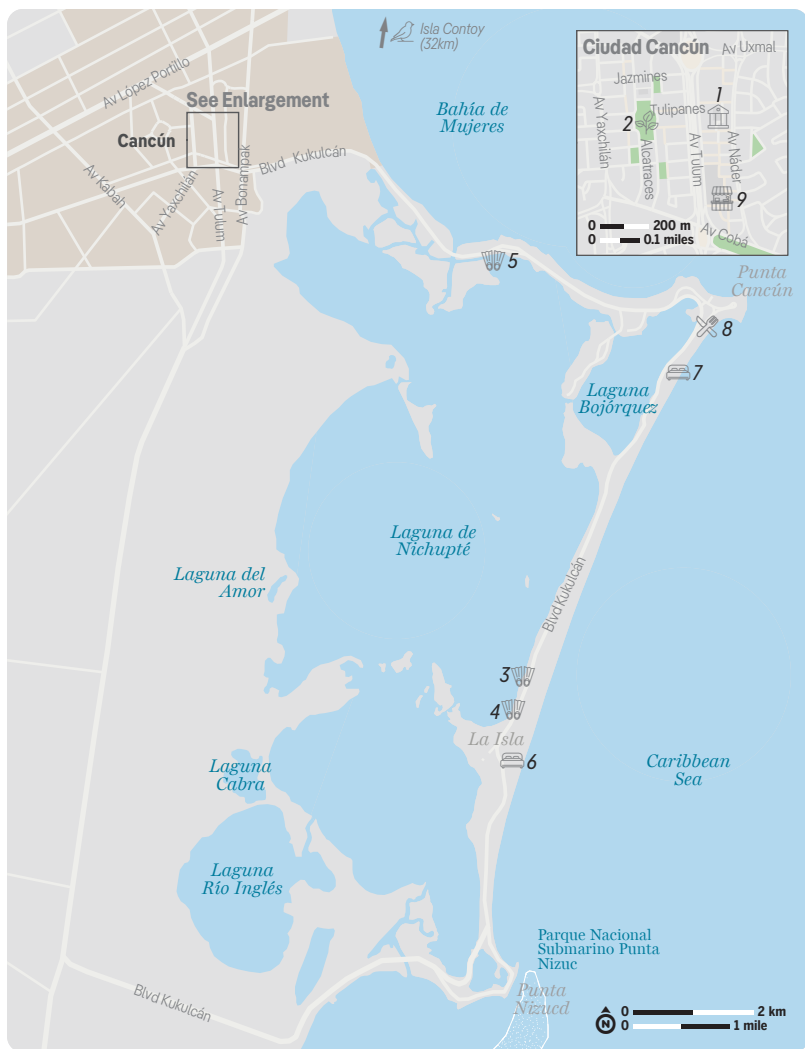
Cancún ranks high among the world's most popular vacation destinations, with over two million visitors each year. The fishing town it once was is long forgotten; now the city is a burgeoning testament to the transformative power of tourism. The megaresorts and clubs usually get the attention, but the food scene here is one of the best in Yucatán. If you know where to look, great food doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg. Of course, if you're here for all that glitz and glamour, you also won't be disappointed.

The city is roughly divided into two parts: El Centro, away from the water; and the Zona Hotelera, home to the fancy all-inclusives, which extends in a D-shape and encloses a large lagoon. Not surprisingly, most of the more economical hotels and better-value restaurants are in El Centro.



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Zona Hotelera

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Palacio Municipal
- 2 Parque de las Palapas

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 3 Manta Dive & Snorkel
- 4 Scorpio Divers
- 5 Scuba Cancún

SLEEPING

- 6 Iberostar
- 7 Le Blanc

EATING

- 8 Hard Rock Cafe

SHOPPING

- 9 Ki Huic Market



Parque de las Palapas



BEST CANCÚN NIGHTCLUBS

Coco Bongo

Part show, part dance club, nights start off with cover performers lip-syncing celebs and become a dance party.

Señor Frog's

A spring-break favorite with foam parties, conga lines and excess-induced craziness.

Route 666

Biker-themed bar in El Centro with loud rock and cheap beer.

The City

Vast venue that fills with partygoers dancing to tunes spun by famous DJs.

11:11

One of Cancún's best gay clubs, offering drag shows, queen nights, themed parties and more.

Sunbathing in Paradise

SUN WORSHIPPERS REJOICE

Look at Cancún from above and you'll see that the entire **Zona Hotelera**, the tourist hotel zone, is built on a thin strip of sand that surrounds a large lagoon, a bit like the letter D tipped on its side. This means that basically anywhere along that perimeter there are amazing, white-sand beaches. Combine the soft, powdery sand with turquoise water that's often as warm as a bath and you can see why so many beachgoers flock here every chance they get. The only thing Cancún beaches *aren't* is empty. Expect a party, pretty much anywhere – and any time – you go.

All the big names have a piece of this sandy pie. Couples will appreciate the luxurious **Le Blanc** for its tasteful, adults-only experience (some stays even include a private butler!), whereas places such as **Iberostar** and **Hard Rock Cafe** offer fun for the whole family. In many ways, though, you'll get much of the same: pools that seem as large as football fields, private beaches that are just steps away, and unlimited food and drinks.

The Zona Hotelera is also a great nightlife destination. Plenty of places serve up bottomless margaritas, but there's much more on offer than just cheap tequila and premade sweet-and-sour mix. Recently, there's been a delightful renaissance of craft tequilas and mezcals, bringing them to their rightful place on the top shelf. Xtabentún, a locally made anise-flavored liquor, is unique to Yucatán. Lighter mixed drinks such as Micheladas (beer and Clamato with a Tajin rim) and Palomas (grapefruit soda and tequila or mezcal) are worth trying as well.

Underwater Worlds

INCREDIBLE SNORKELING AND DIVING

Slip on a snorkel or don scuba gear, plop over the side of your boat, and prepare yourself for underwater scenes that will dazzle, mystify and amaze. The reefs, the wrecks, the caves and the sculptures are teeming with fish and marine life, some of it found nowhere else in the world. It's a bit surreal to have the world become blue and see the myriad of shapes, colors and creatures. Moray eels, lionfish, rays, sharks, parrotfish, angel fish, tangs – the list goes on and on. Thanks to more awareness of the fragility of corals and the **Underwater Museum of Art (MUSA)** drawing people to human-made wonders, the natural corals are showing signs of rejuvenation. Many people find Cancún a perfect spot to get PADI certified, with courses ranging from quick open-water intro to more challenging deep-water or cave diving. Cenotes –



COCKTAILS WITH A VIEW

La Palapa Belga

Lagoonside Belgian food and possibly the best margarita in Cancún.

Las Casitas

Romantic beachside tents make for an evening where anything might happen.

Parole

Zona Hotelera Italian restaurant on a snazzy wooden dock that extends over the water.



ADVENTURE PARKS

The coastline south of Cancún is dotted with **adventure parks** (p257) that provide a full day of activities such as zip-lining, cave tours and snorkeling through lagoons, as well as dining and live entertainment. Many parks offer transport from Cancún.

MUSA

those freshwater caves the Maya thought were doors to the Xibalba underworld – are distinctly Yucatán diving experiences worth exploring. Whatever you've chosen, you'll find it easy to slip below the surface and explore the underwater wonders that await.

There are a number of reputable dive operators in town. **Scuba Cancún**, one of the oldest, is a family-run dive shop that offers the gamut: MUSA, snorkeling, cenote and diving tours. **Manta Dive & Snorkel** is a woman-owned shop known for its friendly instructors, with MUSA excursions and cenote tours. **Scorpio Divers** maintains small dive groups and runs tours to Cozumel as well as the usual local spots in Cancún.

Exploring El Centro

REAL MEXICO IS STEPS AWAY

As glitzy as Cancún is, the city center, known as El Centro, is often overlooked. A shame, since it's surprisingly authentic and can be a delightful place to experience real Mexico, if only for a few hours. Take a taxi or an R-1 or R-2 bus from the Zona Hotelera and discover colorful markets, hipster cafes, bustling streets and tacos that don't cost an arm and a leg. Take a walk on Avenida Nader and see the parks, the shops

MYSTICAL MUSA

There's something mystical about any dive experience, but the **MUSA** takes that to a different level. Imagine diving among more than 500 concrete statues, sculptures and works of underwater art (with plans to place more in the future). The works are fascinating as art installations, but in addition, they provide tourists the chance to snorkel and dive away from fragile corals, thus allowing the reefs to recover from decades of overuse. Made with pH-neutral marine concrete, the statues don't harm the existing wildlife and, in fact, are a harbor for fish and other marine creatures.



BEST PUBLIC BEACHES

Delfines

This top-notch beach has parking, bathrooms and Caribbean water that redefines the word 'blue'.

Playa Caracol

A small but popular beach within walking distance of many Zona Hotelera shops and restaurants.

Playa Tortugas

White-sand beach near one of the ferries to Isla Mujeres.



ISLA CONTOY

Though definitely not everyone's cup of tea, a trip to Isla Contoy will be a thrill for some. It's an uninhabited island a bit north of Isla Mujeres, and in the absence of people, the small, sea-scrubbed, mangrove-studded island has become a haven for birds, with some 170 species migrating through each year. Keep an eye out for frigates, olive cormorants, brown boobies and flamingos.

Even non-birders can enjoy a visit, as the trip out offers the chance to spot dolphins, porpoises and up to four different species of sea turtle, all of which nest on the island. Cancún-based tour operators run daily trips to the island.



Isla Contoy

and the restaurants, or cross to the **Palacio Municipal** on Avenida Tulum. Take a selfie with the Cancún sign and then meander the stalls of **Ki Huic market**, or cross over Avenida Tulum and find **Parque de las Palapas**.

For anyone who lives here, El Centro is the 'real' Cancún: gritty, messy, chaotic, but also vibrant and fun. People forget this isn't just a vacation mecca; people live here. There are supermarkets and big box stores, little corner shops, fresh-squeezed juice stands, taco joints and neighbors saying hi to each other on the street.

On weekends, locals come in throngs to Parque de las Palapas, where there is live music, dozens of food carts, and games for kids. You'll see whole extended families out enjoying a bag of *churros* (doughnutlike fritters) as toddlers sway and wobble on rental roller skates, or while cotton-candy vendors hawk pink and blue fluff from impossibly tall towers they're carrying. If you're getting food, remember to find a cart with a long line, not a short one.



GETTING AROUND

There are pluses and minuses to just about every transportation method in Cancún, but the best deal will be the R-1 and R-2 buses. Bright red, they zip and zoom in opposite circles around the Zona Hotelera and into El Centro, allowing you to hop on one and get to the beach or back for a few pesos. If buses

aren't your cup of tea, taxis are ubiquitous and reasonable, though rates rise substantially late at night going out of the Zona Hotelera. Most drivers are honest, but ask the rate first before accepting the ride. Ask for current rates at your hotel if you're unsure. Tipping is the norm.

ISLA MUJERES

TOP TIP

Convenient Ultramar ferry reservations can be made online, and can now go right into your phone. You can take the ferry from the Juárez port, or from stops in the Zona Hotelera. Once on the island, you can get around by golf cart or scooter, or go green on a bicycle.

Many visitors will skip Cancún completely and head straight for this special offshore island, where the pace slows, resorts shrink and the waters seem somehow even more turquoise... if that's even possible. Whatever the reasons for flocking here, Isla Mujeres – the ‘Isle of Women’ – is different in a sweet, charming way that resonates with many who find themselves overwhelmed by that frenetic big-sister city on the mainland. A 40-minute ferry whisks you away from it all, to a land where golf carts are the normal form of travel, where the town center is so small you can walk anywhere in under 20 minutes, and where the vibe is pleasant and peaceful. If you don't need the opulence of a Cancún all-inclusive, and you want to discover and explore on your own, Isla Mujeres may be just what the doctor ordered.

SIGHTS

- 1 Buho's
- 2 Capilla de Guadalupe
- 3 Garrafón de Castilla
- 4 Iglesia Del Sagrado Corazon
- 5 La Trigueña
- 6 Monumento a la Tortuga
- 7 Parroquia Inmaculada Concepción
- 8 Punta Sur

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

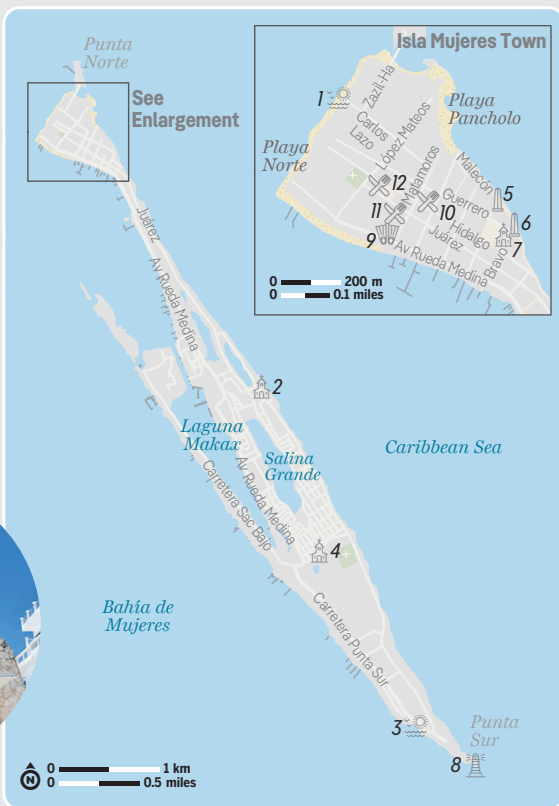
- 9 Carey Dive Center

EATING

- 10 Los Amigos
- 11 Olivia
- 12 Rooster



Capilla de Guadalupe





BEST BEACHES FOR KIDS

Avoid swimming along the eastern coast if you have little ones, as the currents and waves can be unpredictable.

Playa Norte

This flat beach extends along the whole north of the island and offers shallows as long as a football field.

Hermosa Caleta

A lovely, shallow cove, with a calm swimming area and wave-washed rocks that harbor colorful fish.

Garrafon De Castilla

On the southern end of the island, this beach club has a calm swimming area and some rocky jetties that attract fish.



MARAOKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Garrafon De Castilla

Historical Isla Mujeres

AN ISLAND STEEPED IN HISTORY

Isla Mujeres has been around a lot longer than the tourists have. In fact, some archaeologists believe that the island was a stopover for the Maya en route to worship their goddess of fertility, Ixchel, on Isla Cozumel.

Despite the island's size, a number of lovely churches reflect the Catholic influence that still remains today. The **Parroquia Inmaculada Concepción**, in the town square, is a small church with some interesting murals and is a central part of life for many islanders. Nearby, a small photography museum gives insights about local history and culture. Further down the island, the **Capilla de Guadalupe** is a picturesque building with beautiful water views inside and a large statue of the Virgin Mary on the wall. Even further south, the very picturesque **Iglesia Del Sagrado Corazon** greets islanders with a lovely, selfie-worthy exterior.

Isla Mujeres has a number of delightful statues celebrating its history and mythology, among them **La Trigueña** and the **Monumento a la Tortuga**, which pays homage to the thousands of sea turtles that nest on the shores of the island each year.



ISLA MUJERES BEACH CLUBS

Buho's

A popular, easygoing club on Playa Norte with a bar and beach chairs.

Tarzan

Casual surfer-vibe spot that's right on the water.

Mayan Beach Club

Blue-and-white-themed classy club with swing seats at the bar.

Beach Club Bliss

SAND, SURF, SUNSHINE AND MORE

Isla Mujeres boasts some of the area's most delightful and relaxed beach clubs and most are open to the public. Just walk in, rent a chair or an umbrella, slather on that sunblock and let the day begin. They're sprinkled all over the island, but the vibe differs from place to place. **Buho's** is one of several on Isla Mujeres' Playa Norte. There's also **Garrafon De Castilla** on the southern side, where you can rent snorkel gear, lockers and enjoy drinks or food at the restaurant/bar.

Among the many luxuries these clubs offer is therapeutic massage, usually done on covered, open-air benches right on the beach. Another perk of beach clubs are the drinks, with servers bringing orders right to a chair or beach towel. Some have hammocks and rent kayaks or paddleboards.

Hidalgo Street

WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS

Pedestrian-only Hidalgo Street runs the length of the town center, from the plaza all the way to the beach clubs on the north side. It's filled with souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels and vendors, and at night is the spot to go bar hopping.

Seafood is a top draw, as is – no surprise – classic Mexican fare. You may find that the best food is actually off this main drag, on little side streets and out-of-the-way alleys. Still, locals often go to **Los Amigos**, an old standby. Grab breakfast at **Rooster**, a little to the north, but look to other spots for afternoon beverages. **Olivia** is a lovely restaurant for dinner.

On the Water

FISHING, DIVING AND SNORKELING DELIGHTS

Isla Mujeres is a beach destination, but for many it's not what's on the beach that matters; it's what's beyond it. Sport fishing is huge, and deep-sea fishing spots are easier to reach than they are from Cancún. The same holds true for underwater activities such as diving and snorkeling. Great snorkeling can be found from the many beach clubs, or you can take a tour of **MUSA** (p227) for something offshore. Diving, too, is easily done here, with quick, easy access to a number of fantastic dive sites. Reputable operators such as **Carey Dive Center** can bring you close to several species of shark, rays, a variety of sea turtles, scorpionfish, lionfish, moray eels and more. It's also excellent for corals.

THE GODDESS IXCHEL

Maya religion permeated every aspect of Maya life, from grand festivals to day-to-day activities. Nothing was more important than ensuring that one's life and habits were in keeping with the will of the gods. The Goddess Ixchel, not surprisingly, is held in high regard on Isla Mujeres. Known as the jaguar goddess, she is thought to have been the god of medicine and childbirth, two realms that were extremely important. But according to Maya mythology, she was the mother of the earth and sky as well, meaning that anything and everything could be attributed to this deity. People still continue to pray to Ixchel in modern ceremonies, asking for health, for cures to illnesses and for fertility and healthy children.



TOP ISLA MUJERES RESORTS

Mia Reef Isla Mujeres

Great family spot at the far north end of the island, right on Hermosa Caleta. \$\$\$

Hotel Privilege Aluxes

Posh and swanky spot with good access to both the beaches and town center. \$\$\$

Ixchel Beach Hotel

Can't get closer to Playa el Cocal, with excellent restaurants and a large pool on site. \$\$\$



TO BARGAIN OR NOT TO BARGAIN

Don't be afraid to browse and be 'just looking' if someone calls you over while you're shopping in a market; they're used to tourists stopping by and then walking away. It's usually fine to bargain a bit with vendors, but there's a mistaken sense that one's likely to be ripped off by unscrupulous vendors when, in reality, back home, similar ripoffs are happening and we don't bat an eye. A latte that costs \$6 at the register costs a fraction of that to produce. And unlike that coffee chain, the vendors here are often moms and pops who want to make ends meet.



MARIANRAV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Ixchel statue, Punta Sur

Strolling Punta Sur

SOMETHING DIFFERENT DOWN SOUTH

Way at the southern tip of Isla Mujeres is Punta Sur, which has a lighthouse, a Maya ruin, some walking trails and spectacular views of wave-eroded cliffs and turquoise water too vivid to be believed. It's a nice alternative to lazing around on the beach, if you're looking for something different to do.

You can enter the **lighthouse** and walk to the top, where a viewing area is a nice spot for selfies. Nearby is a topless **statue** of the goddess Ixchel, another popular stop for selfies, humorous or otherwise.

At the very tip, you'll notice a pathway that leads down a stairway to a cement path along the water's edge. You may see people fishing or swimming here, but don't partake, as it's prohibited.



GETTING AROUND

Golf carts are everywhere here, and you can rent them at numerous places just steps from the ferries. Golf Carts Joaquin has standard rates for golf carts and scooters, and accepts both cash and credit card. If you're mostly in town but want to visit Punta Sur as a one-

time trip, consider taking a taxi and asking the driver to wait for you, or get the driver's number and call when you're ready to be picked up. Rates in Isla Mujeres are fixed, based on the distance traveled, but you may pay extra if the driver waits.

ISLA HOLBOX

TOP TIP

Beyond the well-traveled shoreline, Holbox has a network of mangroves, springs and lagoons that you can see on guided tours. The island-hopping Tres Islas tour is a popular option – it includes a stop at a cenote famed for its healing properties, a protected bird refuge and a picturesque deserted beach.

This quirky, ever-hipper island once called only to windsurfers and beach bums, but times change. Swanky swing bars, beachfront dining and yoga are on the rise, pushing out the fishermen and mom-and-pop shops and making Holbox something of a ‘Tulum North.’ The gas-powered golf carts and ATVs never stop buzzing about the clay-soft streets, but despite the bustle and hubbub, a day on the beach here can be blissfully calm, and food – especially tacos! – is excellent. It’s also undeniably beautiful in a way not found anywhere else in Yucatán. Squint your eyes and the sky melts into the sea. Squint again and the sea melts into the beach. A limitless wash of blues, greens and ivory. Winter sees whale sharks, and the trade winds bring back snowbirds, who surf, swim and sunbathe as they’ve always done. Some things never change.

ARKADU SCHELU/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Isla Holbox



BRILLIANT BIOLUMINESCENCE

While the amazing phenomenon of bioluminescence is possible to see year-round in Isla Holbox, it's most common in the summer months and often coincides with whale-shark season. So if you're here to see the sharks, earmark an evening or two to mosey down to the water when it's good and dark, and you may be in for a wonderful surprise: the ocean glowing with every wave or ripple. It's a beautiful, almost eerie sight caused by millions of tiny organisms triggering chemical reactions in response to stimuli. A wave breaks, a foot splashes, a fish jumps – all these can trigger this amazing light show.

ISLA HOLBOX



Basking on the Beach

CONFECTIONER-SUGAR SAND AND WARM WAVES

There's something indescribably relaxing about Holbox beaches, a tranquility that permeates not just your body, but your spirit as well. Even the pelicans seem more relaxed, to say nothing of the gentle waves, the velvet-soft sand and the skies that look like they're done in watercolors – sun hits the ocean and turns it the color of jade. The winds, if there are any, are warm and soothing, and you can easily watch a whole morning or day vanish as you laze, lounge, sip or swim. It's the kind of place where doing nothing all day seems like a success.

Most of the beachgoers come to the island's north side, but if you're looking for some quieter, more remote places, you can take a taxi or even a launch and get to spots where it's just you, the beach and maybe a mangrove tree or two.

Though beaches may seem barren at first, there's a host of wildlife to watch for, especially birds. Flamingos and spoon-bills are frequently spotted, as well as a wide variety of shorebirds, gulls, egrets and herons. Iguanas, tortoises, sea turtles and a snake or two make up some of the common reptiles. You'll want to watch for crocodiles in the more remote areas, especially where there are inlets or lagoons. And out in the water, it's not impossible to step on a stingray, so drag your feet if you're walking in the water.



WHERE TO STAY ON ISLA HOLBOX

Tribu Hostel & Bar

This funky, hip and friendly spot is a great place to stay, meet or mingle. **\$**

Hotel Casa Palapas del Sol

A viewing tower and great beach access. **\$\$\$**

Hotel Para Ti

Wood and palm-frond theme around a beautiful pool. **\$\$\$**

I LIVE HERE: TACO TECHNIQUES



Lorena De León of Taco Tour Holbox, whose tours pair four mouthwatering taco stops with four great cocktails at each (and can be customized to your specific dietary needs), tells us her secrets about what makes an amazing taco.

1. The tortilla. From the ingredients to its texture, it represents our first contact with the taco.

2. The filling. There's such a wide spectrum of what can be in it, but this is the soul of a taco.

3. The salsa. Some salsas are so good they will make a good taco become an amazing one.

4. The occasion. Because so much of the experience of having tacos is about going out and sharing time with good friends.



Isla Holbox

Dining on the Island

FEAST FOR THE EYES AND PALATE

Dining on Isla Holbox is delightful and seems to just keep getting better over time, as swanky new spots replace some of the tired, living-on-laurels spots around the main square. You can now find almost anything here, from fine steaks to Caribbean lobster and even southern specialties such as pulled pork or ribs. Some of the nicest dining is less about the food and more about the view. Many of the north-side beach restaurants have al fresco dining steps away from the jade-green water for which the island is famous.

For those who don't need a water view, the main plaza is a great place to find excellent eats. Many of the spots in the square have weathered not just the seasons – and a hurricane or two – but also proven themselves to keep people coming back, time and time again.

Snorkeling with Whale Sharks

SEE GENTLE GIANTS UP CLOSE

For many, seeing a whale shark in the wild is a bucket-list experience, and getting to swim with them is even better. Isla Holbox is one of very few places in the world where full-grown whale sharks come to feed, and from May to September this is a prime activity you won't want to miss...unless, of course, the thought of being right next to a 5m- to 8m-long shark scares you. But it shouldn't. These gentle fish feed by opening their mouths and taking in large quantities of fish, plankton and krill, much like their namesakes, the whales.



DINNER DELIGHTS ON ISLA HOLBOX

La Pinsa de Tío Pupo

Best pizza on the island. \$\$

Salma

Creative fusion cuisine in a decorative setting. \$\$

El Chapulín

A long-standing icon for seafood and fine, artful fare. \$\$\$



PUNTA MOSQUITO

This popular beach forms the northern 'elbow' of Isla Holbox and is a treasure trove for wildlife enthusiasts or those wanting to get away from the din and bustle of the town center. From the air, the intricate network of channels, inlets, swamps and lagoons resembles a cell, magnified in cross-section. Surprisingly, Punta Mosquito, with its breezes, is often less insect plagued than the main parts of town, but you'll still want to bring repellent because 'less' doesn't mean mosquito-free.

Here you'll find crocodiles, snakes, iguanas, pelicans, flamingos, spoonbills and more. It's a popular snorkeling destination, and a standard stop on many of the island tours. Photographers may find the azure, opaque water mesmerizing.



MAYBE MARION/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Flamingo, Punta Mosquito

Whale sharks are true fish, unlike whales, which are mammals, and they are the largest fish on the planet.

Tours begin whenever the sharks arrive, usually May at the earliest, and they run until mid-September or so. A conscientious tour operator will not let you wear normal sunscreen, nor will you be able to touch, dive under or otherwise molest the animals. If you care about keeping your interaction with these incredible creatures safe for you and for the fish, you'll pay attention and follow the guidelines. It's usually a full-day experience: a bit of orientation at the beginning, several hours on the boat, the shark viewing, a stop at a remote beach for lunch, a swim and some optional snorkeling, and – tired and thrilled – you'll return in the late afternoon with memories and hopefully photos that will last a lifetime.

After Sunset

HOLBOX NIGHTS: FUN NOT WILD

Isla Holbox has a much more mellow vibe than the Caribbean coast, but a night on the town can be fun, especially if **Tribu** has some live music. Another option is **The Hot Corner**, which has live music as well, often at decibel levels that make it easy to find. Mexicans from the mainland often sip cocktails at **Salma**. You can also check out the beach clubs, which often stay open late for the barefoot crowd that wants to sip while digging their heels into the sand.



GETTING AROUND

Two ferry companies run to Isla Holbox from Chiquimulá from about 6am to 9pm daily. Because they alternate their arrivals, you may find that getting a round-trip fare locks you into a return trip that's later than you hope for, since you have to wait not just for the next ferry, but the next ferry departure that specific

company offers. At most you'll only wait an extra hour, but flexible travelers may want to forgo a return fare and just buy a ticket at the dock. A variety of buses run from the ferry to places all over Yucatán, such as Mérida, Cancún and beyond.

PUERTO MORELOS

TOP TIP

Puerto Morelos' central plaza is 2km east of Hwy 307, nearly at the end of the main road into town (the main dock is the road's true end). The town, all of three streets wide from east to west, stretches several blocks to the north of the plaza and about three long blocks south.

Halfway between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, Puerto Morelos makes a great entry point to the Riviera Maya. Stretching along a picturesque section of beachfront lapped by shallow Caribbean waters, this easygoing town still has an active fishing industry as well as small-scale ecotourism that seems a world away from the massive operations to the north and south.

The town's biggest source of pride is the barrier reef, which lies just 600m offshore. Beginning in the 1980s, the seaside community lobbied hard for its protection, and in 1998 succeeded when President Ernesto Zedillo signed a decree creating the Parque Nacional Arrecife de Puerto Morelos (National Reef Park of Puerto Morelos). Part of the Mesoamerican reef system, this undersea ecosystem is beloved by visitors owing to its easy accessibility. It's also one of Mexico's best-studied reefs, with local schools and major universities carrying out research along it.



LUNAMARINA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Lighthouse, Puerto Morelos



RUTA DE LOS CENOTES

About 1km south of the turnoff to Puerto Morelos, a sign on the highway announces the 'Ruta de los Cenotes,' a 37km jungle-lined road that passes over a dozen enchanting swimming spots. A few highlights: **Siete Bocas** contains both a subterranean area and an open-air cenote that you can leap into from the small cliffs. **Boca del Puma** has two cenotes and offers adventure activities such as zip-lining. **La Noria** is a refreshing spot for a swim (or zip-lining), and you can also ride horses. It's best to bring lunch with you and pack snorkel gear so you can enjoy the views beneath the crystal-clear waters. Go early to beat the crowds.



Exploring the Reefs

MEMORABLE SNORKELING AND DIVING

Brilliantly contrasted stripes of bright green and dark blue separate the shore from the barrier reef – a tantalizing sight for divers and snorkelers. The hard and soft corals here are one chunk of the 1000km-long Mesoamerican Reef, stretching from Mexico down along the coasts of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras.

You might spot sea turtles, sharks, stingrays, moray eels, lobsters and loads of colorful tropical fish. Various operators run tours, including **Wet Set** and **Aquanauts**, both with years of experience leading snorkeling and diving trips. On a standard two-hour excursion, boat captains will pilot you out to a prime reef spot (usually five to 10 minutes away) for snorkeling amid a kaleidoscope of aquatic species. You'll have about 45 minutes there before moving on to a second spot for more immersion in the reef. The summer months (June to mid-September) bring whale sharks into the region, and you can see them on special snorkeling tours.

Water depths run from 3m to 6m, and gear is typically included (including life vests, which are mandatory for visits



WHERE TO EAT IN PUERTO MORELOS

Cafe d'Amancia

This buzzing spot overlooking the main square serves the best breakfasts in town. **\$\$**

La Pirata

Organic farm-to-table dishes served up with occasional live music on restaurant-lined Avenida Gomez. **\$\$**

Al Chimichurri

Uruguayan grill fires up perfectly cooked steaks as well as pizzas, pastas and *empanadas*. **\$\$\$**

into the national park). Sunscreens are not allowed, so wear a rash shirt to protect your skin from the sun.

Divers have even more options when it comes to exploring the reef. Grassy areas are ideal for spotting munching sea turtles, while Bajito has small canyons, arches, swim-through passages and caves fringed with coral in the heart of the national park. Those with more experience can venture to deeper sites such as the aptly named Aquarium, with its huge schools of fish. There's also a WWII-era shipwreck that advanced divers can tour with a guide.

Jungle Walk in the Jardín Botánico

SMALL WILDLIFE-FILLED RESERVE

Just south of Puerto Morelos, you can immerse yourself in a lush remnant of the once-vast coastal forests covering the northern Yucatán Peninsula. Despite the name, the **Jardín Botánico Dr Alfredo Barrera Marín** feels less like a manicured botanical garden and more like an untamed nature reserve, and wildlife is as much a draw as the diverse plant species.

A 2km trail loops around the property and winds through sections dedicated to epiphytes, palms, ferns and other common forest flora. You'll see the towering Ramón tree, which can reach heights of 40m, and develops buttress roots for support. The *palo mulato* (gumbo limbo) resembles a sunburnt tourist with its peeling bark, while the smaller *palo santo* has been much used over the years in indigenous medicine and, more recently, in incense and handicrafts. Along a wetland stretch of the reserve, you'll see the tangled roots of mangroves and the bright leaves of green buttonwoods (*mangle botoncillo*), another salt-tolerant species.

An impressive kapok (ceiba), considered sacred by the Maya, lies near a section of traditional dwellings made of pole supports and thatch roofs. The path continues into an area containing the ruins of platforms, altars and rock walls, all part of a ceremonial site dating back to the 15th century.

As you wander along the path, keep an eye out for wildlife. You might see parrot snakes (bright green with white underbellies), agouti (a coarse-haired rodent that resembles an overgrown guinea pig), coati (members of the raccoon family) or spider monkeys.

Bring mosquito repellent and go early or late in the day to maximize your chances of spotting wildlife.



CRAFT MARKET

One of the best reasons to come to Puerto Morelos is for the daily artisans market, which spreads along the streets southwest of the plaza. Dream catchers, pottery and textiles are popular, but if you're looking for a hammock, this is the place. Unlike hammocks in the larger cities, which come from Mérida, some of these are made right in town by local families.



Spider monkey

RIGHT: LAURA KATHLEEN LEWIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



GETTING AROUND

From Cancún or Playa del Carmen, Playa Express vans and *colectivos* (shared vans) will drop you on the highway turnoff to Puerto Morelos. From there, it's a 2.5km walk into

town, or you can take a taxi or town-bound *colectivo*, which stop at the taxi stand around the corner (on Calle Jose Maria Morelos).

Mexico
CityPlaya del
Carmen

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

TOP TIP

Quinta Avenida and its adjacent streets can get really packed at night, especially on weekends, but you can always head several blocks west and you'll pick up on a notably more local vibe. For the latest on city life, as well as day-trip recommendations, check out Everything Playa del Carmen (everythingplayadelcarmen.com).

Playa del Carmen, second in size only to Cancún, ranks right up there with Tulum as one of the Riviera's trendiest spots. Sitting coolly on the lee side of Cozumel, the town's beaches are packed with fit sun worshipers who enjoy the easy access from the hotels, restaurants and bars on and around nearby Quinta Avenida. Coral reefs lie just offshore, while idyllic cenotes are an easy drive from town.

Playa, as it's known locally, was once a small fishing village, and was something of a tourist backwater until the early 1990s. Over the last three decades, however, its population has exploded, as Mexican nationals from other parts of the country have come to tap into the city's burgeoning (largely tourist-oriented) economy. In fact, the city of 310,000 has one of Latin America's fastest growth rates. It's also one of Mexico's most cosmopolitan destinations, with visitors and expats from every corner of the globe.



Quinta Avenida (p242)

SIGHTS

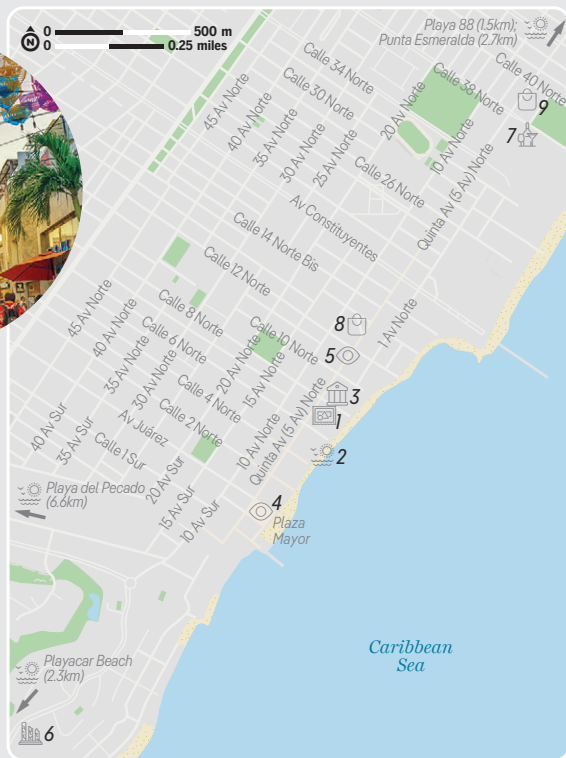
- 1 Gastón Charó Gallery
- 2 Inti Beach
- 3 Museo Frida Kahlo
Riviera Maya
- 4 Parque Los Fundadores
- 5 Quinta Avenida
- 6 Xaman-Há Ruins

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 7 Chela de Playa

SHOPPING

- 8 Calle Corazón
- 9 Tierra Huichol





Playa del Carmen

Beachgoing in Playa del Carmen

EXPLORING THE DIVERSE SHORELINE

If you're eager to join the people, head to **Inti Beach**, the strip between Parque Fundadores and the Muelle Constituyentes. Here, you'll find Playa's most vibrant seaside playground, with outdoor restaurants, lounge chairs for hire and all manner of action on and off the water.

The crowds start to thin as you go north of Muelle Constituyentes, and at **Playa 88** you'll reach a gorgeous expanse of sparsely developed beachfront. Access this stretch of coastline along Calle 88 or via Avenida Colosio just south of there. Another 1km north, Punta Esmeralda has soft white sand and ample room to run about. There's also a small shallow cenote, which makes a calm coastal pool for kids to play in.

South of Centro, you'll also find some enchanting coastal spots. Just beyond the ferry terminal, you can kick off your shoes and walk along the well-kept **Playacar Beach**. The inviting sands and shallow waters are ideal for families. About 500m past the ferry dock, you'll pass a small turnoff to the 13th-century **Xaman-Há ruins**. Nearly swallowed by the forest, the low-rise structures were once a key departure point for Maya pilgrims to the island of Cozumel.

I LIVE HERE: FATHER OF MESTIZOS



Born and raised in Playa del Carmen, **Pierre Nahataen Alvarez Kaul** leads walking tours with Estación Mexico and talks about one of history's unsung heroes.

In 1511, Gonzalo Guerrero was shipwrecked on the Yucatán Peninsula and enslaved by the Maya. Several years later, when Hernan Cortes learned of his existence, he sent a rescue team. Guerrero refused to be rescued, having adopted the Maya culture as his own. He had married Zazil Há, chief Na Chan Kan's daughter, and they raised several children together. The Spanish called him 'the renegade,' but for the Maya he became known as the father of the mestizos. His children were the first to have both European and indigenous ancestry.



WHERE TO EAT IN PLAYA DEL CARMEN

La Cueva del Chango

Known for its fresh ingredients, 'the monkey's cave' has seating in a jungly *palapa* setting or a verdant garden. **\$\$**

Chez Céline

Good, healthy breakfasts and perfectly flaky baked goods are what keeps this French-run bakery-cafe busy. **\$**

La Tarraya

One of Playa's oldest restaurants serves up good, reasonably priced seafood at an enviable beachfront location. **\$\$**



FERRY TO COZUMEL

Two companies run passenger ferries to Cozumel (p248), with a departure every hour from the terminal at the end of Calle 1 Sur near Parque los Fundadores. Slightly pricier Ultramar reaches the island in 20 minutes, while Winjet takes about 40 minutes.

BEST NIGHTLIFE IN PLAYA

Inti Beach

The beach club has DJs as well as an evening fire show (usually from around 8pm). Watch the moon rise over the sea while sipping tropical cocktails.

La Bodeguita del Medio

The writing is literally on the walls (the lampshades etc) at this Cuban restaurant-bar, pumping out Afro-Cuban jazz followed by fiery salsa.

La Verbena

An easygoing bar with a lush back garden where you can catch a range of live music, from hip-shaking *cumbias* to classic reggae beats.



Quinta Avenida

For a hidden slice of the Maya Riviera, continue to **Playa del Pecado**, hidden at the southern tip of Playacar Beach. Backed by swaying palms and coastal forest, this beach feels wild and remains remarkably free of any signs of development. It's a long (4km) walk though, and you'll have to cross over some rock formations, so bring appropriate footwear.

Strolling Quinta Avenida

PLAYA'S FAMOUS PEDESTRIAN LANE

Just inland from the beach, but running parallel to the shore, is Playa del Carmen's iconic pedestrian lane. Quinta Avenida (Fifth Ave) is lined with restaurants, bars and shops, and has different personalities depending on the time you visit. Early morning, when much of the city still slumbers, you can join runners and strollers who enjoy the shaded peaceful lane. In the afternoon and early evening, you can join the hustle and bustle, winding your way past street vendors and restaurant touts along with musicians, dance troupes and other street performers showing off their talents.

Anchoring the southern end of the avenue is **Parque Los Fundadores**, a tree-fringed square where you can take the pulse of the city. Snack stands dole out coconut waters and



BEST PLACES FOR CRAFT BEER IN PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Chela de Playa

Grab a spot on the leafy terrace and order a sampler of quality drafts from this Playa de Carmen microbrewer.

Club de la Cerveza

A much-loved spot for outstanding beers (including rotating drafts) that you won't find elsewhere.

Colectivo Mexicano Cervezero

Gastropub with a focus on regional craft beers, which pair nicely with the fish or shrimp tacos.

fresh fruit, while tourists line up for photos beside the giant 'Playa del Carmen' sign. The massive sculpture framing the seaside is known as the **Portal Maya** and its swirling figures pay homage to the coast's quintessential elements – water (left side) and wind (right) – while the hoops evoke the much-loved pre-Colombian game of *juego de pelota*. By night, the sculpture serves as a backdrop to concerts and film screenings, as well as more frequent performances by drummers and dancers dressed as mythical Maya warriors.

North of the park, you can take in Playa's diverse subcultures as you make your way along the avenue. Open-sided restaurants pack this stretch of pavement, with live salsa and American rock spilling onto the terraces in the evening. Just past Calle 6, keep an eye out for the **Gastón Charó Gallery**. Tucked down a narrow alley just off the avenue, this gallery showcases the works of more than 40 different artists from Mexico and abroad. Don't miss the wild anthropomorphic sculptures at the gallery entrance that were created by the Argentine artist and gallery founder, Gastón Charó. There's more of his work inside.

It's also worth taking a slight detour up Calle 8 to see an oversized mural created by the Mexican artist Senkoe. **Equilibrio** depicts a dreamlike portrait of a woman emerging from clouds beneath an explosion of radiant flowers. It's one of many murals hidden in the streets of Playa del Carmen.

Farther along, there's shopping galore, particularly at the **Calle Corazon shopping mall**, where you'll find an abundance of American brands. The same area is also the epicenter of Playa's nightlife, with heavy bass thumping from the multilevel dance clubs lining both sides of Calle 12.

The crowds thin as you make your way farther north, with the tree-lined street dotted with open-sided restaurants and cafes, as well as one-of-a-kind storefronts such as **Tierra Huichol** with its colorful collection of *alebrijes* (folk-art sculptures of fantastical creatures).

The scenery gets more tranquil as you continue, with palm trees crowding the street and occasional eruptions of street art appearing near galleries and plant-based restaurants. Before the end of the pedestrianized section of the avenue, you can take a culinary stroll down Calle 38 Norte. Some of Playa's most romantic restaurants lie among dense tropical foliage, which by night are lit with fairy lights. There's even a tiny cenote here, which you can check out while toasting the day's walk at the microbrew pub **Chela de Playa**.



MUSEO FRIDA KAHLO RIVIERA MAYA

The admission is pricey, and there are no original works by the famous painter on display, but the small Museo Frida Kahlo Riviera Maya does an excellent job bringing the legendary Mexican artist to life. Knowledgeable guides take you through pivotal moments in her life, with the assistance of artwork by other Mexican artists (including several from Playa del Carmen). A short animated film captures the trauma of the accident that forever marked her, and a model of the bed in which she recovered features fantastical images flickering across mirror-like butterflies. Elsewhere, you can peek through tiny holes at miniaturized scenes from Kahlo's life.



GETTING AROUND

The ADO Terminal Alterna is where most long-distance bus lines arrive and depart. Buses heading to destinations within the state of Quintana Roo leave from the ADO Terminal Turística, conveniently located on Quinta Avenida. Playa Express shuttle buses (departing from Avenida Benito Juárez) are

a quicker way to get around the Riviera Maya between Playa del Carmen and Cancún.

Apart from taking an ADO bus, you can take a *colectivo* if heading to Tulum, with frequent departures from Calle 1 Sur near Avenida 45 Norte.



Cozumel

ISLA COZUMEL

Cozumel is a bit of a melting pot, but with only three ingredients: cruise-ship passengers, divers and the people who make a living off the first two. Regardless of whether you belong in one of those categories, you might still fall in love with the island.

The top draw is Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Cozumel and its clear, warm, coral-filled waters. Jacques Cousteau agreed that Cozumel's diving and snorkeling are world class, and even non-swimmers can take a gander at these vibrant reefs from a glass-bottom boat or submarine. Cruising the island's downtown, you'll see murals filled with undersea life, and it's also highly gratifying to explore the lesser-visited parts of the island. Zipping around on the coastal road, you'll discover wind-swept shores, small Maya ruins and cliffside beach bars. Evenings are for feasting on freshly caught seafood, or perhaps heading back into the water for some glorious night diving.

TOP TIP

If you rent a car, scooter or bike there are a few things you need to know: most streets in San Miguel are one-way; beware of the abundant potholes and speed bumps; and if you ride a scooter without a helmet, cops will ticket you.



RUBI RODRIGUEZ MARTINEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Aerial view, Isla Cozumel

**SIGHTS**

- 1 El Castillo Real
- 2 El Cedral
- 3 Jade Cavern
- 4 Mayan Bee Sanctuary
- 5 Pueblo Del Maiz
- 6 Punta Molas

7 Punta Sur

Eco Beach Park
Adventure Park

8 San Gervasio

- 9 Aldora Divers
- 10 Atlantis Submarines

ACTIVITIES,**COURSES & TOURS****11 Chankanaab Beach**

Adventure Park

12 Deep Blue**13 ScubaTory**

I LIVE HERE: UNUSUAL & AMAZING DIVE SITES

**Miranda Ríos**

González is a Cozumel diving guide and the owner of the tour company Miri Adventures. She recommends these advanced and extraordinary dive sites:

Cave of the Sleeping Sharks

North of the island, this site is a must-do for shark lovers. There are several caves where you can find 2m Caribbean reef sharks. Some are in a sleep-like state, others are wide awake.

Eagle Ray Wall

Also north of the island, this is a site where local divers monitor eagle rays. We have seen groups of up to 40 of them traveling together.

Devil's Throat

An advanced dive to 40m off Punta Sur, suitable for people who like going deep and squeezing into confined spaces.

Underwater Adventuring

SUPERLATIVE SNORKELING AND DIVING

Lots of visitors to Cozumel rent gear and **snorkel** around the accessible sites just off the island and in front of the beach clubs. There's one very good spot just north of San Miguel, where a rocky shore and a series of concrete blocks offer hiding spots that tend to attract marine life. If you prefer a ladder and a lounge when you're done, the best beach clubs for snorkeling are Buccanos, Sky Reef and Playa Palancar Beach Club. You'll pay to enter and/or dine at the clubs, but save on boat fares. The best snorkel spots require getting into deeper water. Tour operators, including **Deep Blue**, offer frequent trips to lively snorkel spots on the island's southern part, including Palancar, Colombia and El Cielo.



BEST ISLAND TOUR COMPANIES

Gozumel

E-bike tours in the city and along the coast with personable, English-speaking guides.

Smiggie's Concierge Services

Highly engaging city walking tours, off-roading 4WD tours and snorkeling trips to El Cielo.

Gala Naturaleza

Bird-watching tours to spot endemics such as emerald hummingbirds and golden warblers.



BEST SNORKELING SITES

El Cielo

Shallow turquoise water, ideal for gliding among starfish, stingrays and fish. Only accessible by boat.

Punta Sur Reef

A 20-minute swim from the island's southern shore; a coral reef teeming with fish and purple sea fans awaits.

Palancar Shallows

Stunning underwater gardens with coral, sponges, fish, turtles, rays and eels. Excellent visibility, some current. Boat required.

Colombia Gardens

Massive, sponge-covered coral buttresses that can be seen from above, along with occasional turtles or barracudas.

Cozumel's **dive sites** offer fantastic year-round visibility (30m or more) and an eye-popping variety of marine life that includes spotted eagle rays, moray eels, grouper, barracuda, turtles, sharks, brain coral and huge sponges.

There are scores of dive operators on the island, though two reliable favorites are **ScubaTony** and **Aldora Divers**. Both limit group size, have exceedingly knowledgeable dive masters and can take you to less common and more advanced sites.

For those who'd like to see what goes on beneath the sea, but aren't willing or able to dive, there's **Atlantis Submarines**. In a vessel with large windows, you'll go down 30m for a view of coral, garden eels, lobsters and queen angel fish. You'll also pass the C-53 shipwreck, which often has divers inside.

Learning the Ways of the Maya

HISTORY AND CULTURE

Depending on which archaeologist you ask, Cozumel either served as a trading center or a pilgrimage destination for the Maya, who established some 30 settlements around the island. The best preserved is **San Gervasio**, located in the island's interior. The complex is thought to have contained the sanctuary of Ixchel, goddess of fertility, and was thus a site Maya women – especially prospective mothers – traveled to for worship.

Another modest ruin is found in **El Cedral**, the oldest Maya settlement on the island, which has a small temple, a modern church and an adjacent plaza for markets and festivals. There's also **Jade Cavern**, a bat-filled cenote that for the Maya was an entrance to the underworld. Swim if you must, but the water is cloudy and questionable.

The most entertaining Maya attraction is **Pueblo de Maíz**. Upon entry, employees in elaborate Mayan costumes paint your face with natural pigment, purify you with sacred incense and introduce you to a stone carving depicting goddess Ixchel. From here, a guide in a Mayan headdress escorts you into a series of *palapas*, where hands-on activities highlight the ancient Maya lifestyle. You make *tamales* by hand. You sample chocolate and *pozol* (a corn drink). You test the strength of agave fiber. The experience is mostly light-hearted, with lots of jokes about human sacrifice, but the drumming, dance and fire-stomping finale is intense and impressive.

If you're thirsty for more, continue to the **Mayan Bee Sanctuary**. The island was a pre-Hispanic honey-producing center, and guests at this sanctuary meet stingless bees, taste their honey and visit a small cenote.



BEST BEACH CLUBS ON ISLA COZUMEL

Buccanos

Zona Hotelera beach club with decent snorkeling, a tasty restaurant and free tequila tastings.

Mr. Sancho's

Long-standing, family-centric beach club with kayaks for use and horseback-riding tours.

Paradise

Floating water park and banana-boat rides for the kids; massages, day beds and all-inclusive drinks for the adults.

SOLARIS/S/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Snorkeling, Isla Cozumel

Island Cruising

BEACHES, NATURE AND LIGHTHOUSES

To circle the island and visit its far-flung corners, you'll either need to rent a car or a scooter, though some intrepid souls do rent bicycles for the day and cruise the bike path on the scenic – if windy – east side. The easiest thing to do is jump on one of the many island tours in various vehicles, including vans, 4WDs, taxis, convertible VW buggies, ATVs and e-bikes. Whatever vehicle you end up in, you'll only need a day to circumnavigate the drivable part of the island.

The most rewarding stop, despite a steep entrance fee, is **Punta Sur Eco Beach Park** at the southwestern tip of the island. Here you'll find a lighthouse, a small nautical museum and a Maya ruin. Then you can continue along the coastal road past an observation tower, from where it's possible to spot migratory birds and crocodiles. Continuing farther, west you'll reach a white-sand beach with a shallow reef, a couple of open-air restaurants and free boat tours (noon, 1pm and 2pm) around Laguna Colombia. Just driving around the park, you're likely to spot coatimundis, pygmy raccoons and tortoises, and the pristine habitat exudes a castaway vibe.

To reach the far northeast of the island, **Punta Molas**, you'll want to join an off-road tour with either Omar's Island Buggy Tours or Cozumel Lighthouse Project to avoid getting stranded on the remote dirt road. The tour makes stops at some fairly good beaches, where you can go snorkeling, and you'll also visit the small Maya ruins of **El Castillo Real** (The Royal Castle).



ART OF THE SEA

Undersea life has inspired works of art all over Cozumel. When out and about, look for murals created by Sea Walls Cozumel, a PangeaSeed foundation project that brought artists together in 2015 and 2019 to create a total of 57 murals. They're meant to raise awareness about ocean conservation and responsible coastal development, and there's a map at cozumelmycozumel.com/cozumel-sea-walls.

Divers and snorkelers can find underwater sculptures in Chankanaab Beach Adventure Park and off the coast near Sunset Bar, where an artist installed a giant DNA molecule sculpture that doubles as an artificial reef. Volunteer with the Cozumel Coral Reef Restoration Program to clean the sculpture and visit a coral rescue garden.



WHERE TO EAT ON ISLA COZUMEL

Kondesa

Upscale seafood restaurant in a jungle-shrouded environ. Don't miss the lionfish cakes. \$\$\$

Cervecería Punta Sur

The island's first and only microbrewery serves satisfying local brews and a mean lionfish pizza. \$\$

Rasta Bar

The drive to this east coast *palapa* is worth it for the ocean views and mouthwatering coconut shrimp. \$



BEST PLACES FOR A SUNDOWNER

Coconuts

Whacky bar out east, with the highest perch in Cozumel. Defined by silly signage, bras and underwear and a pet crocodile.

Hemingway Lounge & Night Club Bar

Swanky *palapa*-topped restaurant bar with two levels of gorgeous ocean views and an Instagram-ready heart-shaped dock.

Alberto's Beach Restaurant

Dive-y, toes-in-the-sand hideaway with a live local rock band on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, and straight-off-the-boat seafood.

Buccanos at Night

This beach club goes upscale in the evenings when it opens a cocktail lounge and fancy rooftop restaurant.



Chankanaab Beach Adventure Park (p247)

LOST IN THE MIDWEST/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cozumel after Dark

BE A CREATURE OF THE NIGHT

For those willing to brave the water after dark, night snorkeling is an exceedingly rewarding endeavor, as a different variety of sea creatures can be spotted and the vibe is delightfully spooky. If you're a beginner, the best way to start is by contacting Daniel Mendoza Iglesias on his Instagram page (@night_snorkel_cozumel). He's a certified dive guide who has been leading groups into the shallows at night for nearly five years. He provides all the gear you'll need, including wetsuit, mask, fins, snorkel and an extra-bright underwater flashlight. Then you'll follow him into the water at one of several spots he frequents, and begin looking for small stingrays, octopuses and squid.

For divers, there are some even more exciting nocturnal options. Nearly all dive shops offer night dives in the marine park, and most will take you to shallow reefs such as Paradise, Yucab and San Clemente. It's sometimes a little nerve-wracking, and difficult to avoid bumping into other divers, but the rewards include regular sightings of octopuses, squid, eels, rays and unusual fishes. At a certain point during the dive, your guide may indicate that lights should be turned off. When you move your hand through the water quickly in the dark, microscopic plankton will glow in a display of bioluminescence. For experienced divers, Blackwater Cozumel and Aldora Divers offer blackwater dives, or night dives to around 25m in the open ocean. These dives feel like floating in outer space, and the creatures that drift by are decidedly alien.



GETTING AROUND

There are two ways to arrive on the island: by ferry or airplane. Passenger ferries operated by Ultramar and Winjet run frequently between Cozumel and Playa del Carmen from 7am to 10pm, leaving from and arriving at the

Passenger Ferry Dock. The ride takes about 45 minutes. Cozumel's small international airport is 3km northeast of the ferry terminal, and welcomes direct flights from cities across the US, Mexico and Canada.

Mexico
City

Tulum

TULUM

THE GUIDE

YUCATAN PENINSULA

Tulum's spectacular coastline – with all its confectioner-sugar sands, cobalt water and balmy breezes – makes it one of the top beaches in Mexico. Adding to the allure are the impressive Maya ruins perched above the seaside. There's also excellent snorkeling and diving, enticing cenotes nearby and buzzing nightlife on and off the shore.

TOP TIP

Bicycles and scooters can be a good way to make the 5km trip between the town and beach. Some hotels and hostels have free bikes for guests. You'll also find plenty of rental places in town, including the reliable I Bike Tulum, which has a good selection of bike and scooter rentals.

Originally named Zama ('dawn'), Tulum dates back to the late post-Classic period (1200–1521 CE), when it was an important port town. The Maya sailed up and down this coast, maintaining trading routes in other parts of present-day Mexico all the way down to Honduras.

Today Tulum is a fast-growing city, with two distinct personalities split along the seaside/town divide. The upscale beach clubs of the Zona Hotelera aim for glitz and glamour, while the center of town has a more low-key vibe with restaurants, shops and bars catering to a wide range of tastes and budgets.



Playa
Paraíso (p252)

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Tulum Ruins

SIGHTS

2 Playa Las Palmas

3 Playa Paraíso

4 Playa Pescadores

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

5 Batey

6 La Guarida

7 Místico Tulum

8 Naná Rooftop Bar



Scan this QR code for prices and opening hours.



TOP SIGHT

Tulum Ruins

Sitting pretty on a bluff high above gleaming turquoise waters, these Maya ruins may not have the imposing structures of Chichén Itzá, but no other Mexican archaeological site offers such stunning vistas over the Caribbean. Founded in the 6th century CE, Tulum reached its high point in the late post-Classic period (1200–1521 CE), when it was an important port town for trading up and down the coast.

DON'T MISS

El Castillo

Templo del Dios
Descendente

Templo de
las Pinturas

Casa del Cenote

El Castillo

Standing nearly 8m high near the cliff face, this imposing structure once served as a lighthouse that guided Maya ships to port. In the upper level, note the small windows, which would blaze with light when fires were lit in the evening. The watchtower was appropriately named El Castillo (The Castle) by the Spaniards. Note the Toltec-style 'Kukulcánes' (plumed serpents) at the corners, echoing those at Chichén Itzá.

Templo del Dios Descendente

This temple gets its name from a relief figure of a Descending God depicted in a niche above the building's door. The figure's legs are splayed, with his arms below and his face appearing beneath a headdress. His hands are holding an unknown ob-

ject. Note the slightly off-kilter slope of the walls and door, which was created intentionally by Maya builders.

Casa del Cenote

Named for the small sinkhole at its southern base, the Casa del Cenote was built atop a vital water source for the city. Peer inside and down into the depths and you might catch a glimpse of little silvery fish as they turn sideways in the murky water. A small tomb was found in the *casa*.

Templo de las Pinturas

With its columns, carvings and two-story construction, the Temple of the Frescoes was among the most elaborate at Tulum. The facade on the lower temple has relief masks and sculptures, while colored murals reside on an inner wall. The murals have been partially restored, but are nearly impossible to make out. This monument might have been the last built by the Maya before the Spanish conquest.

Templo del Dios Viento

All on its own on a high point overlooking the sea, this two-level structure is unusual for its round base, which is associated with Kukulcán, the Maya god of the wind. There's a small altar within, and evidence that the building was used for ceremonial purposes as late as the early 1900s. According to legend, when a whistling sound emitted from the building's upper story, Maya knew dangerous storms and hurricanes were approaching and they should take shelter.

Casa del Halach Uinic

A short walk from the Templo de las Pinturas, the House of the Halach Uinic is named after the royal lord (and high priest) who likely lived here. Though part of the sizable building is in ruins, you can still make out the staircase leading up to the column-lined entrance and a stucco image above the portal just beyond. It is yet another recurring image of the Descending God, which may relate to Ah Muzen Cab, the revered god of the bees.

Mirador Arqueoastronómico

Not marked on most maps is a fantastic viewpoint overlooking the ruins. Get here by turning right after passing the Temple of the Frescoes and heading west (inland) to an open expanse where you'll have a sweeping view over El Castillo and the surrounding temples. A small sign points out the perfect alignment of the buildings in relation to solstices and equinoxes. At sunrise during the winter solstice, sun beams stream through an opening in the top of the Temple of the Descending God.

ABANDONMENT

The city was abandoned about 75 years after the Spanish conquest. It was one of the last of the ancient cities to be abandoned; most others had been given back to nature long before the arrival of the Spanish. But Maya pilgrims continued to visit over the years, and indigenous refugees from the War of the Castes (1847–1901) took shelter here from time to time.

TOPTIPS

- Visit at 8am or late in the day.
- You can skip the line by booking a guided tour.
- Bring a hat, sunscreen and water, as there isn't much shade in the site.
- Pack your swimsuit for a dip in the ocean after exploring the ruins.
- Get here by bicycle (it's a 3.5km ride from the town center) or *colectivo* – any Playa del Carmen-bound shared van will drop you on the highway, from where it's a 1km walk to the ticket booth.
- From the beach near the ruins, you can book a one-hour boat tour that includes panoramic temple views from the sea followed by snorkeling.



GETTING TO THE BEACH

You can hop on a bike and head to the shore – it's about 5km from the town center to Playa Pescadores. By public transit, *colectivos* runs frequently from the Parque Rotario. These shared vans stop at the beach-road T-junction, from where you'll have to walk to beaches along the north shore (it's 1.5km to Playa Las Palmas). If you're heading to the southern beaches, the *colectivo* continues south to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve entrance before turning around. Hop off anywhere along the way. If you have a car, you'll have to pay for a parking lot (M\$250 and up) or a beach club (upwards of M\$500). Taxi fares are generally outrageous, with quoted rates from M\$400.



SIMON DANHHAUER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Playa Paraíso

Tulum Beaches

SHORELINE EXPLORING

Palm-backed beaches overlooking cerulean seas – Tulum doesn't lack for pretty shoreline. Adjacent to town, 10km of sublime white sands lie between the Tulum ruins and the Sian Ka'an Biosphere fronting the Caribbean, which is clear and temperate almost year-round. Get an early start to claim a prime spot.

As you head north from Sian Ka'an along the leafy beach road, an unexpected opening in the tropical forest appears, acting like a window into another realm. It's **Playa Las Palmas**, a wide, sloping beach with tranquil blue water, a rocky cove on one end and a ribbon of white sand on the other.

Head another 700m north and you'll reach the entrance to **Playa Paraíso**. Home to several restaurants and beach clubs, this is the place to come for people-watching and bass-heavy beats, with servers weaving between lounge chairs and beach beds, loaded down with ceviche platters and cold drinks.

A short hop (300m) up the beach, you'll reach **Playa Pescadores**, which was once a fishing community. These days, the boats pulling up on the sands are more often used for snorkeling trips out to the reef. Consider booking an excursion, not only for a peek at the underwater world but also for the



MEMORABLE MEALS IN TULUM

La Negra Tomasa

Festive, garden-like spot for indulging in seafood-centric tacos, *tostadas* and sharing plates. \$\$

La Hoja Verde

Tulum's best vegetarian restaurant draws fans for breakfast, lunch and dinner and also offers cooking courses. \$\$

Asado Argentino

One of several food carts near Pemex (off Géminis Norte), this place fires up mouthwatering grilled steak. \$

stunning views of the nearby ruins from the water – a vantage point that really showcases the magnificence of Tulum’s glorious coastline.

Tulum’s southern shore has no free public access, though you can reach the water through beach clubs and restaurants. Some places, like **Akiin Beach Tulum**, require you only buy something – even just a drink. Other places have much higher minimum consumption charges to use the facilities.

Off-the-beaten-path in Sian Ka’an

REMOTE BEACHES AND WILDLIFE

Ten kilometers south of Tulum, an arch over the coastal road marks the entrance to **Sian Ka’an** (Where the Sky is Born), a jungle-clad biosphere reserve with beautiful beaches and wildlife-watching opportunities. After writing your details in the registration book and paying your fee (M\$100 per person), you’ll continue on a badly pockmarked dirt road lined with dense forest.

Around 3km from the entrance, you’ll reach a spot where you can arrange a boat tour on the lagoon. This two-hour experience (per person from M\$750) allows the possibility of seeing manatees, crocodiles and many birds around the large, island-dotted lagoon.

A couple of kilometers farther along, you’ll reach a small gap in the trees, with parking for a few vehicles and a path leading down to the water. This is one of your only chances to access the beach (private properties block access elsewhere along the road), so it’s worth stopping and spending some time down by the ocean. The views across this empty stretch of sand are magnificent.

Another 10km farther along, you’ll reach the **Puente Boca Païla**, where the road travels across the lagoon just before it intersects with the sea. Stop here to look for birdlife, turtles and sunning crocodiles.

The going gets progressively tougher the farther south you go, and it typically takes about three hours from Tulum to reach **Punta Allen**, a mere 43km away. This end-of-the-road town has a few simple guesthouses and restaurants, as well as boat captains who can take you on a variety of tours (wildlife-watching, snorkeling and fishing).



BEST SHOPS IN TULUM TOWN

Kaahal Home

High-quality, ethically sourced ceramics, tapestries and jewelry, with an emphasis on sustainability.

Honestà Vintage

Apparel from decades past as well as upcycled designs – vintage fabrics turned into modern tops, and boots featuring repurposed denim.

Mixik

Colorful store with a range of folk art and crafts.

La Valentina

Stocks more than 400 different types of tequila, plus mezcal, sotol (made from the desert spoon plant) and Mexican wines.

Panna e Cioccolato

Serves up Tulum’s best gelato.



THE MUYIL CONNECTION

There’s also access to the Sian Ka’an biosphere reserve from the north. Near the ruins of Muyil (p260), you can take a boat tour across Muyil Lagoon, go for a swim on an ancient canal built by the Maya and spot abundant wildlife.



TOP CAFES IN TULUM

Raw Love

Plant-based cafe with creative dishes served in lush outdoor settings in town and on the beach. \$\$

Ki’Bok

Enjoy a chai latte or flat white (plus satisfying breakfast and lunch fare) while relaxing in the garden. \$\$

La Fournée

A petite slice of Paris in Tulum, with buttery croissants, fresh-squeezed orange juice and filling baguette sandwiches. \$\$

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO GO OUT IN TULUM



Founder of Honesta Vintage, and best friend of Margarita (her canine companion), **Lucia Dao** shares her favorite local haunts.

La Guarida

A multispace bar that has live music, DJs spinning vinyl and periodic film screenings, plus cozy places to hang out (including a room with pillows where you can stretch out).

Recíprico

A place that makes you feel like you're out in the countryside, even though it's only a few minutes from Tulum. Mostly a daytime spot for breakfast and lunch, it hosts occasional special events, like **L8 Nai**, featuring DJs and stand-up (comedy).

Bandera

Friday and Saturday there's always a good party on, and it has a more local and welcoming feel than many other places.



ABRUJO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Sian Ka'an (p254)

Bar-hopping in Tulum

BARS, GARDEN LOUNGES AND BEACH CLUBS

Tulum has buzzing nightlife, complete with live music, tropical cocktails and lush terraces. Calle Centauro Sur, just off Avenida Tulum, is the epicenter of the action. Start the night at **Batey**, a much-loved expat watering hole with a back garden where bands perform; the sidewalk-side bar gives a prime view for people-watching. Don't miss Batey's signature drink: mojitos made with freshly pressed sugar cane – you can watch the hard-spinning workers in action on the painted VW bug just behind the bar.

One block away, **La Guarida** makes a great hideaway for an evening of cocktails, snacks and first-rate wines. You'll find rooms and terraces secreted in the multilevel space, and there's often live performances of funk, soul, flamenco, reggae and other sounds. Other nights, vinyl-spinning DJs draw dance lovers.

Naná Rooftop Bar feels just off the beaten track (it's about a 10-minute walk from Centauro Sur). Head up to the 4th floor and enjoy the lounge-like vibe, breezy views and well-made cocktails. When you're ready to pick things up a notch, head over to **Mistico Tulum**, with tables set in a lush garden. You can order food, smoke from hookahs and catch DJ sets while fire dancers show off their skills.

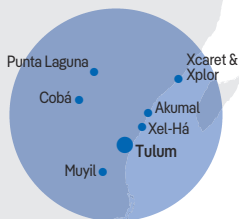
Tulum's beach clubs are largely a daytime affair. On weekends, however, you can catch some of Tulum's best parties at places like the **Papaya Playa Project**. On Saturday nights, this upscale hotel, restaurant and beach bar hosts DJ sessions in a captivating seaside space. It's best known for full-moon parties, held on Saturdays closest to the full moon. Book tickets online in advance.



GETTING AROUND

The centrally located ADO bus terminal on Avenida Tulum has frequent long-distance service to Cancún (city and airport), Bacalar, Mérida and other key places.

Colectivos leave from several places on Avenida Tulum for Playa del Carmen. *Colectivos* to Cobá leave from Osiris Norte, just off Avenida Tulum.



Beyond Tulum

This stretch of coast and hinterland is packed with natural and human-made wonders, from ancient ruins to coral-fringed beaches.

The Maya left their mark in ways both small and large in the region surrounding Tulum. The magnificent ruins of Cobá were once home to an enormous population center, while at Muyil you can float along centuries-old canals created by Maya engineers. Places named by the Maya still link to the present, as is the case with Akumal – ‘Place of the Turtles’ – one of the top beaches for snorkeling amid marine life. The Maya aren’t really just figments of the past, of course. Their ancestors live all across Quintana Roo and the Yucatán Peninsula, where some 700,000 people still speak Mayan. You can also take part in ecotourism adventures run by a small Maya community at Punta Laguna.

TOP TIP

If you need a break from the bustle of Tulum, you can overnight in the quiet lakeside town of Cobá.

NATALIYA HORA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Nohoch Mul (p258)

DIY SNORKELING

Between the Chemuyil and Xel-Há exits is a tiny sign on the east side of the highway marking a short dirt road that leads to the two arching bays Xcaceel and Xcacecito. This is one of the loveliest and cleanest beaches along the Riviera Maya. You'll find good snorkeling here (bring your own gear) and, most notably, Quintana Roo's most important loggerhead and white sea-turtle nesting site. The site is managed by a local community, with a small charge for admission. Food, drinks and the use of sunblock are prohibited on this protected beach (open 10am to 4pm, closed Monday).


CNOBY/GETTY IMAGES ©

Sea turtle, Akumal Bay

The Sea Turtles of Akumal

SNORKELING ADVENTURES

Akumal lives up to its name with sea turtles feeding in the clear waters off the palm-backed beach. Until recently, visiting here was a bit of a free-for-all, with tourists, guides and kayakers crowding around and sometimes touching turtles. Since the creation of the nature reserve **Tsúuk Akumal Parque Natural** (admission M\$120), however, regulations have brought conservation to the forefront, and life has improved for the turtles and other marine life.

To access the aquatic reserve beyond the beach, you'll have to book a guided snorkel tour (M\$500), where a certified English-speaking guide will swim with you around the sanctuary (the use of a life vest, mask and snorkel is included). During the 45-minute tour, you'll likely see several ray species, tropical fish, coral and the fragments of an old shipwreck. The sea turtles, of course, are the stars of the underwater world, and nothing compares to watching a massive, but graceful animal munching along the sea floor then poking its head above water while making eye contact with you.

Akumal is also home to **Laguna Yal-Kú**, which lies about 2km past Tsúuk Akumal Parque Natural. Although turtles are sometimes spotted here, this inviting lagoon is better known for its abundance of fish life, and the crystal-clear water allows for prime viewing. At both sites, sunblock is prohibited so wear a rash shirt and seek shade when you're not in the water.

Akumal is 30km north of Tulum, just off the highway to Playa del Carmen. You'll find decent dining and snack options in a complex across the street from the reserve entrance.



WHERE TO EAT IN AKUMAL

La Cueva del Pescador

This relaxed restaurant grills up excellent seafood and also runs fishing tours (it'll cook what you catch). \$\$

Turtle Bay Cafe & Bakery

A good anytime spot with hearty breakfasts, Tex-Mex fare and burgers, plus homemade ice cream. \$\$

La Buena Vida

Huge menu of seafood, plus snacks and cocktails in an open-air setting above the beach. \$\$

A Day at the Adventure Park

AQUATIC AND AIRBORNE ACTIVITIES

Theme parks are always a big hit with children, and there are several between Cancún and Tulum, many with fantastic scenery – truly some of the most beautiful lagoons, cenotes and natural areas on the coast. Sure, some people will find these places overly touristy, but the kids couldn't care less. Most of these parks are pricey (admission US\$110 and up), but their websites often offer presale online discounts.

It's worth mentioning that some parks offer an optional swim-with-dolphins activity, and though it may seem like a lovely idea, animal welfare groups suggest interaction with dolphins and other sea mammals held in captivity creates stress for these creatures, and it's best avoided altogether.

Located 6km south of Playa del Carmen, **Xcaret** is one of the originals, and it's easy to spend an entire activity-filled day swimming in underground rivers, hanging out on the beach and beside natural pools, and visiting an aquarium, butterfly enclosure and aviary. There are also shows (dancing, high-flying *voladores*) and appealing dining options.

A short hop from Xcaret, **Xplor** is an adventure-lover's playground where you can go zip-lining, drive an amphibious ATV through the jungle, paddle beneath stalactites in an underground river and swim and hike through caverns. A buffet lunch, snacks and drinks are included with admission.

Some 13km north of Tulum, **Xel-Há** bills itself as a natural outdoor aquarium. It's built around an inlet and has lots of water-based activities, namely snorkeling in cenotes, a hidden bay and the slow-moving river. There's also a 30m tower with a fine view that doubles as a spiraling waterslide. Food is part of the package deal.

Cycling the Ruins of Cobá

EXPLORING A MASSIVE MAYA SITE

Cobá's ruins include the tallest pyramid in Quintana Roo (the second tallest in all the Yucatán) and the thick jungle setting makes you feel like you're in an Indiana Jones flick. Given the distances between some temples, the best way to explore the area is by bike. You can rent one just inside the main gate.

Before you even reach the bicycle concession, turn right to visit the cluster of sites known as the **Grupo Cobá**. Here you'll find dozens of structures, including courtyards, vaulted rooms and a *juego de pelota* court. The biggest structure here is **La Iglesia** (The Church), a towering pyramid that reminded early explorers of a massive medieval cathedral, hence the name.

THE GUATEMALAN CONNECTION

Once home to some 40,000 Maya, Cobá has a rather unusual design: its towering pyramids and stelae resemble the architecture of Tikal, which is several hundred kilometers away, rather than the much nearer sites of Chichén Itzá and the northern Yucatán Peninsula. Archaeologists say that between 200 and 600 CE, when Cobá had control over a vast territory of the peninsula, alliances with Tikal were made through military and marriage arrangements in order to facilitate trade between the Guatemalan and Yucatecan Maya. Stelae appear to depict female rulers from Tikal holding ceremonial bars and flaunting their power by standing on captives. These Tikal royal females, when married to Cobá's royalty, may have brought architects and artisans with them.



DINING OUTSIDE TULUM

Tulum Cervceria Artesanal

Handsome restaurant and craft brewery with a sustainable focus and outstanding catch of the day. \$\$\$

Oscar & Lalo

Tuck into seafood-stuffed *poblanos* and other temptations in a tranquil garden-like space. \$\$

Pandano

Come for sunset at this upscale beachfront restaurant that serves well-executed Italian and Mexican fare. \$\$\$



BEST PLACES TO STAY & TO EAT IN COBA

La Casa de los Gorditas

Inviting, open-sided place with a small menu of thoughtfully prepared Yucatecan cuisine. \$\$

Chile Picante

Makes everything from vegetarian omelets with *chaya* (Mexican tree spinach) to *panuchos* (bean-filled tortillas with toppings). \$

El Cocodrilo

Palapa restaurant with classic Mexican fare, just a short stroll from the ruins. \$

Aldea Cobá

A lovingly designed, jungle-set resort where rooms feature furnishings crafted by local artisans. \$\$\$

Mayahau Cobá

This budget-friendly option has comfy rooms above a decent restaurant, within walking distance of the ruins. \$\$

Kaab Cobá

Handsome, well-equipped rooms overlooking the lake, a short walk to the ruins. \$\$

Afterwards, pick up a bike and hit the trail to **Grupo Nohoch Mul**. You'll past several interesting sights along the way. Northeast of the Grupo de las Pinturas turnoff, you'll reach the second of Cobá's two *juego de pelota* courts. Look at the ground in the center of the court to spot a carved stone skull (the winner or loser of the ball game?) and the carved relief of a jaguar. After the ball court, the track bends between piles of stones – a ruined temple – and you reach a junction of sorts.

Turn right (east) and head to the structure called **Xaibé**. This is a tidy, semicircular stepped building, almost fully restored. Its name means 'the Crossroads', as it marks the juncture of four separate *sacbé*s (ceremonial limestone avenues or paths between great Maya cities). Going north from here takes you past **Templo 10** and **Stela 30**. The exquisite stela – worn, but not so badly as the others – bears the date AD 730 and a familiar theme: a ruler standing imperiously over two captives. In front of it is a modern line drawing depicting the original details.

Leave time to admire majestic **Nohoch Mul**, a 42m-high temple and the second-tallest pyramid on the Peninsula after Calakmul. Climbing is no longer allowed, so you'll have to use your imagination to visualize the two gods carved over the doorway in one of the upper niches. Built in the post-Classical period (1100–1450 CE), they are similar to sculptures at Tulum.

Back in the saddle, return to the fork in the road and turn left. You'll soon reach the **Grupo de las Pinturas** (Paintings Group). The temple here bears traces of glyphs and frescoes above its door and remnants of richly colored plaster inside. Leave by the trail at the northwest (opposite the temple steps) to see a stela beneath a *palapa*. Here, a regal figure stands over two others, one of them kneeling with his hands bound behind him.

Continue by bike up to **Grupo Macanxoc**. These buildings are notable for the numerous restored stelae, some of which are believed to depict reliefs of royal women from Tikal. Though many are worn down by the elements, a number are still in good condition and are worth the effort getting here.

Cooling Cave Swims

THREE CENOTES WITHIN REACH OF COBÁ

On hot days, these subterranean water holes, clustered near one another, make for perfect dips. If you're not driving, you can rent a bike in Cobá. The first of the bunch (6km southwest of Cobá) is **Choo-Ha**, a stalactite-filled cavern that has shallow waters ideal for younger children. A short hop from here, **Tamcach-Ha** is much deeper and has several platforms from which thrill seekers can leap into the water. Head back to the main road and continue another 3km to reach **Multum-Ha**, which has remarkably clear waters.



CENOTES & LAGOONS WEST OF TULUM

Laguna Kaan Luum

Halfway to Muyil, this large lagoon has safely roped-off turquoise waters. Overwater hammocks are great photo ops.

Cenote Corazon

Some 7km west of Tulum, this heart-shaped cenote feels like a verdant oasis.

Cenotes Escondido & Cristal

An easy bike ride from town, Escondido is jungle-clad with clear waters. Across the road, lush Cristal has several swim platforms.

PHOTO SPIRIT/SHUTTERSTOCK



Nohoch Mul

Lagoon-Side Adventures

MONKEYS, RAPPELLING AND ZIP-LINING

Some 20km northeast of Cobá (about an hour's drive from Tulum), **Punta Laguna** makes a good side trip when visiting the temples of Cobá. Here, a small Maya community runs an ecotourism project in the **Otoch Ma'ax Yetel Kooh Nature Reserve**. The centerpiece of the reserve is the sparkling lagoon and the wildlife-filled forests surrounding it.

There are several options for visiting the reserve, though most people come for the adventure package. The experience starts with an incense-filled purification ceremony in hopes of bringing good fortune to the day's activities. You'll then join your guide on a walk through the forest in search of spider monkeys, howler monkeys and unique plant species. Along the way, you'll learn about the reserve, from its creation by *chicleros* (gum harvesters) to ongoing preservation by their children and grandchildren. Today, the reserve is run by a cooperative of 30-plus families, who live and work in the area and share in the revenue from tourism.

After the forest, you'll hop into a canoe for a paddle across the lagoon, and yet another chance to spot birds and perhaps the odd crocodile. This is followed by an adrenaline-fueled flight over the water's surface via a 240m zip-line. The last experience is a descent into the **Cenote Calaveras**, with clear water at the bottom (watch your step, lest you become an involuntary offering to the Maya gods). On the way out, stop in the small one-room museum, which has more information on the reserve's plant and animal life. You can also learn the story of the Canul brothers, who first rediscovered the area some 50 years ago.

I LIVE HERE: MAYA CEREMONIES



Local guide **Muriano Canul Abam** shares wisdom about Maya traditions.

My grandfather came to the area when he was about 30 years old, and he worked as a *chiclero* (a chicle collector) and later helped conserve this place. He was also a *H-Men*, a type of shaman who performs a variety of ceremonies, like baptisms and Maya weddings. Before he died, he taught my father and uncle about traditional Maya ceremonies, which they conduct today for park visitors. The ceremony is for purification and protection, using the smoke of the copal (a type of incense), giving a taste of the once grandiose ceremonies conducted in honor of Chaac, the god of rain, and other deities.



LODGING OUTSIDE TULUM

Zamna Tulum

Rustic-chic bungalows overlooking a forest-backed cenote 6km west of Tulum town. \$\$

Ajal Tulum

Beautifully designed treehouses, with hammock-strung balconies, within walking distance of Cenote Escondido. \$\$\$

Bayou Tulum

Glamping tents and simple en-suite cabins in a jungle-like setting 3.5km west of Tulum. \$



BEST CENOTES NEAR TULUM

Zacil-Há Combine swimming, snorkeling and zip-lining at this small, enjoyable cenote, 8km northwest of Tulum.

Gran Cenote A worthwhile but busy stop on the highway to the Cobá ruins. Snorkel among small fish and through a cavern.

Cenote Dos Ojos Offers guided snorkeling tours of some amazing underwater caverns, where you float past illuminated stalactites and stalagmites in an eerie wonderland. You can also book diving adventures here with a Tulum-based operator.

Aktun-Ha (Car Wash) The open-air cenote makes an inviting setting to unwind, with smaller crowds.



ARKADU SCHELL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Muyil

Ruins & Waterways

MAYA TEMPLES AND ANCIENT CANALS

A 23km (20-minute) drive west of Tulum, **Muyil** was the most important Maya settlement inside the present-day Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Today, amid the dense surrounding greenery, you can visit a handful of ruins, which see a fraction of visitors compared to the better-known temples in Tulum and Cobá. Afterward, it's worth paying the extra fee for the walk through the forest, and the boating and swimming excursion in the nearby waterways.

Near the entrance, **structure 7H-3** still contains visible fragments of mural painting, as well as Maya west-coast-style features such as vaulted ceilings and column-supported lintels. Follow the short trail from here to **El Castillo**, Muyil's most impressive building. Head around the back to see a stucco frieze of two herons above an upper-level portal.

Afterward, follow the 500m path through the forest. Along the way, you can climb a wooden lookout tower for views over the jungle and the lagoons to the east.

At the waterfront, boat drivers can whisk you across the **Laguna de Muyil** and through a narrow canal into **Laguna Chunyaxché**. From here, the boat docks and the best part of the trip begins. Comfortably wrapped in a life vest, you'll plunge into the crystalline water and float past mangrove trees and twittering birds. There's no effort required as the current takes you along the 800m journey.

You can reach Muyil by a *colectivo*, which departs Tulum hourly (on the hour) from a stop about one block west of the bus station on the main road, Avenida Tulum.



GETTING AROUND

Colectivos are the most affordable and reliable way of getting around the area. To head north to Akumal and the Riviera theme parks, hop in a Playa del Carmen-bound

colectivo on Avenida Tulum, and let them know where you're going. Cobá-bound *colectivos* leave just off Avenida Tulum on Calle Osiris Norte.

Mexico
City

Bacalar

BACALAR

THE GUIDE

YUCATAN PENINSULA

TOP TIP

If possible, stay next to the lagoon at a place with kayaks and stand-up paddleboards, or at least a good viewing platform. Get up early and take in the sunrise at, near, or on the water. It'll take your breath away. Early morning is also the best time to look for wildlife.

This quiet-yet-growing town still retains a lot of what's defined it for decades. You'll still see cowboys riding down the same main streets that kids zip through on skateboards, and find taco stands next to ritzy vegan restaurants. For tourists, the draw in Bacalar is a true sense of getting away from it all, combined with the chance to really see the natural and historical beauty up close: mist rising off the lagoon that's reflecting the sunrise; woodlands that still hold jaguars and tapirs; mysterious Maya ruins rising from jungle so thick you won't see them until they're right in front of you. The town is certainly growing, but at the moment that means there's good food, some nice spots for a beer, and a range of hotel options. All this in a place just a few hours' drive from the wild metropolis of Cancún.

RUBI RODRIGUEZ MARTINEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Bacalar

STROMATOLITES

Bacalar has an abundance of natural wonders, but the lagoon is home to one of the world's oldest forms of life – one that some scientists believe first put enough oxygen into the atmosphere for other forms of life to survive. Similar in some ways to corals, stromatolites are rock-like organisms that grow slowly over thousands of years, upward and outward to become cauliflower-like shapes. As they die, the calcium carbonate hardens and forms the crust on which new layers of the organism grow.

Stromatolites are fragile, delicate and easily destroyed by human interaction, so do not touch them or approach too close with a paddleboard, kayak or boat.



Bacalar Plaza

A FORT, A SQUARE, A VIEW

The commanding ruins of **Fuerte San Felipe** are unmissable, but they're only one of several lovely things that give the quiet, peaceful plaza in Bacalar its character. The fort, perched on the steep, grassy hill that descends to Laguna Bacalar, is now mostly rampart walls, dry moats and some ironwork, though there is also a small museum. Sometimes it's used as a light show; at other times, as an art exhibition.

As central as the fort is to the square, it's the view behind it – the incredible greens and blues of the lagoon – that make it so spectacular. Currently, there's just the right mix of locals and tourists, and the tourists that are here want to enjoy the town for what it is, not turn it into another Playa, Cancún or Tulum. So if you're hoping to find a piece of Yucatán where you can see the water without needing earplugs and waiting hours to find a parking spot, Bacalar is just the place.

Several tasty restaurants circle the square, there's pizza and coffee and even vegan food available and, at night, a few bars cater to a mostly relaxed, easygoing crowd hoping to make friends and mingle rather than dance the night away.



WHERE TO STAY IN BACALAR

Yak House

A fun, funky hostel right on the shore of the lagoon. \$

El Roble

Simple, cute rooms in a small, family-run hotel. \$

Hotel Laguna Bacalar

An expansive white-and-blue-themed hotel with striking views of the lagoon. \$\$



Fuerte San Felipe

Admiring Laguna Bacalar

'OOH!'-INSPIRING BEAUTY

Laguna Bacalar is one of the gems of Yucatán. The longest, largest freshwater lake on the peninsula has many different depths, from ankle-deep shallows to depths of over 90m, making it one of the prettiest lakes in the world to look at from above. It's also fascinating from below, as it connects to the underground aquifer system that's part of an expansive cave system.

It's also beautiful even just from the shoreline, with lily pads, reeds and a variety of wildlife. The lagoon is popular for a wide variety of water sports, from SUPing and kayaking, to tours in motorized *launches*, to charter sails that let you find spots that few tourists get to frequent on the opposite shore.

Whether you enjoy it actively or passively in a hammock, Laguna Bacalar is a central, unmissable part of being here.

Nightlife in Bacalar

SUBDUED FUN

The night scene in Bacalar won't hold a candle to that in Tulum, Playa or Cancún, but that's a good thing. Here you can sit down at a bar and actually have a conversation, chat with a friendly bartender, and make new friends next to you at the bar. Options range from restaurants that stay open after the kitchen closes to offer craft cocktails, such as **Nixtamal**, to bars like **I Scream Bar** with music playing...but not too loudly. Some nights you can find a decent live-music scene at **Galeon Pirata**, next to the water, which doubles as a center for art and exhibitions during the day.



CROCODILES

Mention the word 'crocodile' and many people shiver, but while crocs do live in the lagoon (and swamps and waterways all over Yucatán), they are generally not a nuisance animal here and many people never even see them. Considering the number of people in the water at all times of day, crocodile attacks are extremely rare.

Still, it's worth being aware of as you swim or sit near water and, unfortunately, at the time of research, the lagoon didn't have posted warning signs.

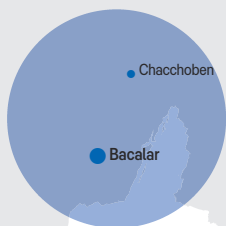
These incredible reptiles are much more active at night, so if you confine your boating or water sports to the daytime, chances are you won't even know they're out there.



GETTING AROUND

The town, like the lagoon, is long. If you're staying near the plaza, nearly everything is within walking distance. Otherwise, you'll

need some wheels. Many of the hotels and hostels have loaner bicycles for guests to use.



Beyond Bacalar

There's a lot of wonder in this region for those who seek it: jungles, ruins, wildlife, beaches, marshes and more.

This region was central to the Maya, and key ruins still lie deep in the jungle, only partially excavated or, in some cases, not excavated at all. Exceptions include the impressive Chacchoben, which is a popular cruise-ship day trip but equally worth visiting for those staying in Bacalar. On the way you can drive by (or even stop at) Limones, where another ruin stands overlooking the highway.

Getting beyond Bacalar means to venture into quiet, rural *ejidos* (communal landholdings) where people still live in the traditional Maya houses, wear the *huipiles* (long, sleeveless tunic), and raise crops in milpas. It's a lifestyle that hasn't changed much in centuries and, as such, is precious and worth seeing, respecting and preserving.

TOP TIP

Bring your own mosquito repellent from home, as the local stuff is less effective. (You'll need it, trust us!)



JEFF WHYTE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Chacchoben ruin



Spider monkeys

Chacchoben Ruin

IMPRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE TO CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Chacchoben, not to be confused with the nearby Maya town of the same name, opened relatively recently compared to more famous places such as Chichén Itzá, which were visited by Stephens and Catherwood in 1841. Chacchoben, on the other hand, opened for tourism in 2002. It's smaller and has fewer structures than its northern sister ruin, but the biggest draw is that you are still allowed to ascend many of the structures, giving an incredible bird's-eye view of the jungle and a sense of what the Maya rulers saw when these great cities were lived in. Archaeological restoration is ongoing at the site, so you may see various stages of work being done.

The parking lot is a ways from the first structures, giving you a nice walk through some jungle before arriving at a clearing and the first pyramid. The second pyramid, even taller, gives you eye-level views of both spider and howler monkeys if they're in the trees, as well as great bird-watching. While it's unlikely you'll spot one, the area does have rare species of fauna such as jaguars and tapirs, as well as more common animals such as foxes, deer and wild pigs. As with many sites in the area, the mosquitoes can be fierce and you're going to be tasty. Bring repellent!



SPIDER & HOWLER MONKEYS

The two types of monkeys endemic to this region are spider monkeys and howler monkeys, though the latter are usually more shy and often harder to see. However, as their name suggests, they are *not* usually harder to hear: their demonic roars fill the jungle, and it surprises many how such a large, scary sound can come out of a cute animal about the size of a basset hound.

Spider monkeys are named for their (vague) resemblance to tarantulas – if you give yourself mental leeway, there's a bit of similarity about the long, hairy legs and thin abdomens. Don't spend too much time directly below one or you may discover their favorite prank is to you-know-what on you from the branches above.



GETTING AROUND

Whether you come by cruise ship or from Bacalar, Chacchoben is pretty easy to get to: just line up a ride with the ground

transportation, or ask taxi drivers what they'll charge to take you there, wait, and bring you back again.

Mexico
City

Mérida

MÉRIDA

Since the Spanish conquest, Mérida has been the cultural capital of the Yucatán Peninsula. A delightful blend of provincial and cosmopolitan, it's a town steeped in history, with narrow cobblestone streets, broad leafy plazas and the region's best museums, including a fantastic collection of Maya archaeological finds. Expect excellent cuisine, atmospheric accommodations, thriving markets and a packed calendar of cultural events, with events happening just about every night. It's also a perfect place from which to kick off your adventure into the rest of Yucatán state, with dozens of sites – both laid-back coastal enclaves and vast Maya ruins – within easy striking distance.

TOP TIP

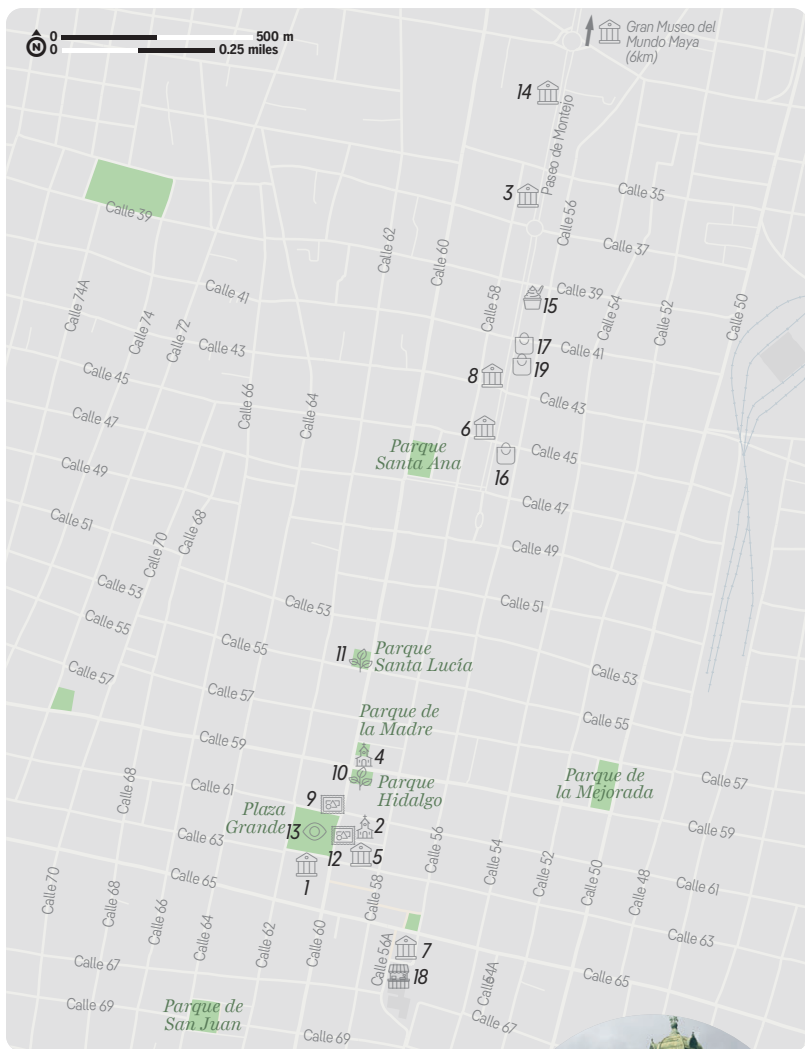
To make the city more bike-friendly, Mérida closes the main stretch of Paseo de Montejo to traffic on Sunday morning (from 8am to noon). You can rent bikes from BiciMérida, conveniently located at the southern end of the Paseo. Find out about group rides at Mérida en Bici's Facebook page.

Long popular with European travelers looking to go beyond the hubbub of Quintana Roo's resort towns, Mérida attracts many visitors, but is too big to feel like a tourist trap. And as the capital of Yucatán state, Mérida is also the cultural crossroads of the region.



ECS1K2Z/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, ROHT1 ERNEST09/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mérida

**SIGHTS**

- 1** Casa de Montejo
- 2** Catedral de San Ildefonso
- 3** El Minaret
- 4** Iglesia de Jesús
- 5** MACAY-Fernando García Ponce
- 6** Montejo 495
- 7** Museo de la Ciudad
- 8** Palacio Cantón
- 9** Palacio de Gobierno
- 10** Parque Hidalgo
- 11** Parque Santa Lucía
- 12** Paseo de la Revolución

13 Plaza Grande**14** Quinta Montes Molina**EATING**

15 Dulcería y Sorbetería Colón

SHOPPING

- 16** Casa Thō
- 17** Cielo
- 18** Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez
- 19** Poshería

**Paseo de Montejo (p269)**

I LIVE HERE: YUCATECAN INGREDIENTS



Walking guide
**Melissa Gabriela
Aguilar Cervantes**
shares insight into
Yucatecan cooking.

Yucatán is one of the best states in Mexico for its cuisine. Three *recados* (a hard-to-translate type of spice paste) are the building blocks of many Yucatecan dishes. You'll find a green kind used in *papadzules*, which are like enchiladas, but made from a sauce of pumpkin seeds. You'll find red sauces, featuring *achiote*, which give a rich flavor to *cochinita pibil* (a roast pork dish), and there are black sauces, like you'll find in *relleno negro* (a stew featuring charred peppers). My favorite dish, though, is *queso relleno*, made of cheese, cream of pumpkin seeds and *masa* (cornmeal).

Exploring the Historic Center

GRAND ARCHITECTURE, PLAZAS AND MARKETS

Feel the pulse of Mérida in the picturesque **Plaza Grande**, which has huge laurel trees shading the park's benches and wide sidewalks. Be sure to return at night, when there are often concerts and other events.

On the plaza's south side, have a look at the **Casa de Montejo**, which dates from 1540. Note the facade with its triumphant conquistadors standing on the heads of generic barbarians (though they're not Maya, the association is inescapable). There are also busts of Montejo the Elder, his wife and daughter, who once lived in the mansion. Head inside to see a **museum** with a permanent exhibition of Victorian, neo-rococo and neo-renaissance furnishings.

Continue across to the **Palacio de Gobierno**, an 1892 building that houses the state of Yucatán's executive government offices. Head across the courtyard and upstairs while taking in the lavish murals and oil paintings by local artist Fernando Castro Pacheco. Completed in the late 1970s, they portray a symbolic history of the Maya and their interaction with the Spaniards and give excellent context to any trip around the region.

One of the oldest cathedrals in the Americas faces the east side of the plaza. The 16th-century **Catedral de San Ildefonso** was built atop a former Maya temple and builders even used some of the stone from the ancient site. Inside, the massive crucifix behind the altar is known as Cristo de la Unidad (Christ of Unity), a symbol of reconciliation between those of Spanish and Maya heritage. The rest of the interior is rather austere, its rich decoration having been stripped away by angry mobs at the height of anticlerical fervor during the Mexican Revolution.

Exit the church and wander through the **Paseo de la Revolución**, a long atrium that features changing artwork. Halfway down the tunnel, you can visit the MACAY-Fernando García Ponce, a museum with a collection featuring works by Yucatán's most famous painters of the Realist and Ruptura periods. It's set in the former archbishop's palace.

Head three blocks southeast of the plaza for more insight into the past at the **Museo de la Ciudad**. Housed in the old post office, this museum traces the city's history from the pre-conquest days up through the belle époque, when *henequen* (sisal) brought riches to the region, and into the 20th century.

Nearby, you can immerse yourself in the bustling epicenter of Mérida's market district at the **Mercado Municipal Lucas de Gálvez**. Vendors sell everything from *panuchos*



WHERE TO FIND YUCATECAN CUISINE IN MÉRIDA

La Chaya Maya

Feast on all the Yucatecan classics at this much-loved restaurant with multiple locations. \$\$\$

Apoala

Dine on creative dishes that fuse Oaxacan and Yucatecan recipes under the arches on lovely Parque Santa Lucía. \$\$\$

Picheta

Head to the rooftop terrace above Plaza Grande for contemporary cuisine and imaginative cocktails. \$\$\$

BEST NIGHTLIFE IN MÉRIDA

Pipiripau Bar

The atmospheric cantina has several rooms for knocking back mezcal cocktails, as well as a garden with occasional live music.

Mercado 60

This lively food and cocktail hall promises a fun night of booze and international fare, with live music (and dancing) most nights.

La Negrita

Iconic hot spot with tropical grooves (including live salsa) and a back garden.

Bird

Beautifully designed bar featuring jazz beats, craft beer and food made from scratch (including Mérida's best pizzas).



Paseo de la Revolución

(fried tortillas stuffed with beans and topped with meat and veggies) to ceviche. In the chaotic surrounding streets, you'll also find arts and crafts for sale.

Continue north along scenic Calle 60. At the **Parque Hidalgo**, you can stop for an ice cream or a coffee, before strolling across the plaza to the side of **Iglesia de Jesús**. Dating back to the 17th-century, the church was built from a destroyed Maya temple, and you can still see several stones bearing Maya carvings.

A few blocks north, you'll reach the pretty little **Parque Santa Lucía**. The arcades on the north and west sides house several restaurants, and the outdoor tables offer prime people-watching.

Strolling the Paseo de Montejo

ARCHITECTURE, BOUTIQUES AND POX

Mérida's 19th-century city planners modeled the wide boulevard of Paseo de Montejo on Paris' Champs-Élysées. Beginning just north of the historic district, a small roundabout near Calle 47 marks the start of this easygoing amble past grand buildings along tree-lined sidewalks.



LAND OF GREEN GOLD

The *henequén* barons all had lavish homes in Mérida, but for a look at the plantations that fueled their wealth, visit the estates south of Mérida. You can learn about the abysmal conditions and see vintage machinery in action at Sotuta de Peón (p274).



BEST CAFES IN MÉRIDA

Manifesto

Small but atmospheric cafe, run by a trio from Calabria, Italy, that serves some of Mérida's best coffees.

El Apapacho

Bohemian cafe and bookshop with a mural-filled backyard and a veg-friendly menu.

Voltacafé Santa Lucia

Inviting anytime space with well-pulled espressos, breakfast burritos and *chilaquiles* (fried tortilla strips).



DELVING INTO THE MAYA WORLD

One of Mexico's best museums dedicated to the Maya, the **Gran Museo del Mundo Maya** houses a permanent collection of more than 1100 remarkably well-preserved artifacts, including a reclining chac-mool sculpture from Chichén Itzá and a cool underworld figure unearthed at Ek' Balam (check out his punk-rock skull belt and reptile headdress). If you're planning on visiting the area's ruins, drop by here first for some context and an up-close look at some of the fascinating pieces found at the sites. The museum also delves into Maya traditions, past and present. You'll find it about 12km north of downtown on the road to Progreso. Buses marked 'Siglo XXI' or 'Tapetes' will get you here (catch one on Calle 56 near Calle 61).



Gran Museo del Mundo Maya

One block up, the **Casa T'hō** houses a small collection of boutiques selling clothing, jewelry, artwork and crafts. It's inside an early-19th-century mansion, with an inviting courtyard restaurant and cafe.

Poshería, on the next block, is the best place in town to learn about *pox*, a traditional distilled spirit that was born in the indigenous Maya community in Chiapas. You can try a variety of shots of the corn-based liquor or pick up a bottle to take home. Next door, browse the high-quality hammocks in every color of the rainbow at **Cielo**.

For a break from the heat, find icy refreshment at **Dulcería y Sorbetería Colón**, a Mérida landmark selling tropical fruit sorbets served in elegant glass bowls. Try a unique flavor like zapote, guava or tamarind.

Continue up to Calle 35 and cross the street to visit **Quinta Montes Molina**, which gives a sense of the splendor and grandeur of the 'Oro Verde' (Green Gold) *henequén* era. Head back down along the west side of the *paseo*, stopping to admire the 1911 **Palacio Cantón**, the former governor's home that today houses an anthropology museum. You can also stop at **Montejo 495**, another lavish mansion museum showing how the upper class lived in the early 20th century (book a tour in advance).



GETTING AROUND

Most parts of Mérida that you'll want to visit are within 10 blocks of Plaza Grande, which means walking is often the best way to get around. Mérida's main bus terminal is the ADO

Centro Histórico TAME (Calle 69 near Calle 68), which has buses to major destinations and to the airport.



Beyond Mérida

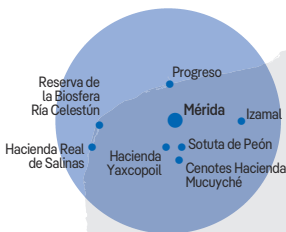
You could spend many days exploring Mérida's surrounds, with its mix of nature reserves, seaside towns, historic estates and fabled monasteries.

There's a lot to see and do within a 90-minute drive of Mérida. Tucked amid the forests south of the city are the old *henequén* plantations, some still used for cultivating leaves, others transformed into upscale lodgings with restaurants and swimming pools overlooking manicured gardens.

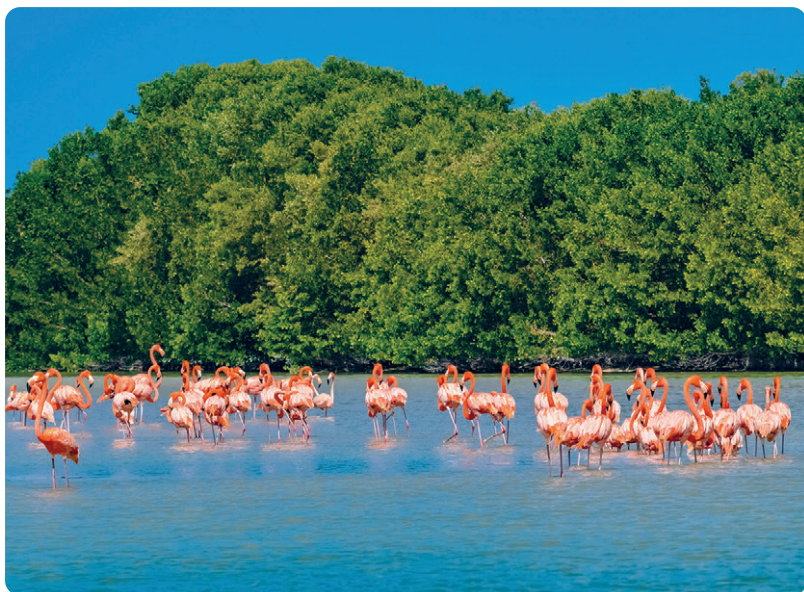
Though lacking Caribbean beaches, Yucatán state has an alluring coastline, from the vibrant beachfront town of Progreso to the more low-key fishing village of Celestún perched near a major nature reserve. Beyond these tourist attractions, there are hundreds of seldom-visited cenotes and caves, and traditional villages where life moves at an agrarian pace: locals will bike out to cut firewood or shoot a pheasant; women still wear *huipiles*, and Maya is spoken.

TOP TIP

You'll find plenty of unique places to stay, including rustic seaside cabins (Perla Escondida) and historic estates (Sotuta de Peón).



WITR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Flamingos, Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún

COAST RAMBLES

Heading east from Progreso along Hwy 27, you'll reach the mangrove-lined **Laguna Rosada** (Pink Lagoon) after 35km. Turn right on the Dzemul-Xtampú road to look for flamingos and other birds, and to visit the little-known Maya ruins of **Xcambó**.

Back on Hwy 27, continue another 5km east to reach **Reserva Ecológica Sayachaltun**, a community-run nature reserve where you can go kayaking or take a mud bath. A few kilometers farther, you can stop for a meal in the seaside village of **Telchac Puerto**, or keep going to **Dzilam de Bravo**. This small settlement is home to the delightful **Perla Escondida**, which has rustic cabins and offers memorable excursions.



MORE FLAMINGOES

Yucatán state is home to another impressive Unesco biosphere reserve. Near Río Lagartos (p286), on the north coast, you can head out on boating excursions amid flamingos and countless other bird species.



KA GRIM/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mangroves, Ría Celestún

Slow Travel in a Biosphere Reserve

COMMUNITY-RUN ECOTOURISM

A sun-scorched, west-coast fishing village, Celestún is the gateway to the **Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún**, a wildlife sanctuary abounding in birdlife, with large colonies of flamingos the star attraction. While there are plenty of motorboat operators departing from the beach, it's much more enjoyable (and better for the wildlife) to book a more sustainable excursion offered by ecotourism pioneer **Guardianes de los Manglares de Dzinintún** (contact by Whatsapp 999-645-4310 to avoid similarly named copycat imitators).

You can opt to do some paddling (in a single or double kayak) or let the guide do the work, poling you quietly along in a canoe while you watch for wildlife. Gliding across tea-colored waters, you'll pass through mangrove tunnels and into picturesque heart-shaped lagoons, with kingfishers flitting past and cormorants on mooring posts drying their wings in the sun. Huge flocks of flamingos are present from February through April.



WHERE TO FIND SEAFOOD ON THE SHORE OF RÍA CELESTÚN

La Ramada de la Tía Candi

Laid-back, family-run beach spot for coconut shrimp followed by a swim. **\$\$**

Los Pámpanos

With tables on the sand, this is a good sunset spot for flavorful ceviches and margaritas. **\$\$**

La Palapa

Iconic spot on the waterfront with an expansive menu and indoor and outdoor dining. **\$\$\$**

Biking the Wilderness

SCENIC BACKROADS AND RUINS

The **Hacienda Real de Salinas**, 5km south of Celestún, makes a memorable destination for a DIY cycling adventure. This abandoned estate once produced dye-wood and salt, and served as a summer home for a Campeche family. You can wander the ruins, noting the shells in the wall mixed into the building material, as well as pieces of French roof tiles that served as ballast in ships on the journey from Europe. Coming south from town on Calle 4, go left at the Y junction (an unpaved road flanking Puerto Abrigo), and follow this little-traveled dirt lane past lagoons where flamingos, black-necked stilts and herons are sometimes spotted. Hire bikes from **Casa Bacab** (Calle 11 near Calle 12).

Waterside Adventures in Progreso

BEACHES, PROMENADES AND SWIMMING HOLES

If Mérida's heat has you dying for a quick seaside escape, or if you want to see the longest pier (6.5km) in Mexico, head to **Progreso** (aka Puerto Progreso). The **malecón** (waterfront promenade) can get packed with diners, drinkers and over-sunned tourists, as can the beach in front of it, but they're both great places to unwind, especially for families. Start off at **Muelle de Pescadores** (fishing pier), then make your way east, passing outdoor restaurants, a skating park, some notable ice-cream shops (such as **Gelatopia**) and the dinosaur-themed **Museo del Meteorito**, which is popular with kids. There's also a small **amusement park** open in the evenings (6pm to 11pm).

Just east of Progreso's main beach, but separated by the port, is the **Playa de Cerditos**, better known by its English moniker, Pig Beach. True to name, this scenic, sandy stretch is where black-and-white rescue pigs spend their days (mostly in a pen) from 8am to 6pm. They roam the sands several times a day (currently 11am, 3pm and 5pm), freely interacting with visitors (they're usually in search of food).

Another fine place to cool off is at the **Reserva Ecológica El Corchito**. Here you can go for a dip in one of several freshwater swimming holes surrounded by mangroves. Admission includes the motorboat ride across the canal to reach the reserve. El Corchito is home to raccoons and coatis, as well as turtles and small fish (no food, sunscreen or plastic bags allowed).

I LIVE HERE: BIODIVERSITY HOT SPOT



Founder of the cooperative **Guardianes de los Manglares de Dzintintún**, **José Isaías Uh Canul** has a deep passion for Celestún's mangrove forests, playing a leading role in reforestation over the past 20 years.

The mangroves serve as an important barrier for coastal protection against hurricanes, and they also support an entire ecosystem. These mangrove forests are home to ocelots, coati, raccoons, snakes, crocodiles and countless birds – including some species like herons that build their nests in the trees. The roots are equally essential to marine life, with many fish species reproducing and laying their eggs in this protected area. Before you take an excursion, find a guide with a green heart, who really loves this place and its incredible biodiversity.



WHERE TO EAT IN PROGRESO

Crabster

Stylish upscale restaurant serving seafood-centric cuisine from an ideal *malecón* spot with beach tables. \$\$\$

La Antigua

This historic restaurant has a veranda and a pool, plus a menu of classic fare (great breakfasts). \$\$

Eladio's

A Progreso favorite for its beachfront location and abundant complementary appetizers. \$\$

I LIVE HERE: THE SACRED TREE OF LIFE



Sotuta de Peón guide and historian **Felipe A Fuentes** delves into the Maya cosmovision.

Known as Yax'ché to the Maya, the ceiba was the most sacred element of the landscape and it symbolized a communication link between the three levels of the universe. The trunk represented the middle world where humans lived, the branches symbolized the upper realm as a conduit to the heavens, while the roots guided you to the underworld (Xibalba). The tree sounds hollow if you tap on it, which, according to Maya mythology, is where the souls descended to Xibalba. The lower part of the trunk can appear wider or swollen, which to the Maya was symbolic of a pregnant woman or even Mother Earth.

A Road Trip into the Past

FADED SISAL ESTATES AND CENOTES

On a worthwhile day trip from Mérida, you can visit historic sites and cool off with a swim in a cenote. **Sotuta de Peón**, 32km south of Mérida, is the world's only working *henequén* hacienda. Reserve ahead to take one of several daily tours. Bilingual guides take you through the process from growing the plant until its fibers are packed into giant 200kg bales – which takes about 8000 leaves to create. You'll take a peek inside the beautifully restored big house, set with period furnishings, and learn about the horrific conditions for the laborers.

You'll see the old-fashioned way of producing fibers, and also massive scraping machines that revolutionized the industry. Afterward, you'll hop in a horse-drawn cart and clip clop through the countryside to an inviting underground cenote for a swim.

Around 15km south, the **Cenotes Hacienda Mucuyché** is famed for its photogenic cenotes set amid the ruins of a once-lavish *henequén* estate. Book ahead for the full experience, which includes a tour of the old buildings and swims in the crystalline waters of a verdant canal and two cenotes (one is named after the Empress Carlota of Mexico, who was the first to swim here in 1865).

On your way back to Mérida, loop up to **Hacienda Yaxcopil**, another faded *henequén* relic, complete with grazing goats. You can freely wander the French Renaissance-style buildings, many of which have undergone picturesque restorations. Don't miss the gardens at the back and the separate complex with its vintage but still-functioning machinery.

Exploring the Ciudad Amarillo

SAINTS, MAYA TEMPLES AND CRAFTS

A one-hour drive east of Mérida, **Izamal** earned its nickname Ciudad Amarillo (Yellow City) for its bright, yellow, colonial-era buildings. The small town, with its quaint plazas and horse-drawn carriages, is best known for the massive **Convento de San Antonio de Padua**, a still-functioning 16th-century monastery.

From the main plaza, take the ramp up to reach the vast arcaded courtyard, reputedly the second largest in the world after St Peter's in Rome. The monastery's principal church is the **Santuario de la Virgen de Izamal**, which is flanked by 16th-century frescoes beside the entrance. The interior is rather austere, apart from the lavish gilded altarpiece. To peer



WHERE TO DINE IN IZAMAL

Kinich

Showcases outstanding Yucatecan cuisine dished up in a massive *palapa* by servers in traditional dress. \$\$

Restaurante Zamna

Authentic home-cooked food, prepared in a huge open-sided thatched hut. \$\$

Restaurante Los Arcos

On the main plaza, this atmospheric spot has a small garden and serves Mexican classics and vegetarian fare. \$\$

IZAMAL'S GODS

In ancient times, Izamal was a center for the worship of the supreme Maya god, Itzamná, and the sun god, Kinich-Kakmó. A dozen temple pyramids were devoted to these or other gods. No doubt these bold expressions of Maya religiosity are why the Spanish colonists chose Izamal as the site for an enormous and impressive Franciscan monastery. In fact, after the Spaniards conquered Izamal, they destroyed the major Maya temple, and used its stones in constructing the Convento de San Antonio de Padua. Under the monastery's arcades, you can spot stones with Maya carvings.



Convento de San Antonio de Padua, Izamal

inside the monastery, join a guided tour, where you'll get a glimpse of the small cloister and a Marian museum devoted to the convent's star attraction: the **statue of the Virgin of Izamal**, the patron saint of the Yucatán. Numerous miracles are attributed to the 16th-century statue, and it has long attracted pilgrims, including Pope John Paul II, who visited in 1993 and gifted a crown to the Virgin.

A few blocks northeast of the plaza, visit **Kinich-Kakmó**, one of the town's original Maya pyramids. Ascend to the top of the 34m structure for sweeping views over the town and the countryside beyond.

Izamal is also known for its craft-making traditions. Just across the square from the monastery, the **Centro Cultural Artesanal** showcases popular art from around Mexico. You'll find some beautifully imaginative works in fabric, paper and clay, including an elaborate funeral procession featuring a colorfully costumed, skeltonesque cortege.



LEARNING ABOUT THE MAYA

A great place to learn about the ins and outs of Maya beliefs and cultural traditions both past and present is the excellent Gran Museo del Mundo Maya (p270) in Mérida.



GETTING AROUND

From Mérida, frequent buses make the 45-minute trip to Progreso (leaving from Autoprogreso bus station on Calle 62). From Mérida's Noreste terminal (Calle 67 and 50),

you can catch buses to either Celestún or Izamal. Transportation is more difficult to the old haciendas; you're better off renting a car.

Mexico
City

Uxmal

UXMAL & THE RUTA PUUC

Uxmal (pronounced oosh-mahl) is an impressive set of ruins, easily ranking among the top (and most visited) Maya archaeological sites. It has an array of fascinating structures in good condition and some elaborate ornamentation.

Uxmal was an important city in a region that encompassed the satellite towns of Sayil, Kabah, Xlapak and Labná. Although Uxmal means ‘Thrice Built’ in Maya, it was actually constructed five times. First settled about 600 CE, Uxmal was influenced by highland Mexico in its architecture, most likely through contact fostered by trade. This influence is reflected in the town’s serpent imagery, phallic symbols and columns.

Uxmal is the most important site along the Ruta Puuc (Puuc Route), a forested region of rolling hills dotted with Maya temples. The sites offer some marvelous architectural detail and a deeper acquaintance with the Puuc Maya civilization.

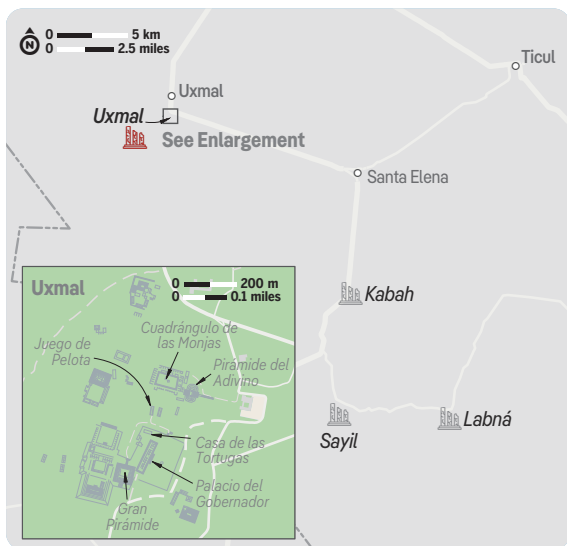
TOP TIP

It’s possible to visit Uxmal and several temples along the Ruta Puuc in one long day trip from Mérida (but you’ll want to arrive right at opening time). It’s much more enjoyable, however, to take your time and perhaps overnight in an atmospheric lodging option in nearby Santa Elena.



ALEXSANDAR TODOROVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Pirámide del Adivino



I LIVE HERE: DRINK OF THE GODS



Law student and chocolate connoisseur **Beatriz Dzul Vela** sheds light on the most important Mayan drink.

The modern word for 'chocolate' comes from the Mayan words '*chocol haa*,' which literally means 'hot water'. *Espuma* (foam) was an essential part of preparing the chocolate drink, which was used in rituals. The Maya employed three different techniques: blowing through a hollow tube, using a wooden tool for stirring, or pouring the liquid back and forth between two equal-sized cups. Creating the foam was a way of connecting or channeling the god of cacao (Ek Chuah) and it also represented the purity of the person preparing it. Some believe that if there was no foam created, the person making it might even be sacrificed.

Exploring the Ruins of Uxmal

TEMPLES, GODS AND STRUCTURES

As you approach Uxmal, you'll soon see the magnificent **Pirámide del Adivino** (aka the Casa del Adivino, which translates to 'Magician's House'). Note the unusual oval shape of the massive 35m-high temple. What you see is a restored version of the temple's fifth incarnation, consisting of round stones held rudely together with lots of cement. Decorated in elaborate Chenes style (which originated further south), the doorway proper forms the mouth of a gigantic Chaac mask.

Continue around the temple's north face to reach the sprawling **Cuadrángulo de las Monjas** (Quadrangle of the Nuns). Archaeologists guess variously that it was a military academy, royal school or palace complex. The long-nosed face of Chaac appears everywhere on the facades of the four separate temples that form the quadrangle. Several decorative elements on the exuberant facades show signs of Mexican, perhaps Totonac, influence. The feathered-serpent (Quetzalcóatl, or in Maya, Kukulcán) motif along the top of the west temple's facade is one of these. Note also the stylized depictions of the *na* (traditional Maya thatched hut) over some of the doorways in the northern and southern buildings.



OTHER ACTIVITIES AROUND UXMAL

Choco-Story

Get deep insight into chocolate (with tasting); the lush grounds also have rescued spider monkeys and jaguars.

Museo de las Momias

See unusual mummified infants and learn about syncretic burial traditions (Maya-Catholic) in Santa Elena.

Grottoes Loltún

Tour through one of the largest dry-cave systems on the Yucatán Peninsula.

OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH ADVENTURES

Near Calcehtok, 40km northwest of Uxmal, a turnoff from the highway leads down a rough and narrow road that hides some outstanding attractions. For adventure, make an excursion through the **Grutas de Calcehtok**, a cave system you can explore through belly crawls, rope descents and a shimmy through the 'birth canal.' Wear clothes you don't mind getting filthy. A few kilometers farther, **Oxkintok** is a rarely visited Maya site that's home to ancient inscriptions, plus a 15m climbable pyramid offering fine views. Two kilometers farther west, the caves of **Aktun Usil** were considered a sacred Maya site and entrance to the underworld. See petroglyphs and cave paintings on a guided tour (contact Victor or Lourdes via WhatsApp at 999-214-1342).



SOFT LIGHT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Ball court, Uxmal ruins

Pass through the corbeled arch in the middle of the quadrangle's south building and continue down the slope to the **Juego de Pelota** (Ball Court). From here, turn left and head up the steep slope and stairs to the large terrace.

The **Casa de las Tortugas** (House of the Turtles), which you'll find on top of a hillside overlooking the Juego de Pelota, takes its name from the turtles carved on the cornice. The Maya associated turtles with the rain god, Chaac. According to Maya myth, when the people suffered from drought, so did the turtles, and both prayed to Chaac to send rain. The frieze of short columns, or 'rolled mats,' that runs around the temple below the turtles is characteristic of the Puuc style.

Nearby, the **Palacio del Gobernador**, with its magnificent facade nearly 100m in length, is arguably Uxmal's most impressive structure. The buildings have walls filled with rubble, faced with cement and then covered in a thin veneer of limestone squares; the lower part of the facade is plain, the upper part festooned with stylized Chaac faces and geometric designs, often lattice-like or fretted.

On a small platform facing the palace's east side, the **Trono del Jaguar** (Throne of the Jaguar) is a two-headed sculpture of a jaguar. Their bodies joined in the middle create a flat seat



WHERE TO STAY ON THE RUTA PUUC

Nueva Altía

Ecofriendly bungalows with hammock-strung balconies in a forested setting near Santa Elena. **\$\$**

Hacienda Uxmal

Historic property with lovely tile work, wrought iron, high ceilings and a beautiful swimming pool. **\$\$\$**

Pickled Onion

Charming Santa Elena spot with *palapa*-roof *cabañas*, a swimming pool and a good restaurant. **\$\$**

upon which the ruler of Uxmal would sit or stand. Curiously, when the jaguar was first discovered near its present location, no one thought to dig beneath the statue. In 1951, however, archaeologists discovered a trove, including beads, jade earrings, spear heads and obsidian knives – over 900 pieces in all.

Southwest of the Palacio del Gobernador, the 30m-high, nine-tiered **Gran Pirámide** has been restored only on its northern side. Archaeologists theorize that the quadrangle at its summit was largely destroyed in order to construct another pyramid above it. That work, for reasons unknown, was never completed. At the top are some stucco carvings of Chaac, birds and flowers.

Road Tripping Along the Ruta Puuc

OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH MAYA TEMPLES

Some 23km southeast of Uxmal, **Kabah** is home to the impressive **Palace of the Masks**. The facade is an amazing sight, covered in nearly 300 masks of Chaac, the rain god. Around the back, check out the two restored atlantes (male figures used as supporting columns). These are especially interesting, as they're some of the very few 3D human figures you'll see at the main Maya sites. One is headless and the other wears a jaguar mask atop his head.

Continue 10km south of Kabah to reach **Sayil**, which is best known for **El Palacio**, a huge, three-tiered building with an 85m-long facade. Take the path south from the palace to reach a stela bearing the relief of a fertility god with an enormous phallus, now sadly weathered.

Farther along, **Labná** was home to some 3000 Maya in the 9th century. To support such numbers in these arid hills, water was collected in dozens of *chultunes* (cisterns), several of which are still visible. **El Palacio**, the first building you encounter, is one of the longest in the Puuc region, and much of its decorative carving is in good shape. On the west corner of the main structure's facade is a serpent's head with a human face peering out from between its jaws – the symbol of the planet Venus. Toward the hill from this is an impressive Chaac mask, and nearby is the lower half of a human figure (possibly a ballplayer) in loincloth and leggings. Labná is best known for **El Arco**, a magnificent 6m-high arch with reliefs decorating its upper facade in an exuberantly Puuc style.

WHY I LOVE THE RUTA PUUC



Regis St Louis, writer

After traveling across the flat landscapes of northern Yucatán, I always feel like I'm entering another world amid the rolling hills and thick forests of the Ruta Puuc. I relish the walks past ancient temples being swallowed by the jungle and rustic restaurants serving traditional Yucatecan fare. It's also a place to embrace slow travel. Staying a few nights (like at the verdant retreat of Nueva Altía) allows time to chat with locals who are often happy to share tips about this secluded corner of Mexico.



SEEKING THE SNAKE KINGDOM

If you're eager to see more Maya wonders, make the journey south across half of Campeche state to Calakmul (p293). Here you can climb steep pyramids for jaw-dropping views over the rainforest.



GETTING AROUND

Buses operated by Sur go to Uxmal from the Ado TAME Terminal (Calle 69) in Mérida. There are several departures daily (including 9am), returning around 3pm and 5pm. If you get

stuck, take a taxi to nearby Muna, where there are hourly *colectivos* back to Mérida. Public transportation isn't practical to reach other Ruta Puuc sites, so you'll need a car.



Valladolid

VALLADOLID

Once known as the Sultan of the East, Yucatán's third-largest city is famed for its quiet streets and sun-splashed pastel walls. Valladolid is a delight to explore with its walkable center, intriguing art collections and hidden attractions (including an open-air cenote in the downtown). The provincial town also makes a great hub for visits to Río Lagartos, Chichén Itzá, Ek' Balam and a number of cenotes outside of town.

Before 1545, the settlement served as the Maya ceremonial center of Zaci (zah-KEE). The conquistadors, in typical fashion, tore the place down and used stones from the Maya village in churches and houses. During much of the colonial era, Valladolid's physical isolation from Mérida kept it relatively autonomous from royal rule, and the Maya of the area suffered brutal exploitation, which continued after Mexican independence. Today, Valladolid is a prosperous seat of agricultural commerce, augmented by some light industry and a growing tourist trade.

TOP TIP

Bicycles are a great way to see the town and get out to the cenotes. You can rent them at Ko'ox Balak, a few blocks west of the Parque Principal. You can also reach some cenotes by *colectivo*. These depart from different points around the center; ask the locals.



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Cenote Zaci (p283)

SIGHTS

- 1 Casa de los Venados
- 2 Casa Maya
- 3 Choco-Story
- 4 Convento de San Bernardino de Siena
- 5 Diez y Siete
- 6 Iglesia de San Servacio
- 7 Museo de Ropa Étnica de México (MUREM)
- 8 Parque Franciscano Rosado

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 9 Cenote Zací

EATING

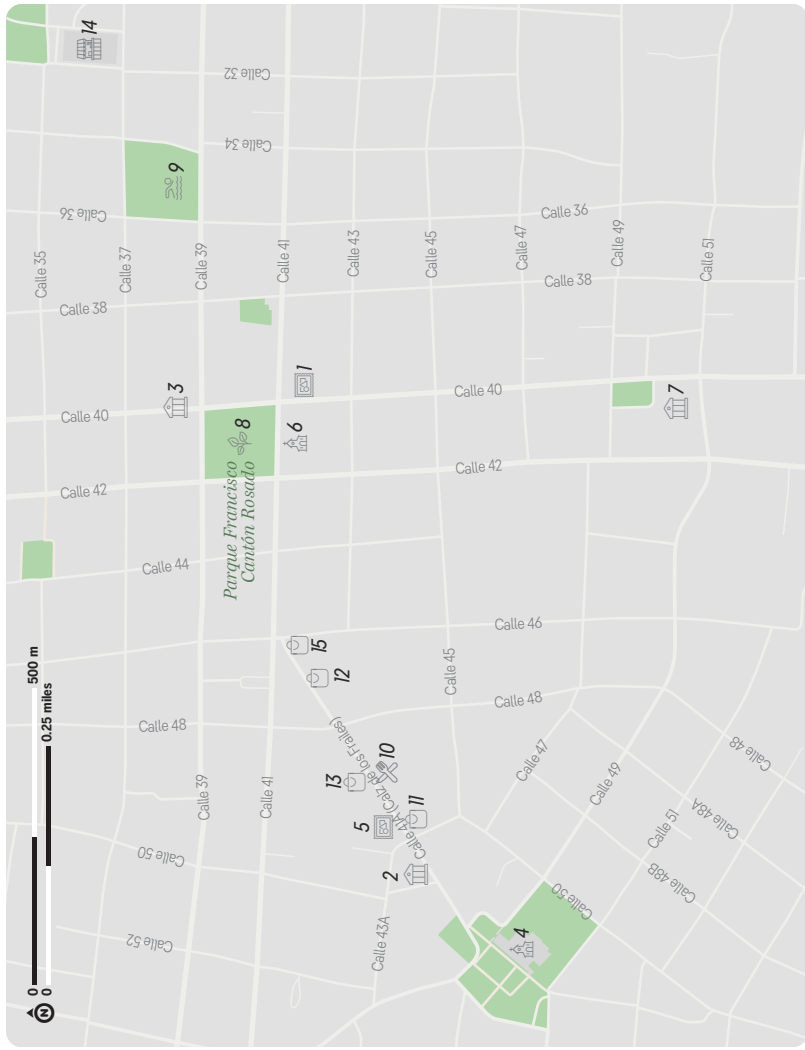
- 10 Tresvambien

SHOPPING

- 11 Caracol Púrpura
- 12 Conesencia
- 13 Coqui Coqui
- 14 Mercado Municipal
- 15 Vernaculo



Convento de San Bernardino de Siena (p283)



I LIVE HERE: VALLADOLID'S ART SCENE



The artist **Horazio Sánchez**, who leads individualized community-focussed tours and has gallery shows around town, shares insight into Valladolid's creative scene.

There are a handful of artists working in the area. One of the most established is a Chilean painter named Jaime Fierro, who lives in the small village of Tikuch, and creates a lot of works with Maya themes. Rafael Baca is originally from Mexico City, but has been living here some years. You'll find his *alebrijes* (colorful animal figurines) and other impressive works at his gallery Ik-Kan, across from Cenote Zaci. Daniel Baar creates a variety of imaginative works, including street murals.



NEKOMURA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Parque Francisco Cantón Rosado

Exploring the Historic Center

FOLK ART, CENOTES AND CHOCOLATE

Start in the leafy **Parque Francisco Cantón Rosado**, the heart of the old city. Pick up a snack from one of the vendors selling *churros*, ice cream or *elotes* (corn on the cob).

On the park's south side, peek inside the imposing Iglesia de San Servacio. The original church was built in 1545, but demolished and rebuilt in the early 1700s following a violent atrocity the town wished to forget. Note the twin bell towers and the vertical openings used during rebellions to defend the church.

Half a block from the park, the **Casa de los Venados** holds one of Mexico's best private collections of folk art. Visits are by guided tour (hourly 10am to 1pm), with docents leading you around an expat's beautifully restored colonial home. Every room is packed with fantastical works and set to different themes (including a Frida suite, with art inspired by the great Kahlo).

Head five blocks south to **Museo de Ropa Étnica de México (MUREM)**, a small but beautifully curated museum displaying traditional clothing from a number of Mexico's different ethnic groups.



WHERE TO DINE IN VALLADOLID

Yerbabuena del Sisal

Deliciously healthy dishes (many veg-friendly choices) served in a peaceful garden on Parque Sisal. \$\$\$

Mesón de Marqués

Overlooking the main plaza, you'll find a beautiful courtyard restaurant, rooftop bar and historic hotel. \$\$\$

Ix Kat Ik

Take a cab to reach this superb place for the best opportunity to eat traditional Maya cooking in Valladolid. \$\$\$

Retrace your steps to the plaza and walk three blocks north-east to the **Cenote Zaci**. The only cenote in the city center, it's small but enticing and there's a good restaurant overlooking the water. Nearby, the buzzing **Mercado Municipal** has vendors selling fruit, vegetables, flowers and a few handicrafts. You can also find food stalls selling Yucatecan fare.

End the stroll at **Choco-Story**, a fascinating museum that delves into the world of chocolate, from its importance in Maya ceremonies to its later popularity with European royals.

Strolling the Calzada de los Frailes

ART, CRAFTS AND ARCHITECTURE

Originally dating from the 16th century, the 'Friars' Lane' connected Valladolid with the indigenous settlement of Sisal. Today, this narrow 600m-long road is lined with unique shops and garden-backed cafes, along with some striking architecture from centuries past.

From Valladolid's main park, it's a couple of blocks west to the lane's start. On the left, the small boutique **Vernaculo** is known for its jaguar vases, candle holders and other unusual ceramics. A few paces farther along, find a nicely curated selection of crafts and clothing at **Conesencia**, including pottery, woven bags and dresses.

At elegant **Coquí Coquí**, browse the locally made perfumes featuring tropical accents, or have coffee in the hidden courtyard cafe. Across the street, **Tresvanbien** fires up satisfying Argentinean *empanadas* (turnovers), which you can enjoy in the back garden.

Nearby, the **Diezy Siete** gallery features rotating displays by talented local artists. You might even see resident artists at work in the back studio.

The bright-green walls of **Caracol Púrpura** invite further exploration. Inside, you'll walk past a sombrero-wearing Catrina (Day of the Dead skeleton) to see shelves arrayed with folk art and jewelry.

Farther along on the right, check out a well-preserved remnant of traditional architecture: the **Casa Maya**, better known as the 'Casita Blanca,' is a small white-washed house with a thatched roof and rounded walls.

At the lane's south end, cross the plaza and visit the fortresslike, 16th-century **Convento de San Bernardino de Siena**. Inside the church and convent, you'll find rose-colored walls, 16th-century frescoes and a small museum of weaponry and other objects found in the covered cenote on the convent grounds.

BEST CENOTES NEAR VALLADOLID

Cenote Suytun

The favorite among Instagrammers, Suytun has a stone platform lit by sunlight streaming through an opening overhead. Go early for the obligatory photo.

Cenote X'Kekén y Samulá

Admission gets you into two separate cenotes: both are underground cavern pools with striking limestone formations.

Cenote Oxman Hacienda

The former *henequén* plantation has a gorgeous cenote set in a collapsed cave with ample natural light. Tree roots cascading down to the pool add to the beauty, and there's a rope swing and a restaurant.



NIGHTS IN THE CITY

Valladolid has many fine aspects, though it's not known for nightlife. If you're looking for buzzing mezcal cantinas, craft-beer lounges and live music spots, make your way to Mérida (p266), home to the best bars in Yucatán state.



GETTING AROUND

The historic center and other nearby sites (such as the Calzada de los Frailes) are easy to navigate on foot, and bus terminals

are also in easy walking distance of the center.



San Felipe
Las Coloradas
Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos
Ek' Balam
Valladolid



Beyond Valladolid

Climb to the top of ancient pyramids and slow-boat your way through biologically diverse wetlands in this captivating corner of the Yucatán.

North of Valladolid, forest-lined Highway 295 leads past fields and tranquil villages that hide remnants of a colonial and pre-Hispanic past. The road ends at sleepy Río Lagartos (Alligator River), a fishing village that boasts the densest concentration of flamingos in Mexico. It's an appealing base for adventures in the area, from wildlife-watching to exploring deserted beaches.

En route to the coast, it's worth stopping at the scenic ruins of Ek' Balam. This compact Maya site has some impressive temples and is much more manageable in size (and draws far fewer visitors) than Chichén Itzá. Intricate stucco facades, carvings and stela give insight into a place that was mysteriously abandoned 1000 years ago.

TOP TIP

On steamy days, you can cool off in X'Canché, a cenote with zip-line, rope swing and rappelling near Ek' Balam.



Ek' Balam



Ek' Balam

Climbing Ancient Temples

FORESTED MAYA RUINS

The fascinating ruined city of **Ek' Balam** reached its peak in the 8th century CE, before being suddenly abandoned. You'll enter along a **Sak bé** (white road created by the Maya) that leads past fragments of the former walls that encircled the city and an impressive entrance arch.

Go right and pass the **Oval Palace**, which vaguely resembles a multi-tiered cake made of stone. A small temple crowns the top, which may have been used for astronomical observations. Next to the Oval Palace lie two similar vaulted structures best known as **Las Gemelas** (The Twins). Nearby, a large stela depicts two figures: the lower figure is quite possibly the great ruler of Ek' Balam, known as Ukit Kan Le'k Tok'. Above him is another ruler (or ancestor) passing to him the ruling powers. The inscribed date translates to 840 CE.

Continuing north, you'll pass a **pelota de juego** ball court as you reach the **Acrópolis**, Ek' Balam's grandest building. Before climbing this towering 32m pyramid, note the 160m-long gallery – actually a series of separate chambers. On a landing before reaching the top, you'll pass a temple with a gaping jaguar mouth, which serves as the entrance to the **tomb of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok'**. Below the mouth are stucco skulls, while above and to the right sits an amazingly expressive figure. On the right side stand unusual winged human figures (most likely shamans or medicine people). Keep climbing to reach a magnificent view over the ruins and surrounding forest.

NORTHWARD BOUND

If you're heading up to the coast, it's worth stopping in Tizimín for a look at the 16th-century **Iglesia de los Santos Reyes** (Church of the Three Wise Kings) and the attached convent along the way. Note the three empty niches in the upper level, believed to be for icons of the Three Kings to whom the church is dedicated.

Some 6km northwest of Tizimín, the community-run **Cenote Kikil** is a lovely swimming spot surrounded by pretty landscaped gardens and a restaurant. Come outside of weekends, and you'll have the turquoise waters largely to yourself.



UNIQUE STAYS BEYOND VALLADOLID

Genesis Eco-Oasis

Outside of Ek' Balam, this lovely, ecofriendly guesthouse makes a great base for cultural tourism. **\$\$**

Casona los Cedros

French-run guesthouse with stylish rooms, a photogenic pool and an excellent restaurant in Espita. **\$\$\$**

Hacienda Kaan Ac

Stay in a 16th-century estate converted into an art-filled hotel surrounded by gardens. **\$\$\$**

I LIVE HERE: AVIAN DIVERSITY



Ecotourism pioneer and founder of Río Lagartos Adventures, **Diego Antonio Nuñez Martínez** gives insight into the wonders of the biosphere reserve.

You'll find a surprising number of different ecosystems in a relatively small space here. There are coastal dunes, wetlands, scrub forests, hardwood hammocks, mangroves and, further inland, rainforest. Subtle elevation changes can bring big changes to the landscape. There are endemic birds and plants, and this makes the region much sought after by bird specialists – those seeking to see an orange oriole, jacana, Yucatán jay, crested caracara or buff-bellied hummingbird, among many other species. It's also a great place for generalists, and the migration months of September to April can be amazing for many different types of birds.



'Pink' lagoon, Las Coloradas

LU: SEAS/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: JOSE MIGUEL HERNANDEZ LEON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Adventures on the North Coast

FLAMINGOS, BOATING AND PINK LAGOONS

One of the Yucatán's great unsung wilderness sanctuaries, the **Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Lagartos** harbors a wide range of plant and animal life tucked within a mangrove-lined estuary. Many operators lead trips, but ecotourism pioneer **Río Lagartos Adventures** earns high marks for its conservationist approach.

Book an early morning or sunset boat trip for the best wild-life viewing. On a three-hour excursion, you'll see alligators and a dazzling array of birds: frigatebirds, osprey, cormorants, royal terns, kingfishers and various species of egrets and herons (including tiger herons), along with the iconic, show-stealing flamingos. Guides have an obvious love for the region and give a wealth of insight into the biosphere.

Some 13km west of Río Lagartos town, the fishing village of **San Felipe** is another great stop. From a pier near Calle 6, a cooperative of boats offers trips out to **Isla Cerritos**. Around 5km west of San Felipe, this tiny island was an important Maya trade hub, but is deserted today – apart from huge colonies of seabirds.

San Felipe's other attraction is **Isla Bonita**, an island beach just across from the village. There's a rustic restaurant with fresh catch of the day, run by a kindhearted young family – **Cejas** (986-118-1630 WhatsApp) can ferry you across; he also offers tours.

Heading 24km east of Río Lagartos town, you'll find **Las Coloradas**, with a working salt-extraction plant and a series of lagoons that appear quite pink at certain times (usually midday, under full sun). You'll have to pay to visit, opting for a guided tour either on foot, bicycle or in an open-sided truck.



GETTING AROUND

Colectivos to Ek' Balam depart Valladolid from a green taxi driveway on Calle 37, between Calles 42 and 44. To reach the coast, take a bus to Tizimin from Valladolid's

main station (corner of Calles 46 and 39) and transfer to a Noreste bus to Río Lagartos. Take a *tricítaxi* (motorcycle rickshaws) to get between Río Lagartos and San Felipe.

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

TOP TIP

At the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (around March 20 and September 22), the morning and afternoon sun produces a light-and-shadow illusion of the serpent ascending or descending the side of El Castillo's staircase. The illusion is recreated nightly (except Monday) in the sound-and-light show that starts at 7pm (8pm in summer).

SIGHTS

- 1 Edificio de las Monjas
- 2 El Caracol
- 3 Gran Juego de Pelota
- 4 Plataforma de Venus
- 5 Platform of Skulls
- 6 Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars
- 7 Plaza de Mil Columnas
- 8 Pyramid of Kukulcán
- 9 Sacred Cenote

The most famous and best restored of the Yucatán Maya sites, Chichén Itzá, while tremendously crowded, will impress even the most jaded visitor. Indeed, its inclusion in the New Seven Wonders of the World in 2007 came as no surprise at all.

Chichén Itzá was first settled around the 6th century CE and remained a purely Maya city up until around 1000 CE. This is when the city came under the marked influence (either through conquest or by cross-cultural exchange) of the Toltec, a people based in Mexico's central highlands. The substantial fusion of highland and Puuc architectural styles makes Chichén unique among the Yucatán Peninsula's ruins, with images of both Chaac, the Maya rain god, and Quetzalcóatl (Kukulcán, in Maya), the plumed serpent, throughout the city.

No one knows why the great city was abandoned in the 15th century, but it remained the site of Maya pilgrimages for many years.



Exploring the Great Maya City

ANCIENT WONDERS CARVED IN STONE

Upon entering Chichén Itzá, the **Pyramid of Kukulcán** (aka El Castillo) rises before you in all its grandeur. The first temple here was pre-Toltec, built around 800 CE, but the present 30m-high structure, built over the old one, has the plumed serpent sculpted along the stairways and Toltec warriors represented in the doorway carvings at the top of the temple.

The structure is actually a massive Maya calendar formed in stone. Each of El Castillo's nine levels is divided in two by a staircase, making 18 separate terraces that commemorate the 18 20-day months of the Maya Vague Year. The four stairways have 91 steps each; add the top platform and the total is 365, the number of days in the year. On each facade of the pyramid are 52 flat panels, reminders of the 52 years in the Maya calendar round.

Northwest of the great pyramid, stroll through the center of the **Gran Juego de Pelota**, the largest and most impressive ball court in Mexico. Temples flank each end, while the ball court's towering parallel walls are lined with stone reliefs, including scenes of decapitations of players.

Nearby, you'll find the **Platform of Skulls** (Tzompantli in Náhuatl). You can't mistake it because the T-shaped platform is festooned with carved skulls. In ancient days, this platform was used to display the heads of sacrificial victims.

Adjacent to the Platform of Skulls, the carvings on the **Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars** depict those animals gruesomely grabbing human hearts in their claws. It's thought that this platform was part of a temple dedicated to the military legions responsible for capturing sacrificial victims.

The adjoining **Plataforma de Venus** has huge, ornate and superbly preserved plumed serpent heads extending on either side of the staircases. It's thought that from the top of the platform, the planet Venus would be tracked, an important aspect of the Maya calendar, though the site's wider significance remains unclear.

From the Plataforma de Venus, a 400m rough stone *sacbé* (path) runs north to the **Sacred Cenote**, a water-filled sinkhole where victims were sacrificed to the gods. The cenote gave the city its name: Chichén Itzá means 'mouth of the well of the Itzá' (Itzá being an early Maya people).

Retrace your steps along the path and visit the **Plaza de Mil Columnas** (Plaza of a Thousand Columns), featuring a forest of pillars stretching south and east. The star attraction

DREDGING THE SACRED CENOTE

Around the year 1900, Edward Thompson, a Harvard professor and US consul to Yucatán, bought the hacienda that included Chichén Itzá. No doubt intrigued by local stories of female virgins being sacrificed to the Maya deities by being thrown into the site's cenote, Thompson set to work dredging the cenote.

Gold and jade jewelry from all parts of Mexico, and as far away as Colombia, was recovered, along with other artifacts and a variety of human bones. It appears that all sorts of people – children and elderly, the diseased and the injured, and the young and the vigorous – were forcibly obliged to take an eternal swim in Chichén's Sacred Cenote.



WHERE TO STAY NEAR CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Hacienda Chichén

Near the Chichén Itzá entrance, this garden-like resort and spa has lovely bungalows. \$\$\$

Villas Arqueológicas

Small, good-value hotel with a restaurant and a pool near the ruins. \$\$

La Casa de las Lunas

Rooms open onto a small courtyard at this popular spot in Pisté, a five-minute drive from the ruins. \$\$



Edificio de las Monjas

here is the **Templo de los Guerreros** (Temple of the Warriors), adorned with stucco and stone-carved animal deities.

Southeast of here, the rounded observatory known as **El Caracol** is one of Chichén Itzá's most fascinating buildings. Maya Chaac rain-god masks adorn four external doors facing the cardinal points, while the windows in the observatory's dome are aligned with the appearance of certain stars at specific dates. From the dome, the priests may have decreed the times for rituals, celebrations, corn planting and harvests.

Thought by archaeologists to have been a palace for Maya royalty, the so-called **Edificio de las Monjas** (Nunnery), with its myriad rooms, resembled a European convent to the conquistadors, hence their name for the building. A smaller adjoining building to the east, known as **La Iglesia** (The Church), is covered almost entirely with carvings.

NATURAL WONDERS NEAR CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Cenote de Yokdzonot

This Maya-run cenote and park in the seldom-visited town of Yokdzonot, west of Chichén Itzá, makes a refreshing stop after a day at the sunbaked ruins. There is also a restaurant on site, making it a decent lunch stop as well.

Cenote Ik-Kil

A short drive southeast of Chichén Itzá, a cenote here has been developed into a divine swimming spot. Small cascades of water plunge from the high limestone roof, which is ringed by greenery. Go at opening time (9am) to beat the tour groups that pile in after 11am.



MAYA TEMPLE TRAIL

Chichén Itzá is one of many impressive Maya sites in Yucatán state. You can also marvel at ancient engineering in Uxmal (which also has a worthwhile sound and light show) and see lesser known wonders along the Ruta Puuc (p276).



GETTING AROUND

First-class buses from Cancún, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, Mérida and other major towns stop directly at the entrance to the ruins. Depending on where you're coming from,

there may only be one bus per day. For more flexibility, you can base yourself in Valladolid (45km east) and take a *colectivo*; these run frequently throughout the day.



Campeche

CAMPECHE

TOP TIP

Stop by for lunch, come at dinner, linger over coffee or have sunset cocktails at Casa Vieja del Río, overlooking the Plaza Grande and the cathedral. The food is decent, but anything would taste great when you're taking in the sweeping view from the colonnaded balcony of Campeche's best-located restaurant.

Of all of Yucatán's cities, Campeche is undoubtedly the prettiest and the most unique, with its delightful walls around a historic, walkable center filled with houses that – painted in pastels and trimmed in white – look as if they're wedding cakes, not architecture. The cathedral, one of the region's oldest, is lovely by day and spectacular by night, and all of this is set beside a stunning, jade-green sea. Campeche has fantastic restaurants, delightful activities and is a midway point for folks going from Mérida to mainland Mexico. In 1995, it was given Unesco World Heritage status. Not bad.

The city's history is part of its charm, though if you lived here in the 1700s you might not think it was 'charming' to be sacked every year or so by pirates. The wall built to prevent this still stands and is a prime tourist attraction and part of what gives the city its delightful character.



ECS1K2Z/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Plaza de la Independencia



Exploring the Historic Center

SCENIC STREETS AND WATERFRONT VIEWS

There's just something that will make you fall in love with Campeche. There's so much to see, to do, but also...it's so beautiful. You can't tire of even just walking from your hotel to your favorite cafe, because the streets – and by 'streets' we mean buildings – are so delightfully decorated. It really does look like they're painted with cake frosting. And yes, there's bustle and hustle and traffic, but all at a slower, more relaxed, friendlier pace than in nearby Mérida. Walk around **Plaza de la Independencia**, people-watch as you hunt for souvenirs, or walk atop the city wall and look across the patchwork of rooftops at a city that's been here for centuries. Duck into a museum or two. In the evenings, dine at a cafe, with the spectacular cathedral as a backdrop for the teeniest electric police vehicles, and watch kids proudly holding neon-lit balloons as ice-cream vendors ring bells to attract customers.

Once you've ambled around the historic center to your heart's content, venture out under the arches and walk along the beautiful *malecón*, which stretches along the water for kilometers in either direction. Need a bite to eat? Grab something at one of the shrimp and fresh-seafood shacks. Feel like a boat ride? Hire a launch and zip around on the waves for a while.



CALLE 59

Campeche has many lovely spots to eat, drink and be merry, and the plaza is a great spot to start. But not far away, Calle 59 has been made into a pedestrian-only thoroughfare, with every cafe putting out tables, chairs and umbrellas so that people can dine al fresco without worrying about cars. At night, the lights come on, as does the music, and there's dancing, drinking and a whole different kind of merry. It's a delight to walk up and down the street, checking out the various options for dining or drinking, or even just looking around if you're not going to stop anywhere.



WHERE TO EAT IN CAMPECHE

La Parrochia

Delightful, old-style cafe with decent food and a mouth-wateringly good flan. \$\$

Casa Vieja del Río

Head up a narrow stairway to this 2nd-floor spot that looks out on the cathedral. \$\$

Chocol Ha

The spot for all things chocolate, with bars, bonbons, cacao items and a traditional Maya hot chocolate. \$

BÉCAL & POMUCH

Between Campeche and Mérida, two small towns deserve a stop if you have the time.

Bécal

This quiet town is famous for one thing, and one thing only: Panama hats. Known as *jipijapa* in Spanish, these are the real deal, woven underground in hand-carved caves because of the perfect humidity. Stop in for a tour or maybe get a hat. You'll look dapper if you do!

Pomuch

This sleepy town is known for its bread... and its *dead*. Yep. Bakers here turn out soft, pillowy bread that draws people from all over Yucatán. The town also has an unusual burial custom that features the openly displayed bones of the deceased. Go to the cemetery and you'll see grandmother – or her skull, rather – peeping out at you.



JOSU OZKANITZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Panama hats, Bécal

Defending the City from Piracy

IMPRESSIVE FORT WITH GREAT VIEWS

The **San Miguel fort** sits atop a high hill overlooking Campeche city and the Gulf of Mexico. It was built in the late 1700s as part of the city's effort to secure itself from marauders. The walls below protected the city. But from the fort, defenders could see hostile ships coming from far on the horizon and could fire cannons at them.

Today, the fort is a beautifully done museum of the area, with excellent rooms that depict the regional history, with lots of pre-Colombian artifacts, a bit of pirate memorabilia and some interactive exhibits. One of the highlights is a mask made of jade that came from one of the tombs in Calakmul. Other ceramics, tools and writings are shown as well. There's even a moat and drawbridge.

After checking out what's inside the museum, head out on top of it. A large ramp leads up to a flat roof area where you get superlative views of the surroundings. The bright ochre of the inner courtyard and blinding white walkway above make the area even more striking.

Getting to the fort by bus from Campeche is a bit tricky, as buses don't come up the steep hill that brings you to the museum parking lot. You can either flag down a taxi or walk.



GETTING AROUND

Inside the walled city you'll be fine just walking, but the one-way streets are doable in a car. Parking is often frustratingly far from your destination. Shared vans whisk people to parts further away. Campeche's main bus station, the ADO or 1st-class terminal,

is about 2.5km south of Plaza, and it has reliable service to Mérida, Cancún and other key destinations. The Maya Train (p220) will also link Campeche with other places on the Yucatán Peninsula.

CALAKMUL & THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRIDOR



TOP TIP

If you plan to stay a while, consider using Xpujil as your base. It has a handful of ruins within easy distance by taxi, plus access to Calakmul and other sites such as Rio Bec. Xpujil is also home to several reputable tour agencies, including Ka'an Expeditions, which offers tours of Calakmul.

Perhaps no single region in all of Yucatán has so much to see that's literally just off the main highway, but nothing compares to Calakmul and other nearby archaeological sites. Feared throughout Yucatán, but particularly by its arch rival Tikal, the fearsome 'Snake Kingdom' crafted alliances ruthlessly to defeat its foes. Its enormous structures are some of the highest in the Maya world, and it lies deep in the jungle. Driving the dirt road with your own vehicle is the best way to get here, but it will take you about an hour each way from the turnoff on Highway 186.

Calakmul is a must-see, but there are other delightful sites to stop at as well, such as the hidden frieze found inside a structure in Balamkú. If you can, take your time along the Archaeological Corridor, stopping at as many ruins as you can.



ALFREDO MATUS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Aerial view, Calakmul (p294)



THE BAT TORNADO

If you're heading west from Xpujil to Calakmul, you'll pass a 'bat crossing' sign that seems comically odd if you're here in the middle of the day. Come back at dusk, however, and a short hike will take you to a cave that comes out of the bottom of a dry cenote. Each evening, bats emerge and form a swirling tornado – one of the most incredible swarm sights you'll see. It begins with one bat, then two, then 50, and then the cave fills. Finally the bats leave, heading out through the forest to consume up to a third of their weight in insects each day. It's a show worth seeing and, for once, the mosquitoes are the ones running for their lives.

CALAKMUL & THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRIDOR



Calakmul, the Snake Kingdom

MAGNIFICENT AND FEARSOME LOST CITY

Calakmul in many ways is as remote as it gets without needing to hike or take a helicopter. It's an hour's drive through the jungle of the Biosfera Calakmul and, as such, is about as different an experience from the bus tours, lines and selfie-takers of Chichén Itzá as can be. When you finally reach the ruin, you'll be surrounded by jungle as far as the eye can see. Time it right and you may only be sharing the site with the inquisitive monkeys above you and the iridescent oscillated turkeys on the ground.

Calakmul's majestic temples rise above the jungle's treetops and, in its heyday, it dominated the Yucatán, conquering contemporaries Tikal and Palenque, among many others, with influence extending across the peninsula. Its rulers used cunning, outright power and intermarriage to create alliances and subjugate other cities, which would either pay tribute, install Calakmul-approved leaders or pass on their trading routes. The ruin has more than 6000 structures, many of which remain unexcavated, and new discoveries are still being made, such as elaborate canals and reservoirs that allowed the city to survive, despite a lack of nearby lakes or rivers. Be sure to climb Structure II, one of the tallest and most massive pyra-



PLACES TO STAY ALONG THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRIDOR

Río Bec Dreams

A delightful hotel and restaurant with owners who are experts on the ruins. \$\$\$

Hotel Maya Balam

A simple spot a few blocks from the main road, with spartan rooms and on-site parking. \$

Hotel Puerta Calakmul

Upscale spot that's about as close as you can get to the ruin entrance. \$\$\$



Xpujil

mids in the Maya world, and the largest in Campeche. From the top, you can actually see El Mirador, in Guatemala, if you know what to look for. You'll also want to climb Structure I, assuming you have the energy, though nobody will judge you if you don't – it's hot, humid and the mosquitoes seem as big as hummingbirds.

Xpujil

GREAT FOR EXPLORING

The little, oft-overlooked town of Xpujil (Shpoo-heel) is a great spot to use as a base for exploring the area's many ruins, and (don't be confused!) there's a ruin named Xpujil as well. The latter is fascinating because of its beautiful triple pyramid, Structure I. The site features elaborate Chenes and Rio Bec-style decorations and some fascinating doors, stairways and chambers. Until recently, you could ascend a stairway inside one of the temples and look out from above, but that has since been walled off to protect the structure. Some scholars think the tall 'false' temples were intended to mimic architecture seen in Guatemala's Tikal. If so, it's interesting that this would be the case when Tikal's arch rival, powerful Calakmul, lay between the two sites. In each of Structure I's three false temples, a flint ceremonial knife was found.

The town is oriented on the main highway, with a variety of local restaurants and a few hotels. While it's likely to change substantially once the Tren Maya opens, currently it's still a quiet, rather unassuming spot, but still the largest town in the region. If you're going to make day trips to Calakmul, Hormiguero or the adventurous Rio Bec journey, you'll want to stay here.



BEST AREA RUINS

Each of these ruins should be in your list if you're in the area.

Río Bec

A remote site in the jungle accessible only by 4WD, and the ruin that gave name to the Rio Bec style.

Becán

Fascinating structures and a protective moat in an easily accessible ruin near Xpujil.

Chicanná

Fearsome, excellently preserved Chenes-style ruin with gaping mouths.

Hormiguero

Another Chenes-style ruin deep in the jungle, with false temples and monkeys in the trees.

Balamku

Famous for its 15m-long frieze.



GETTING AROUND

The Tren Maya (Maya Train) is coming through and, with it, vast swaths of road and jungle are being torn up, making it impossible to know

exactly what will come down the line. But for now, the best way to get here is by car, or by a combination of bus and taxi.



RUBI RODRIGUEZ MARTINEZ / SHUTTERSTOCK ©

CHIAPAS & TABASCO

ANCIENT RUINS, JUNGLES AND WATERFALLS

Pristine lakes rimmed by pine forests, chilly mountain towns and dreamy cascades: Mexico's southernmost states brim with some of the country's wildest and least-visited places.

From sultry tropical jungles to frothy waterfalls, Chiapas and Tabasco are overflowing with natural treasures that receive only a trickle of visitors each year. Located in the far southern reaches of Mexico, these states have always been isolated from the rest of the country by imposing mountains and impenetrable forests.

Curious travelers willing to venture off the conventional trail will be rewarded with distinctive indigenous cultures, rugged nature and few other visitors to contend with. In the region's center lies the cultural capital of San Cristóbal de las Casas, crammed with colonial landmarks and indigenous villages. Nearby, the Cañón del Sumidero National Park woos

outdoor lovers with vertigo-inducing rock walls, an emerald green valley and a myriad of wildlife. Up north are one of the most well-preserved ancient Maya ruins, Palenque, and the lagoons and wetlands of Tabasco state.

In 1994, an armed insurgency by the Zapatista military shook the region, but the troops were quickly pushed back into the jungle by the Mexican government. Today, indigenous groups in the region continue to fight for equal rights and access to public services. While political tensions remain high, it is generally safe to travel around the region. Development is still slow in Chiapas and Tabasco, making any trip here a true adventure.



BARNIA TANNO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE MAIN AREAS

PALENQUE

Epic ancient ruins. **p302**

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Cultural capital. **p313**

CAÑÓN DEL SUMIDERO

Spectacular views and boat rides. **p325**

COMITÁN

A launchpad for luscious falls and lakes. **p331**

TABASCO

Olmec sites, rivers and mangroves. **p339**

Tabasco, p339

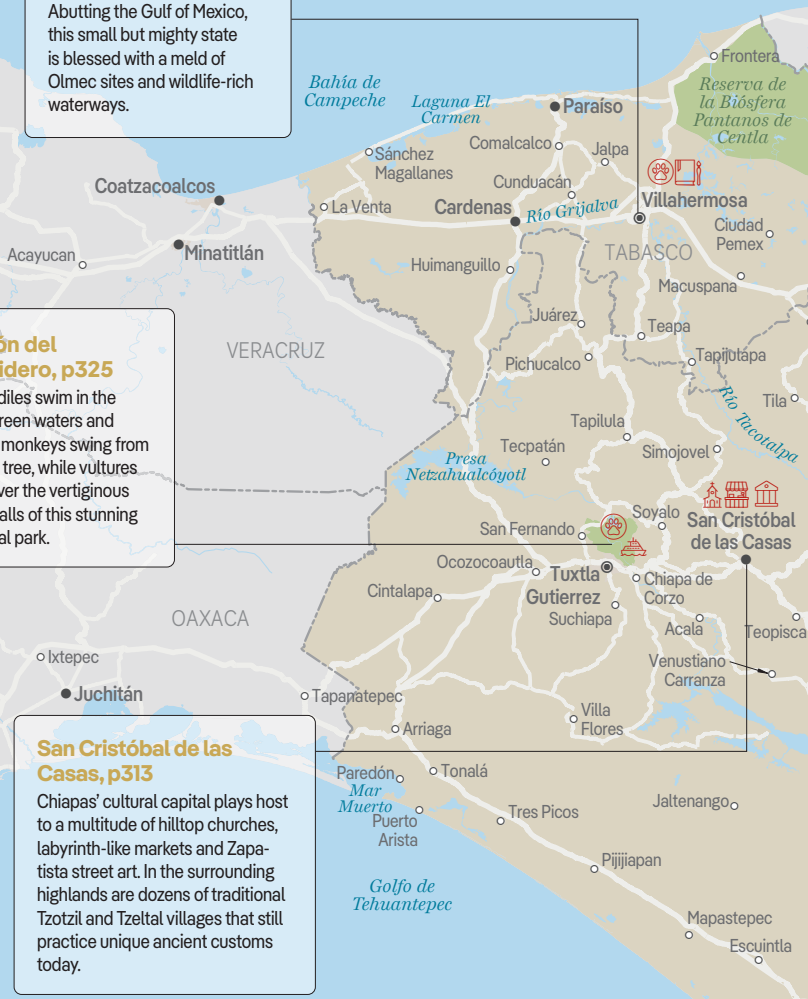
Abutting the Gulf of Mexico, this small but mighty state is blessed with a meld of Olmec sites and wildlife-rich waterways.

Cañón del Sumidero, p325

Crocodiles swim in the jade-green waters and spider monkeys swing from tree to tree, while vultures soar over the vertiginous rock walls of this stunning national park.

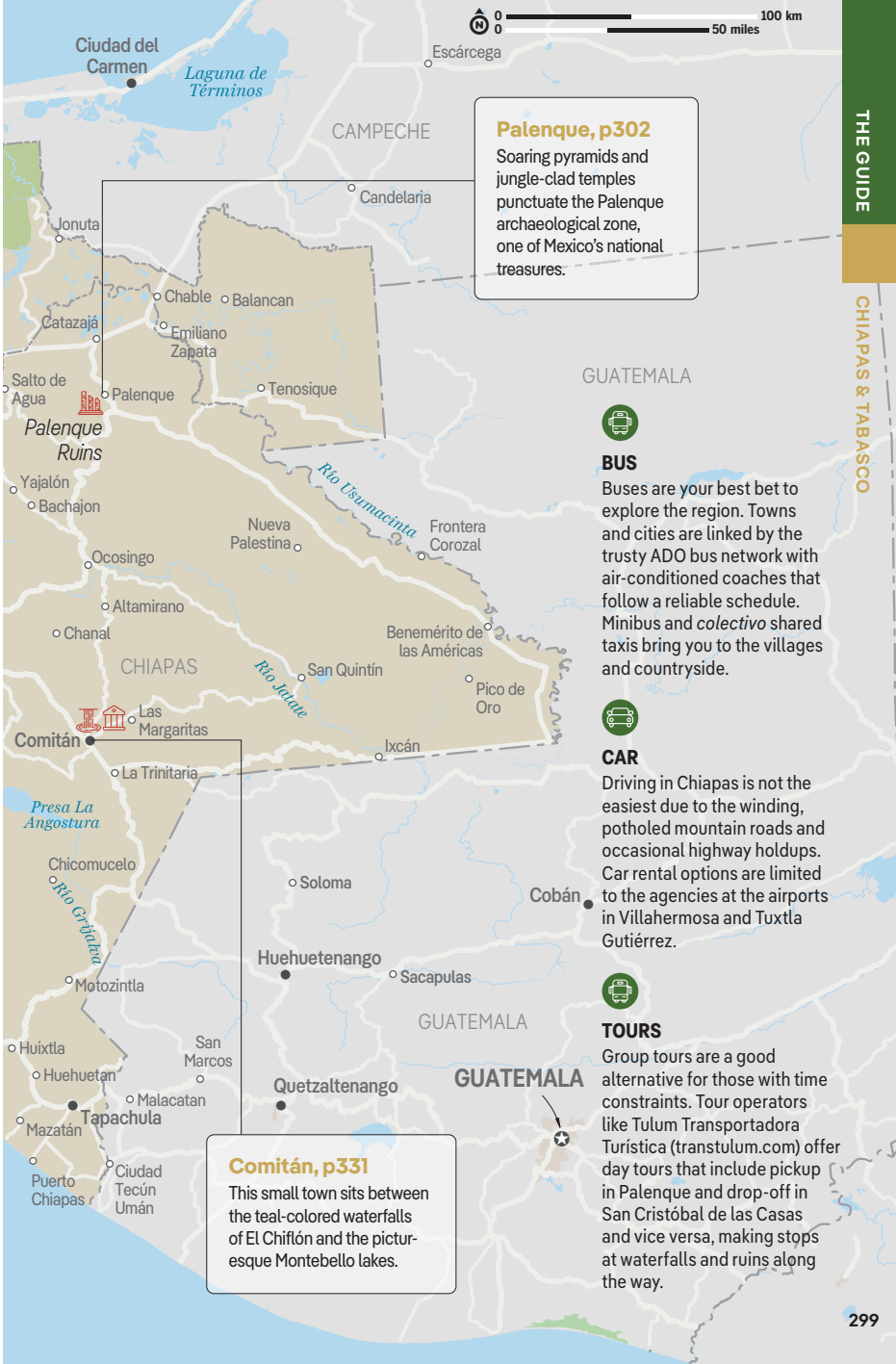
San Cristóbal de las Casas, p313

Chiapas' cultural capital plays host to a multitude of hilltop churches, labyrinth-like markets and Zapatista street art. In the surrounding highlands are dozens of traditional Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages that still practice unique ancient customs today.



Find Your Way

Chiapas and Tabasco sprawl across large swathes of untamed rainforest jungles and pine-forest highlands. We've handpicked the best spots to experience the region's wild nature and unique indigenous culture.



Palenque, p302
Soaring pyramids and jungle-clad temples punctuate the Palenque archaeological zone, one of Mexico's national treasures.



BUS
Buses are your best bet to explore the region. Towns and cities are linked by the trusty ADO bus network with air-conditioned coaches that follow a reliable schedule. Minibus and *colectivo* shared taxis bring you to the villages and countryside.



CAR
Driving in Chiapas is not the easiest due to the winding, potholed mountain roads and occasional highway holdups. Car rental options are limited to the agencies at the airports in Villahermosa and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.



TOURS
Group tours are a good alternative for those with time constraints. Tour operators like Tulum Transportadora Turística (transtulum.com) offer day tours that include pickup in Palenque and drop-off in San Cristóbal de las Casas and vice versa, making stops at waterfalls and ruins along the way.

Comitán, p331
This small town sits between the teal-colored waterfalls of El Chiflón and the picturesque Montebello lakes.

Plan Your Time

Largely forests and highlands, this region is best explored with time on your hands. Whether you are climbing ancient pyramids, hiking in oak forests or dipping in waterfalls, the key is to go slow.



© SHUTTERSTOCK/PHOTOGRABBY

San Cristóbal de las Casas



Seasonal Highlights

The best time to visit Chiapas and Tabasco is during the dry season – from November to May – when the skies are clear and the festivals are in full swing.



JANUARY

Chiapa de Corzo celebrates the **Fiesta de Enero**, a 12-day festival with regional food, music and the famous Parachico masked dance.



FEBRUARY

The town of Comitán puts on a show with **parades and fireworks** to honor the patron saint, San Caralampio.



APRIL

Like in most parts of Mexico, **Semana Santa** is celebrated with fervor throughout Chiapas and Tabasco with somber processions and masses.

With Only One Day

● If you're short on time, head to **San Cristóbal de las Casas** (p313) for a taste of Chiapas' culture. Sip a cup of Chiapan coffee at **Cafeología** (p320) and stroll to the main square **Plaza de la Paz** (p315) to admire the yellow-and-ochre **catedral** (p315). Then ramble along the pedestrian-only **Real de Guadalupe** (p315) to reach the hilltop **Iglesia de Guadalupe** (p316) for sweeping views.

● Grab lunch at the city's largest market **Mercado Municipal** (p317) and browse the handicraft at next-door **Mercado de Dulces y Artesanías** (p318). Don't miss the interesting museum, **Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya** (p317).

Three Days to Travel Around

● After a day of exploring magical San Cristóbal, spend your second day riding on horseback to the nearby indigenous village of **San Juan Chamula** (p322) for a spiritual cleansing ritual with a shaman, before continuing to **San Lorenzo Zinacantán** (p323) to browse its flower market and Totztil artisan shops.

● The next day, take a jaunt to **Cañón del Sumidero** (p325), where you can drive along the canyon rim for mind-blowing views and cruise through the waterway to stare up at the sheer rock cliffs. End your journey in **Chiapa de Corzo** (p329), a laid-back historic city perched on the banks of the Grijalva River.

In Two Weeks

● With more time, venture further to **Comitán** (p331) and **El Chiflón** (p336), where a series of multi-tiered waterfalls tumble into spearmint natural pools. Hike all the way up to the tallest falls, **Velo de Novia** (p336). Continue driving to the **Lagos de Montebello** (p337), making stops at **Lagunas de Colores** (p338) and **Laguna Bosque Azul** (p338), where waters of vivid hues await.

● From there, veer north to **Palenque** (p302) and explore one of Mexico's most impressive archaeological sites. Climb up the tallest building, **Templo de las Inscripciones** (p304), and duck inside to see the tomb of the legendary Red Queen.



MAY

Tabasco's biggest party of the year, **Feria Tabasco**, entertains with cattle shows, food fairs and traditional dances.



JUNE

The rainy season is in full swing, but that doesn't stop locals from commemorating **Corpus Christi**.



NOVEMBER

Mexicans set up elaborate *ofrendas* or altars, and do night-long graveyard vigils for **Día de Muertos** (Day of the Dead).



DECEMBER

Temperatures drop, particularly in the highlands. **Christmas** is celebrated in Chiapas and Tabasco with a mix of Catholic traditions and indigenous rituals.

Mexico City



Palenque

PALENQUE

Rightfully the top destination in Chiapas, the Palenque ruins are evocative vestiges of a powerful Maya kingdom. Ancient pyramids rise from the dense canopy alongside temples swathed in hanging roots and foliage. Palenque's mightiest ruler, Pakal, built a legion of regal palaces and ceremonial complexes here – the most iconic of which is the Templo de las Inscripciones.

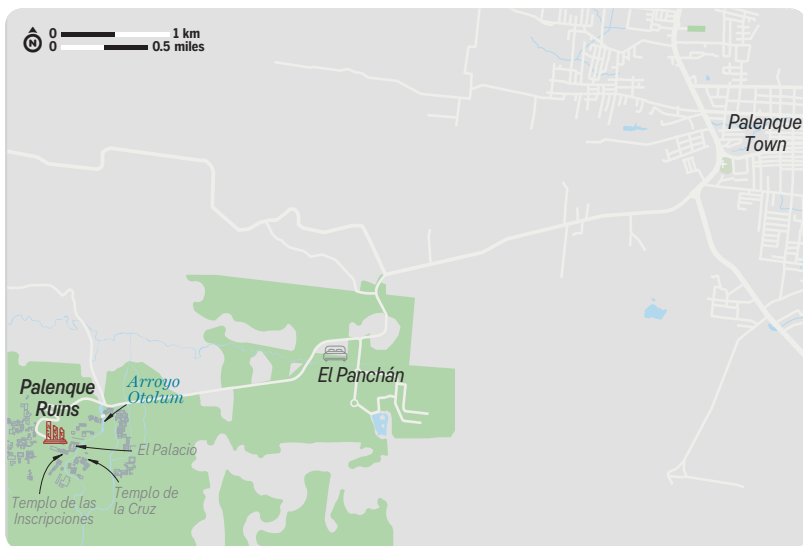
Visiting the Palenque ruins is not just a historical experience, it's also an ecological one: howler monkeys catapult themselves through the jungle, while scarlet macaws soar overhead with their rainbow-colored wings on display. The forest surrounding the ruins forms the Parque Nacional Palenque, a highly protected area of ecological importance.

Set 9km to the east of the archaeological site is Palenque town. This humdrum place isn't particularly attractive, though it hosts several restaurants and value-for-money hotels. Many travelers skip the town and base themselves at the forest hideout of El Panchán or the leafy La Cañada neighborhood.



MADRUGADA VERDE /SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Palenque ruins (p304)



Wander around Palenque Town

GET YOUR FOOTING

When you first roll into Palenque town, the sweaty, dusty streets and uncharacteristic downtown might not immediately offer much appeal, but it is a decent base for an overnight stay. With an assortment of economical accommodations and secret jungle *cabañas*, the town is a comfortable springboard for nature treks around the ruins and outdoorsy pursuits in the nearby falls and ecoparks.

The main entrance into Palenque town is at the **Glorieta de la Cabeza Maya**, a roundabout with a giant statue of a Maya chieftain's head. This is where Hwy 199 intersects with Palenque's main artery, Av Juárez, and where the ADO bus terminal is located. One of the best areas to stay in town is the leafy **La Cañada** district, across the road from the ADO station. Tall ceiba trees and dangling vines provide a lush setting for a cluster of beautiful hotels and atmospheric restaurants. Conveniently located for day jaunts, the neighborhood may be compact (stretching just three blocks), but it's far more inviting than downtown Palenque.

If you continue 3km west along the road to the ruins, you'll find **Aluxes Ecoparque**, the first wildlife rescue center in Chiapas. They work alongside local authorities to rescue and

PALENQUE'S BEST BREAKFAST SPOTS

Café Jade

Enjoy Chiapan coffee in a lush garden at one of the most popular spots in La Cañada. \$

Café de Yara

A chirpy spot dishing up hearty Mexican favorites and organic Chiapan coffee. \$

La Tradición

Sweet *concha* (round pastries), meringue pies, and waffles with hot chocolate at this breakfast/dessert shop. \$

Kinich Kan Balam

This *palapa*-style restaurant has excellent, great-value breakfast sets. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN DOWNTOWN PALENQUE

Hotel Maya Rue

Stay in the heart of town at this modern, fuss-free budget hotel offering excellent value. \$

Casa 5 B&B

This centrally located, cozy B&B has spacious, air-conditioned rooms just a few blocks downhill from the main square. \$\$

Misión Palenque

Part of a Mexican hotel chain, this high-end option is a clean and reliable choice for upscale travelers. \$\$\$



ANTON JIANOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

TOP SIGHT

Palenque Ruins

Palenque is one of Mexico's most important archaeological sites, with ancient pyramids that poke above the treetops and maze-like palaces bearing courtyards and carved pillars – all connected by a string of earthy trails and mossy steps. An arduous climb up to the top of the pyramids will reward you with glorious 360-degree views over the luscious rainforests and lowlands of northeastern Chiapas.

DON'T MISS

Templo de las Inscripciones

El Palacio

Tumba de la Reina Roja

Templo del Sol

Templo de la Cruz

Baño de la Reina

Museo del Sitio

Templo de las Inscripciones

From the entrance, you'll follow a trail into the forest before the trees suddenly part to reveal a line of grand pyramid-shaped structures in one sweeping view. The tallest and most impressive of them all is the Templo de las Inscripciones (Temple of the Inscriptions; pictured), home to the tomb of Pakal. This is the emblem of Palenque and the most photographed of all its buildings.

The eight-story structure has a central stairway that leads to a cluster of small chambers. On an interior wall are three panels with lengthy Maya inscriptions depicting the history of Palenque. Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier named the temple after these specific carvings. Above this, a stairway leads to the burial ground of Pakal, which is now closed to prevent further damage. You can find a recreation of his tomb in Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología.

La Tumba de la Reina Roja

To the right of the Templo de las Inscripciones stands Templo XIII, the burial ground of the Red Queen (Reina Roja), King Pakal's wife, Tz'ak-b'u Ajaw. When archaeologists unearthed her tomb in 1994, they discovered her red remains (colored by cinnabar), alongside 1000 pieces of jade and a malachite mask.

El Palacio

Diagonally across from the Templo de las Inscripciones is El Palacio (the Palace), a ceremonial and political center used to host events and welcome foreign dignitaries. The massive structure is a maze of 12 rooms interconnected by an assembly of corridors and underground passes.

The palace's standout feature is the tower, a four-story structure offering expansive vistas of the surroundings. Archaeologists believe that the royals observed the sun's rays from the top of the tower during the winter solstice. Unfortunately visitors are not allowed to climb the tower. A stream runs alongside the palace to an aqueduct that is said to hold over 50,000 gallons of freshwater.

Templo del Sol

To the southeast of the Palace lies a cluster of temples named the Grupo de las Cruces (Group of the Crosses). Dedicated to Palenque's trinity of gods, the three pyramids were designed by Pakal's son, Kan B'alam II. Located on the west end of the cluster, the Templo del Sol (Temple of the Sun) has the most impressive roofcomb at Palenque. Step inside and see the immaculately preserved carvings that depict the birth of Kan B'alam II and his accession to the throne. Some say this stunning building shows how Palenque's builders thrived on the local hallucinogenic mushrooms – we'll let you decide if that's true!

Templo de la Cruz

Scale the steep steps of Templo de la Cruz (Temple of the Cross) for the best view of Palenque. From this elevation, the sprawling archaeological site stretches beneath you, with a sea of verdant green in the far distance. Kan B'alam built this temple to house the panels commemorating his ascension to the throne after King Pakal died. The bas-relief carvings also illustrate Kan B'alam's ancestral history and the origin of his lineage.

Museo del Sitio

The site museum at Palenque is the best place to end your visit to the ruins. Spacious, air-conditioned rooms display artifacts excavated from the area and background information (in both English and Spanish). Don't miss the feature exhibit on the Red Queen, where you can glimpse the findings from her tomb and videos filmed during the discovery.

GETTING THERE

Catch a combi to the ruins from Parque Central in Palenque. Look out for combis with the sign 'Ruinas' on their dashboard. These combis also pick up and drop off anywhere along the road to the ruins. We recommend taking the combi to the ruins' main upper entrance, exploring the archaeological site and following the jungle trail within the national park to the museum.

TOP TIPS

- Visit the site when it opens and see the morning mist wrap the pyramids in a haze.
- Avoid visiting on a Sunday as it can get crowded (free entry for Mexican nationals and residents).
- The museum opens from 9am to 4pm Tuesday to Saturday.
- A good guide brings the ruins to life. The Maya guide associations offer private, two-hour tours in English for M\$1300 starting from the main upper entrance.
- Food options are limited to a few cafeterias by the upper entrance serving piping hot *pozoles* (soups) and *tacos*.
- You might encounter locals selling mushrooms along the road to the ruins. Be aware that they are hallucinogenic.



PALENQUE'S BEST RESTAURANTS

Café Haki Palenque

Overlooking the main square, this joint is much loved by travelers seeking ice-cold beer and well-priced international food. \$

Restaurante Las Tinajas

A fixture in the local culinary scene serving a wide range of Mexican dishes in generous portions. \$\$

Chivo's

Dine alfresco in the gardens of this hip bar on classic tacos, ceviche and grilled seafood. \$\$

Bajlum

A rare find along the roads to the ruins, this upscale restaurant elevates traditional Maya cuisine. \$\$\$



MIROSLAW SKORNA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Palenque ruins

rehabilitate animals that have suffered from abuse. Part of your entry fee goes towards the projects that Aluxes develops, such as the macaw reintroduction program.

To head into town, walk east along Juárez to **Parque Central**, Palenque's main square. In the evening, it's a hive of activity as temperatures drop. Snap a photo in front of the colorful Palenque letter blocks, and chill out in one of the cafes that line the eastern end of the square. Most offer fresh fruit smoothies, beers and *comida económica* (cheap food). Next to the row of eateries is the **Parroquia Santo Domingo de Guzmán**, the town's main church dedicated to its patron saint. The church's clean whitewashed facade sports a central yellow-rimmed arch and a bell tower on each end.

For a better sense of life in Palenque, head four blocks west to the **Mercado Guadalupe**. The compact but vibrant market is the best spot for cheap eats during the day. In the evening, 2a Avenida Sur Ote street, one block south of the main square, gets filled with pocket-sized taco carts and *marquesita* stands every evening.



WHERE TO STAY IN LA CAÑADA

Casa Janaab Palenque

A laid-back budget option with swinging hammocks and sparkling clean dorm beds. \$

Maya Tulipanes Express

Backed by jungle, this large hotel is a glorious hideout for nature lovers. \$\$

Hotel Chablis Palenque

Kick back at this upscale hotel with modern rooms and an inviting pool area. \$\$



Palenque town

Hang Out at El Panchán

A SECRET JUNGLE HIDEOUT

While Palenque town offers a host of services and amenities, the area between downtown and the ruins swells with magical spots where howler monkeys romp in the tree canopy and flowing streams ripple through the jungle bed.

Located off the road to the ruins, **El Panchán** is a favorite traveler hangout set in the dense forest. This area used to be farmland but it has been revived by the generous Morales family, who contributed greatly to the studies of Palenque ruins. These days it's a bohemian hippie enclave popular with those seeking an alternative experience.

Low-key budget *cabañas* nestle in the stream-crossed jungle, offering rustic accommodations with basic beds and mosquito nets. Most of them have on-site restaurants and many run daily drumming practices as well as nightly entertainment. Get spiritually cleansed at the temascal or meditate at the temple in El Panchán – this commune will be sure to exalt your spirit.



BEST STAYS IN EL PANCHÁN

Chato's Cabañas by Panchan

A long-time favorite among travelers, Chato's wooden cabins feature well-screened windows and decorated walls. \$

Cabañas Kin Balam

Just 3km from the Palenque National Park, this collection of *cabañas* overlooking a pool is a hugely popular choice for backpackers. \$\$

Hotel La Aldea del Halach Huinic

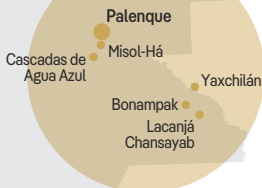
Soak in jungle vibes without sacrificing creature comforts at this *palapa*-roofed hotel set around a wonderful cascading pool. \$\$\$



GETTING AROUND

Downtown Palenque is small and walkable, but the ruins are around 9km away. Combis frequently run in the daytime between the town and ruins, picking up and dropping off passengers anywhere along the Carretera

Palenque-ruinas. They leave from Palenque's Parque Central. There are also white taxis readily available at the ADO bus terminal and by the main square.



Beyond Palenque

The jungles surrounding Palenque play host to luscious cascades, tribal villages and little-visited ruins that are just a skip away.

The region around Palenque presents a wild canvas of untamed jungle, beautiful waterfalls and pools, and less-explored Maya sites, luring visitors away from the more famous ruins.

Head southwards on Hwy 199 and you'll glimpse the luminous water of Río Tulijá winding through the farmland between Palenque and Ocosingo. Continue further along and stop to marvel at the skinny cascade of Misol-Há, swim in the picturesque Agua Clara, and frolic in the series of pools at Agua Azul.

Southeast of Palenque, the paved road of Carretera Fronteriza (Hwy 307) connects a series of little-known archaeological sites and Lacandón villages. The journey to the ancient cities of Bonampak and Yaxchilán is quite the adventure, but a worthwhile one.

TOP TIP

Most Palenque travel agencies offer economical day trips to nearby falls and ruins. Combis ply Hwy 199, making stops at the turn-offs to the waterfalls.



JOYCE CASANOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Río Tulijá



Misol-Há

Water World

PLUNGE POOLS, RAPIDS AND CASCADES

Just south of Palenque, Mother Nature puts on a show with a spectacular display of inviting natural pools, torrential plunging falls and gushing rapids. These masterpieces are the work of the **Río Tulijá**, a ribbon of azure water that carved out these landforms as it made its way from Palenque down south to Ocosingo.

It's easy to see why the local Maya named the river Yaks-Ha (Blue Water): the clear-as-glass water has an unusual shade of spearmint blue, resulting from sunlight reflecting off the limestone riverbed. Unfortunately, the blue-teal effect isn't visible all year. In the rainy season (around August to January), sediments get washed into the river, turning the water an earthy shade of brown.

Drive 20km south of Palenque along Hwy 199 to reach **Misol-Há** – meaning 'waterfall' in Maya – the most photogenic falls along the Río Tulijá. The awe-inspiring Misol-Há plunges 35m from an overhanging semi-circular cliff into a shimmering pool surrounded by shrubs. The indigo water can be a tad too deep in the wet season for swimming.



PALENQUE ROAD SAFETY

The road between Palenque and San Cristóbal de las Casas (Hwy 199) is not considered safe as highway holdups occasionally occur. ADO buses do not run on this road – they take a detour via Tuxtla Gutiérrez. There have been reports of thefts on the night bus; consider stowing your valuables in the luggage compartment. A safer alternative is booking a day tour that includes drop-off in San Cristóbal de las Casas. If you're traveling by rental car, avoid driving at night and prepare some cash in case you encounter a blockade.



WHERE TO STAY ALONG RÍO TULIJÁ

Centro Turístico Ejidal Cascada de Misol-Há

Basic wooden cabins amid the trees, with fans, mosquito nets and hot-water showers. \$

Cabañas Yax-Ha

Just a few meters from the Agua Azul falls, these new cabins are clean and equipped with private bathrooms and wi-fi. \$

Posada Agua Azul

Rustic lodging with simple bedrooms and mosquito nets just a short walk from Agua Azul. \$



VEER OFF THE WELL-TRODDEN TRAIL

A lesser-known but equally stunning cascade lies east of Hwy 199, in the rural village of Roberto Barrios. At 30km south of Palenque, this magnificent medley of aquamarine pools and frothing falls receives a fraction of the visitors that Agua Azul sees. Follow the locals and slide down the calcified rocks, or tread the muddy trails and dirt tracks that lead to the secret coves and jump-off spots – **Cascada de Roberto Barrios** is definitely worth the detour. To get there, catch a *colectivo* from Cuarta Pte Nte between 5a Av Pte Nte and Sexta Av Pte Nte northwest of the main square in Palenque.



KAI GRIMM/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cascadas de Agua Azul

A slippery path along the base of the cliff leads into a deep cave, buffeted by mist from the tumbling falls. A separate *ejido* (communal landholding) charges an additional fee to enter the cave. Turn on your phone's flashlight and follow the short trail to spot some bats hanging off the roof of the cave ceiling.

At the halfway point between Palenque and Ocosingo (60km south of Palenque) lies the churning **Cascadas de Agua Azul**, the most popular falls in the area. Río Tulijá is particularly powerful here, joining forces with another river, the Río Shumuljá. Together, they thunder down multiple tiers of stepped limestone, forming hundreds of falls, rapids and mini pools, before plunging into a chasm where macho locals dare each other to jump. Take care when swimming here as the current is deceptively strong and submerged hazards like dead trees can pose dangers.

A paved concrete path runs from the entrance to the top of the falls, splitting into smaller trails leading to *miradores* (viewpoints) and designated swimming areas. A string of souvenir stalls and food stands line the walkway, hawking knickknacks, T-shirts and food. To avoid the pushy vendors, keep walking upstream. The crowds thin out the higher you go. Be aware that theft isn't uncommon, so keep an eye on your belongings at all times.



WHERE TO STAY IN THE LACANDÓN JUNGLE

Campamento Río Lacanjá

Rich in jungle atmosphere with wood-framed cabins near Río Lacanjá. \$

Topche Centro Ecoturístico

Choose from comfortable concrete rooms or *palapa*-roofed cabins with mosquito nets and shared bathrooms. \$

Santuario de Cocodrilo Tres Lagunas

This higher-end option offers newish, rustic elegant rooms with incredible lake views. \$\$

Traverse the Carretera Fronteriza

HIDDEN RUINS AND LACANDÓN VILLAGES

If you haven't had your fill of wilderness and indigenous culture, journey southeast along the Carretera Fronteriza deep into the Selva Lacandona (Lacandón jungle). This is the region's most remote and least explored territory, where endangered species roam free and Lacandón Maya people live in small communities amid the forest.

The area is now accessible thanks to the Carretera Fronteriza (Hwy 307), a paved road running parallel to the Mexico-Guatemala border from Palenque to the Lagos de Montebello. The highway connects a slew of little-visited archaeological sites and ecotourism projects, providing a direct route from Chiapas to Guatemala's northern Petén region.

Set in the dense jungle about 150km southeast of Palenque, **Bonampak** is a remarkably preserved ancient city kept a secret from the outside world until 1946. Led by a Lacandón, two American explorers – Charles Frey and John Bourne – were the first foreigners to visit the site.

While the site spreads over an area of 2.4 sq km, the main buildings are concentrated around the central Gran Plaza. The most impressive monuments that still stand today were built by Chan Muwan II, who reigned around 776 to 795 CE. Bonampak – which means 'painted walls' in Maya – got its name from the highly detailed frescoes inside the humble Templo de las Pinturas (Temple of the Paintings). The vivid turquoise and red colors depict royal life during the 7th century.

The more extensive **Yaxchilán** ruins are dramatically set around a horseshoe loop in the Río Usumacinta, a river that acts as the natural border between Mexico and Guatemala. Thanks to its geographical location and successful alliances, Yaxchilán rose to become one of the most important Maya cities in the region. It conquered smaller settlements such as Bonampak and fought against larger powers, including Palenque.

Yaxchilán peaked in power between 681 and 800 CE, under the ruler Itzamnaaj B'alam II and his successor Pájaro Jaguar IV. The shield and jaguar symbol appears on many buildings here, telling archaeologists more about this Jaguar dynasty than any other Maya ruling lineage. The most striking features of Yaxchilán are its ornamented facades, roofcombs and impressive stone lintels carved with ceremonial scenes. The best-preserved temple, Edificio 33, features steep steps carved with splendid reliefs.

The largest of the Lacandón Maya villages, **Lacanjá Chansayab**, is 12km southeast of Bonampak. The area is



PARADISE UNDER THREAT

A treasure trove of natural resources and biodiversity, the Selva Lacandona (Lacandón Jungle) is home to an extraordinary amount of plant and animal species, including the jaguar, tapir and harpy eagle. Sadly, the large swathe of wilderness is shrinking fast, under the pressure of loggers, rangers and oil prospectors. It has been reduced from around 15,000 sq km in the 1950s to an estimated 2500 to 3500 sq km that remains today.



WHERE TO EAT IN THE LACANDÓN JUNGLE

Restaurante La Selva

A palapa-roofed restaurant serving simple fare like ceviche and chilaquiles. \$

Restaurante Colibrí

Tuck into huge pots of home-cooked stews and piping-hot grilled meat at this eatery. \$

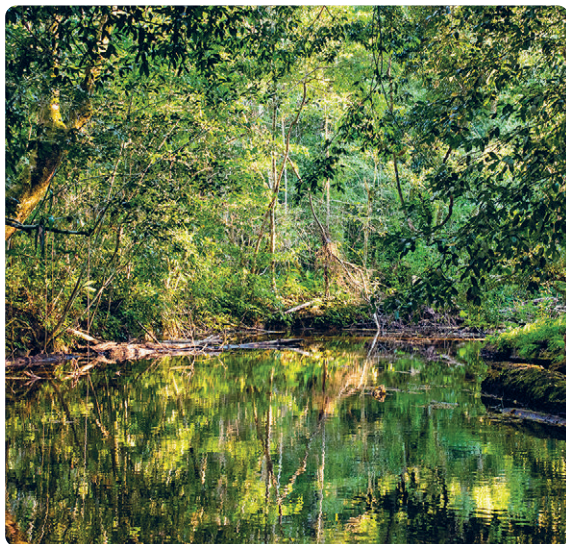
Restaurante de Doña Mary

Feast on classic comfort food at this family-run place in Frontera Corozal. \$



ZAPATISTA TERRITORY

The Carretera Fronteriza and the area around Reserva de la Biósfera Montes Azules are the main areas of Zapatista rebel activity. Expect to find military checkpoints along the road to the Lacandón. These checkpoints are in place to keep the area safe. All border crossings to Guatemala should be done during the day.



ALESSANDRO BANCHELLI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Río Lacanjá

speckled with family compounds, most of which have large grassy areas and the Río Lacanjá running through their backyard. A few local families host travelers in their homes, providing basic lodging, food and hammocks. They'll also offer guided walks through the Lacandón Jungle, stopping by some semi-excavated ancient ruins and the 2.5km-long Laguna Lacanjá. It is possible to hike on your own along the 2.5km Sendero Ya Toch Kusam to reach a waterfall of the same name, but you need a guide to venture to the ruins.



GETTING AROUND

Traveling independently around the area can be time-consuming and pricey. You can catch a van to Frontera Corozal from Glorieta de la Cabeza Maya, south of the ADO bus terminal in Palenque. Ask to stop at Crucero Bonampak, the junction closest to those ruins (two hours). After visiting Bonampak, catch a combi or taxi to the riverside frontier town Frontera Corozal

and take a motorboat from the *embarcadero* (pier) to Yaxchilán (40 minutes).

Organized tours can be a practical way to explore this region if you're not planning to drive. Many operators run day tours that start early and end late, plus multiple-day options that include a night's stay in Lacanjá Chansayab.



SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

TOP TIP

The nearest airport to San Cristóbal de las Casas is Ángel Albino Corzo International Airport in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, a 1½-hour drive away. Daily OCC minibuses run from the airport to San Cristóbal de las Casas bus terminal, and the historical center is just a 10-minute walk north of the station.

Perched 2200m above a highland valley, San Cristóbal de las Casas is a colonial city backed by misty mountains, hilltop churches and Maya villages. Its historical core is lined with centuries-old cobblestoned streets, terracotta-roofed houses, and fascinating markets that flaunt celebrated handicrafts and textiles.

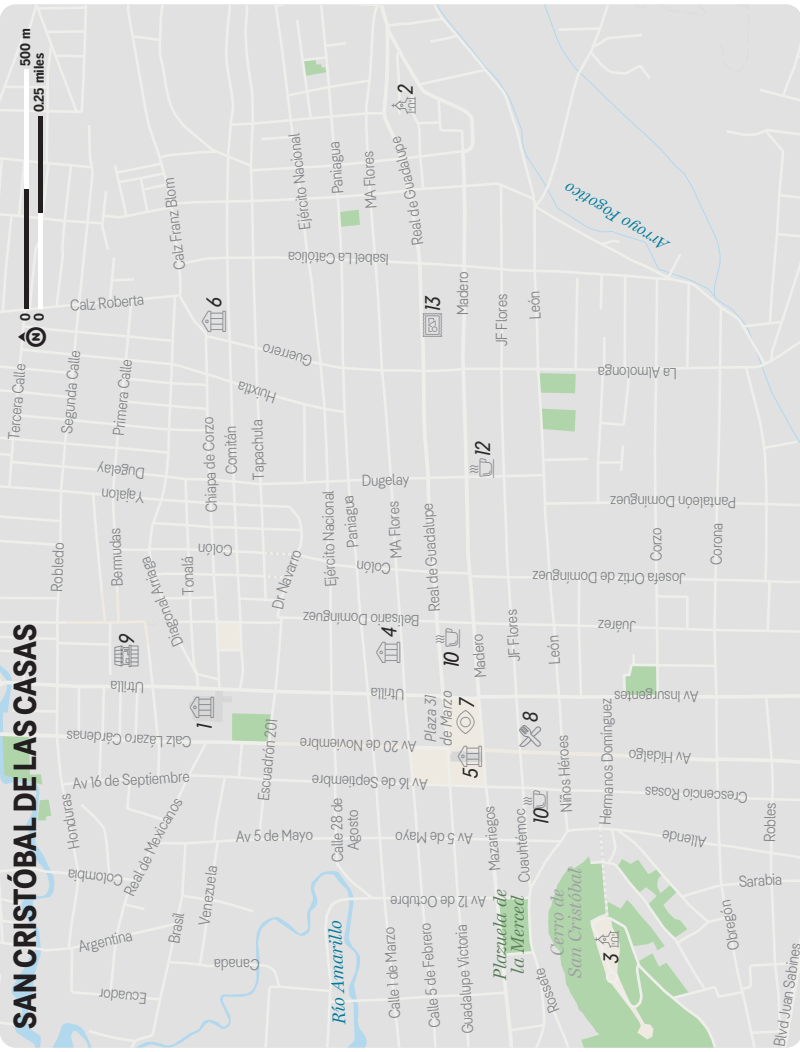
San Cris, as it's known to locals, makes a great base to explore the traditional Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous communities that dot the surrounding slopes, blending unique ancient customs and beliefs with age-old Catholic traditions.

With its sophisticated host of cafes and restaurants and a solid tourism infrastructure, San Cris has long drawn droves of low-key backpackers and artsy expats. These days, the city has a great community of NGO workers supporting the indigenous communities and digital nomads seeking speedy internet connections and easy-to-access attractions.



San Cristóbal de las Casas

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS



SIGHTS

- 1 Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya
- 2 Iglesia de Guadalupe
- 3 Iglesia de San Cristóbalito
- (see 1) Museo de los Altos de Chiapas
- 4 Museo del Café
- 5 Museo San Cristóbal de las Casas
- 6 Na Bolom
- 7 Plaza 31 de Marzo

EATING

- 8 Esquina San Agustín
- 9 Mercado Municipal

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 10 Café la Selva
- 11 Cafelogía
- 12 Libre Café

ENTERTAINMENT

- 13 Plaza Libertad



**Plaza
31 de Marzo**



Plaza de la Paz (Peace Sq)

Churches, Squares & Viewpoints

A DIY WALKING TOUR

San Cristóbal's old town is compact and walkable, interconnected by leafy parks and car-free streets. Begin your walk at the city's main square, **Plaza 31 de Marzo**, where street vendors and shoeshiners gather. Soak in the unhurried highland atmosphere and let your eyes roam.

A few steps north of here is the iconic **catedral**, featuring a yellow-and-ochre baroque-style facade and lavish gold-leaf interior. Construction of the cathedral started in 1528 but it was only completed in 1815 due to a medley of natural disasters. Over the subsequent years, the building was wrecked by several earthquakes, including a major 8.1-magnitude tremor that rocked Chiapas in 2017. The building recently reopened after five years of restoration work.

West of the cathedral, you'll find yourself at the atmospheric **Plaza de la Paz** (Peace Sq), which was given its name following the Zapatista uprising against the Mexican government. Over the years, Peace Sq has witnessed many anti-government protests and peaceful demonstrations.

From there, head east along the pedestrianized **Real de Guadalupe**, lined with trendy cafes and artisan shops. Duck into



BEST RESTAURANTS IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Restaurante Taniperla

Authentic, home-cooked Chiapan food at its best. \$

Restaurante Las Pichanchas

Regional dishes are paired with locally brewed drinks and traditional dances at this institution. \$\$

Fogón de Jovel

A long-established fixture in the culinary scene that serves a repertoire of regional dishes. \$\$

El Secreto

A modern take on Chiapas' specialties elevated to a gourmet level. \$\$\$

Esquina San Agustín

Choose from upscale Peruvian fusion, Japanese cuisine and contemporary Mexican food at this trendy food hall. \$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Hotel Sombra del Agua

A well-priced hotel housed in an elegant 1907 whitewashed building in San Cris' historic heart. \$

Co.404 San Cris

Cowork with other digital nomads at this inviting coliving space in a quiet residential area. \$

Sereno Art Hotel

Kick back in this art-focused hotel blending bold colors and unique paintings. \$\$



BEST VIEWS IN SAN CRISTÓBAL

Cerro de Don Lauro

An intense 30-minute hike (from the trailhead on Av Insurgentes) takes you to this mountaintop, where dramatic views await.

Cerro de Guadalupe

Take the 79 steps up this small hill topped by a church to the east of the city for epic views.

Cerro de San Cristóbal

To the southwest of the historic center stands a hill with 240 steps leading up to panoramic vistas and a church dedicated to the city's patron saint.



SLPHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Weaving, San Cristóbal de las Casas

the alternative cultural center, **Kinoki** (kinoki.com.mx), to catch an indie film, browse its exhibits, or drink in the views from its rooftop. Keep strolling eastward until you reach the vibrant **Plaza Libertad**, a contemporary art gallery that spotlights local artists and sculptors. By day, there's a line-up of ceramics workshops and painting classes; by night, its restaurant dishes up delectable oven-baked pizzas and mezel cocktails.

At the end of the walkway stands **Cerro de Guadalupe**, crowned by the formidable **Iglesia de Guadalupe**. The white-and-yellow church was erected on the site of an Aztec temple in 1712. Climbing the 79 steps to the church gates at this altitude can be slightly challenging, but the views at the top are worth your while. This area is not considered safe at night; make sure to head back before the sun dips.

From here, retrace your steps to Plaza 31 de Marzo and ramble south to the pedestrianized **Andador Turístico**, which runs along Miguel Hidalgo. With multi-hued *papel picado* flags hanging overhead, this lively street is where the city's hippest restaurants and bars are concentrated. Pause for a bite and drink at the **Esquina San Agustín**, a ridiculously stylish food hall chock-a-block with international flavors and gourmet food.



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Casa del Alma

An elegant colonial-style hotel with clean lines, minimalistic decor and a designer hallway.

\$\$

Casa Lum Hotel

Built with reclaimed wood and tiles, this intimate hotel features upcycled furniture and textiles from indigenous artisans. \$\$\$

Hotel Bo

A five-star ultra-modern option that breaks traditions and wows with bright colors and avant-garde furnishing. \$\$\$



A CHIAPAN TIPPLE

Chiapas is the birthplace of *pox* (pronounced 'posh'), a liquor made from sugarcane, corn and wheat. *Pox* traces its roots back to the pre-Hispanic days when Tzotzil communities brewed a corn beer for ceremonies. Often used in religious rituals, *pox* translates to 'medicine' in the Tzotzil language. Modern varieties of artisan *pox* are now infused with chocolate, fruits and honey. **Posheria** (posheria.mx) is one of the well-known spots in San Cristóbal to sample high-quality *pox*, while **La Espirituosa** (laespirituosa.com) offers a fun *pox*-tasting experience.

After you've refueled, stroll southwards to the **Arco del Carmen**, a 17th-century Mudejar-style archway that used to mark the entrance to San Cristóbal. The rose-red archway is a popular spot for live music and street performances.

Finally, head west to the daunting stairway that leads to the top of **Cerro de San Cristóbal**. From this vantage point, the historical city sprawls beneath your feet. Don't miss the **Iglesia de San Cristóbalito**, a church that becomes a fair-ground bursting with music and food on 25 July when locals celebrate their patron saint.

Indigenous Folk Arts

MEXICO'S FINEST HANDICRAFTS

Chiapas has always been a region of artisans. The outstanding indigenous crafts makers of the Chiapas highlands are some of the most skilled in the country, and San Cristóbal is where you'll find the highest quality *huipiles* (sleeveless tunics), weavings and blankets. The production of handicrafts is an important art form for modern-day Maya communities, and it continues to exist thanks to the dedication of the indigenous women.

But in recent years, the local artisans have faced threats from imported Chinese knockoffs that have begun to be mistaken for authentic Mexican crafts in local markets. The pieces are jazzed up and almost always cheaper. When shopping for souvenirs, keep in mind that the originals are always unique, and no two pieces are alike.

For a crash course in indigenous textiles, head to the **Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya**, housed in the Ex-Convento de Santo Domingo. This brilliant museum showcases over 500 pieces of handwoven fabrics from Maya communities throughout Mexico and Central America. Inside the two permanent exhibition rooms are displays of *huipiles*, including a 1000-year-old antique made from tree bark.

Just a few doors down is the indigenous women's weaving cooperative **Sna Jolobil**, which exhibits and sells some of the very best *huipiles*, rugs and blouses in town. Founded in 1970, Sna Jolobil - meaning 'the weaver's house' in Tzotzil - now works with over 800 weavers from the highlands to preserve half-forgotten weaving techniques and designs.

Get Lost in the Markets

LOCAL FOOD, FRESH PRODUCE AND HANDICRAFTS

Ask anyone where the best place to experience local life in San Cristóbal is and they'll inevitably point you in the direction of the **Mercado Municipal**. This is San Cristóbal



BEST BARS IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Café Bar Revolución

There's always something happening here, thanks to the nightly lineups of rock, jazz and reggae music.

La Viña de Bacco

San Cris' most loved wine bar offers affordable *vino*, free tapas and a convivial atmosphere.

El Paliacate

Soak up bohemian vibes and alternative live music, including Tzotzil rock, at this cultural space.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CHIAPAS

Chiapas is home to one of the largest indigenous populations in Mexico – about a quarter of 4.8 million people living in this region are descendants of the ancient Maya. There are eight main indigenous groups here, each with its own distinctive language, customs, and beliefs. On the streets of San Cristóbal, you'll most likely encounter the Tzotzil and Tzeltal people, characterized by their vibrant and elaborate traditional clothing.

Most of them practice syncretic religious traditions that are fusions of Catholic beliefs and pre-Hispanic elements.

Traditionally treated as second-class citizens, these indigenous groups primarily live in areas with no running water or electricity. It was frustration over this long-standing mistreatment and inequality that fueled the Zapatista uprising, bringing attention to the region's issues.

at its most interesting: chilis and mangos perfume the air; neon-colored *piñatas* dangle overhead, while hot steaming tacos and *tamales* crank up the heat. A walk in the dizzying amalgam of fruit stands and pocket-sized knickknack shops is an assault on your senses, and getting lost is just part of the fun.

The market's cooked food section is undoubtedly the best place in town to sample authentic Chiapas' regional food, especially the typical *sopa de pan*, a broth concocted with bread, boiled eggs, plantain and green beans. If you're still not stuffed, order some *tamales jacuanés*, filled with beans and shrimp and wrapped in *hoja santa* leaves, and *tacos de cochito*, marinated pork tacos stewed in a saffron sauce.

For a completely different experience, head to the next-door **Mercado de Santo Domingo**, where a maze of makeshift tents forms an artisan market. Chiapan *huipiles*, embroidery, handwoven trinkets, amber jewelry and leather goods are available at bargain prices here. Even if you don't intend to buy anything, a visit here is a feast for the eyes.

Walk southward along Av Insurgentes to the **Mercado de Dulces y Artesanías**, a compact but equally lively mesh of handicraft shops and candy stalls. Those with a sweet tooth will be thrilled to pick from a blinding array of Chiapas' specialties, including coconut candies, caramelized fruit and the feted *chimbo* (baked flour rolls drenched in honey and cinnamon).

Museums Galore

CRASH COURSE IN CHIAPAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

The museums are compelling places to take a deep dive deep into San Cristóbal's anthropology. The city hosts a number of small but insightful places ranging from aged institutes to niche museums that showcase the region's indigenous cultures and history.

Part museum, part research center, **Na Bolom** tells the story of Danish archaeologist Frans Blom and his wife, Swiss anthropologist Gertrude DUBY-Blom. For years, Frans explored and surveyed ancient Maya sites all over Chiapas, while Gertrude fought to protect the Lacandón people of eastern Chiapas. Today, their home Na Bolom – 'Jaguar House' in the Tzotzil language – has been transformed into an atmospheric museum, displaying the photographs and artifacts they accumulated over 50 years. After Gertrude's passing, Na Bolom has continued their legacy with research work in Chiapas' indigenous cultures and natural environment.



WHERE TO BUY ORIGINAL LOCAL HANDICRAFT

Táabal

A responsible local project that works with over 126 artisans from the highlands to produce quality folk art.

Casa Folklorá

This locally owned design store sells original blankets, shawls and handicrafts produced by more than 20 Maya communities.

Camino de los Altos

A collaboration between French textile designers and 160 women from indigenous communities.



Na Bolom

In the center of town, the **Museo de los Altos de Chiapas** has an impressive display of archaeological relics and 19th-century exhibits. Also housed in the Ex-Convento de Santo Domingo, the museum brings you on a journey through San Cristóbal's history, from the pre-Hispanic era to the colonization period and the founding of the city. The ticket also allows entry into the next-door Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya.

Rejuvenated from its previous life as the municipal palace, **Museo San Cristóbal de las Casas** (MUSAC) is now a history museum highlighting the major milestones of San Cristóbal's past. The building itself is worth a visit: the neo-classical mansion, designed by Carlos Z Flores in 1885, is one of the most beautiful landmarks of the city. Inside, four centuries of the history of San Cristóbal are represented in four permanent exhibition rooms, starting with its founding in the 16th century.

Coffee Culture

EVERYONE'S FAVORITE BEAN

In almost every corner of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the sweet aroma of coffee wafts through the air. Part of the third wave coffee trend, the city has an increasing repertoire of coffee

THE ZAPATISTAS

Just after midnight on January 1, 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) stormed six cities in Chiapas and caught everyone off guard. The indigenous armed organization declared war on the Mexican government, demanding land reform and advocacy for indigenous groups. After 11 days of violence, the Zapatistas retreated to the Lacandón jungle but continued to wage a propaganda war through the internet. In 1996, after a series of negotiations with the government, they signed the San Andrés Peace Accords to address the ongoing marginalization, discrimination and exploitation of indigenous communities.



WHERE TO FIND STREET ART IN SAN CRISTÓBAL

Avenida Cristóbal Colón

Admire psychedelic urban art along the prominent steps of the hilly Barrio del Cerrillo district.

Calle Tonalá

See the dynamic mural paintings on this cobblestoned street.

Calle Belisario Domínguez

The walls on this street are now canvases for young local artists.

WHY I LOVE SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS



Nellie Huang, writer

Perhaps it's the languid pace of life or the artsy vibes, maybe it's the fascinating indigenous traditions or the people's tenacious fight for equal rights – San Cristóbal de las Casas has captivated me since day one. There are few cities quite as deeply rooted yet forward-thinking, and positively charming yet melancholic, as San Cristóbal. Locals may despair of the government, but they remain fiercely proud of their city, their one-of-a-kind hometown with its sensational landscapes, intriguing people and longstanding traditions. I've traveled in many parts of Mexico, but somehow the call of San Cris keeps me coming back.



ANDRISO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Coffee beans

shops and hipster cafes serving up some of Mexico's finest organic coffee.

Thanks to the rich soils and cool highland climates, Chiapan beans have gained worldwide fame as some of the best in the world. This state alone produces over 40% of the country's total coffee output. To sample some of these legendary beans, pop into **Cafeología** and watch how they roast and brew their locally sourced joe in-house. This slick place runs coffee experiences where you can taste different beans and pair them with baked goods.

An institution in San Cristóbal, **Café la Selva** was one of the first coffee shops here and it continues to serve 100% organic coffee from the Lacandón Jungle. **Libre Café** is a delightful hole-in-the-wall spot where most of the space is taken up by a huge roaster and grinder and there's only room to squeeze in a couple of chairs. But the coffee keeps people coming back for more.

To go deeper under the surface, take a detour to the **Museo del Café**, a pint-sized museum covering the history of coffee and its cultivation in Chiapas. It's run by Coopcafe, a cooperative of more than 17,000 mainly indigenous coffee growers from Chiapas. After a wander, sit down and enjoy a cuppa at their cafe.



GETTING AROUND

If you're driving to San Cristóbal de las Casas, it's best to park your car at a covered garage outside of the historic center. The narrow cobblestoned streets can be hard to navigate and congested with traffic. The ADO bus station (Av Insurgentes 66) is just outside the old town, but some drivers will drop passengers off at Plaza 31 de Marzo.

The historical center of San Cristóbal is fantastic to explore on foot. Staying in this part of town will allow you to walk everywhere. That said, expect to climb some steep roads in this hilly city, and make sure to strap on sturdy walking shoes to tread the uneven cobblestoned paths.



Beyond San Cristóbal de las Casas

Part of San Cristóbal de las Casas' charm lies in the villages and rugged nature surrounding it.

San Cristóbal's biggest appeal is the blend of city and countryside, with centuries-old colonial houses giving way to grazing animals and corn fields in the highlands encircling it. Scores of wondrous caves hide under the hills surrounding the city. These cavern formations are an ethereal wonderland of geological features. Best of all, you don't have to go far to explore beyond the city, with nature reserves and Maya villages within an hour's drive from the center.

Nature lovers will swoon over the stalagmites and stalactites in the Grutas del Mamut, and the craggy rock faces of El Arcotete. Those seeking a deeper understanding of the indigenous culture can spend days or even weeks exploring the dozens of Maya villages that dot Los Altos de Chiapas (Chiapan Highlands), including San Juan Chamula and San Lorenzo Zinacantán.

San Juan Chamula
San Cristóbal de las Casas
San Lorenzo Zinacantán
El Arcotete Parque Ecoturístico

TOP TIP

Most combis to the city's outskirts leave from the Mercado Municipal along Calle Utrilla, but day tours are affordable and easily available too.



Templo de San Juan Chamula (p322)



CHAMULAN TRADITIONAL WEAR

The Chamulans wear their traditional clothes with pride: Chamulan women usually sport a simple blouse and a distinctive black shaggy woolen skirt; Chamulan men mostly wear loose white woolen tunics, while the leaders sport sleeveless black tunics and white scarves on their heads. Interestingly, the length of the fur of one's clothing determines one's class. The longer the fur, the pricier it is, and thus the higher one's social standing.



THE ROAD PROVIDES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Door, Templo de San Juan

Meet the Chamulans

HEALERS, INCENSE AND RITUALS

The most famous of all the indigenous villages in the area, **San Juan Chamula** is the religious center for the fiercely independent Tzotzil people. The Chamulans are renowned for their syncretic practices and rituals that blend Catholicism and pre-Hispanic beliefs. Though just 10km northwest of San Cristóbal, the autonomous village couldn't be more different from its neighbor. Day tours from San Cristóbal are highly recommended; you'll learn far more about their beliefs, and the guide will make sure you don't unintentionally break the rules.

On the village's main square stands Chamula's main church, **Templo de San Juan**, a prominent white edifice with vivid arches of green and blue. Step inside the dimly lit building and get ready to be transported into a different world: hundreds of flickering candles puncture the somber ambience, the smell of copal incense fills the air and worshippers kneel deep in prayer on a floor that's covered in pine straw. *Curanderos* (traditional healers) rub the worshippers' bodies with eggs as they sip copious amounts of *poz* (an alcoholic drink made of sugarcane and corn) and Coca-Cola to burp out evil spirits.



WHERE TO EAT IN SAN JUAN CHAMULA

Restaurante El Mirador

One of the few proper restaurants in Chamula, with glorious views and decent food. \$\$

Restaurante Al Toque!

A centrally located and affordable family-run restaurant. \$

Restaurante Nichim

Duck into this casual diner for some comforting regional broths. \$



ZINACANTÁN WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE

Mujeres Sembrando la Vida is a cooperative of 60 indigenous women weavers founded in 2009. Its name – meaning ‘Women Sowing Life’ in Spanish – reflects how these women are improving their lives through local art. The cooperative has successfully sold local textiles and handicrafts nationally and globally by developing fresh and innovative designs that aren’t necessarily traditional. To ensure that the weaving skills are passed on, the cooperative also opened a school, called Yo’onik, that provides free weaving and embroidery classes to children.

Photography is strictly forbidden here – stow your camera away and take the opportunity to soak it all in. The village leaders have confiscated cameras and fined visitors for flaunting the rules. Do not ignore these restrictions; they take them seriously. The Chamulans may be suspicious of outsiders and resent interference in their religious observances, but if treated with respect, they will respond in kind.

The **weekly market** is held every Sunday, right in front of the church. You’ll see Chamulan women dressed in their iconic shaggy wool skirts and selling them in the open market. It’s the busiest day of the week here as people from the hills flock to the village to shop and pay their respects in the church.

Zinacantán Traditions

ARTISAN AND PERENNIALS

You can smell the flowers of **San Lorenzo Zinacantán** (more affectionately known as Zinacantán) from miles away. A patchwork of flower fields and pine-clad hills engulfs the small town, with enormous greenhouses punctuating the landscape like a checkerboard rising from the valley. For years, this vibrant place of 45,000 people, just 10km northwest of San Cristóbal, has been growing flowers and exporting them to Mexico City and beyond.

Zinacantán’s love for flowers is reflected in the traditional clothes. Its people, who are Tzotzils like the Chamulans, wear *chals* (shawls), skirts and tunics with vivid flower motifs, replicating the flowers in this region. Historically, the motifs were woven on a back strap loom, but these days much of the embroidery is machine stitched. The best way to admire this artisan work is to wander into the shops and women’s cooperatives found throughout the village. These resemble local homes, but once you step inside, you’ll find walls full of hanging hot pink tunics, purple *chals* and blue dresses embellished with elaborate floral designs. Watch local women demonstrate the looming processes, and observe other ladies kneading piping hot tortillas and freshly ground frijole beans in the backyard. Tips are expected if you’re not buying anything.

The town’s main square by the **Iglesia de San Lorenzo** is worth visiting. Sunday is market day in Zinacantán and freshly cut flowers will be on sale, while women hawk their textiles on the square. At the time of writing, the Iglesia de San Lorenzo was closed for restoration work.



WHERE TO EAT IN ZINACANTÁN

Tio Tono Restaurante Familiar y Botanero

This casual joint serves up wholesome, authentic Mexican comfort food. \$

Bar Garden Zinacantan

A rare find with tasty sharing platters, delicious drinks and good vibes. \$\$

Cocina Regional los Arcos

Eat in a local’s home and taste home-cooked Chiapan delights. \$



JUAN CARLOS HERRERA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

El Arcotete Parque Ecoturístico



BEST ECO PARKS NEAR SAN CRISTÓBAL

El Arcotete

The most popular option with a distinctive natural stone arch for rock climbing.

Grutas del Mamut

This eco park slightly north of El Arcotete has similar amenities.

Parque Ecoturístico Rancho Nuevo

The eco park with the biggest caves featuring cathedral ceilings and a concrete walkway.

The Grottoes of San Cristóbal

AN UNDERWORLD OF CAVES AND CANYONS

Just a few kilometers east of San Cristóbal lies an underground system of craggy caverns and running rivers that has been transformed into small eco parks. The caves aren't the most impressive in Chiapas, but they offer a dose of nature just a short hop from San Cristóbal. The most popular eco park in the area is **El Arcotete Parque Ecoturístico**, a hodgepodge of pine forests, stone arches and hanging swings perched over streams. To get there, catch a *colectivo* two blocks north of San Cristóbal's Iglesia de Guadalupe, from the junction of Nicolás Ruiz and Av Remesal.

The main star of the show at El Arcotete is a 400m-long semi-open cave, with a walkway weaving through a dazzling chasm of stalagmites and stalactites. Along the trail, you can poke your head out of gaps and gaze over the pine forests that stretch out to the horizon. Underneath the cave entrance is a series of steps that lead to the riverbed, where you can gawk at the naturally formed stone arch above you. The rock face is particularly popular with rock climbers.

For a softer adventure, head to the zip-line and experience gliding leisurely over the forest. Several hiking trails criss-cross the pine forests that stud the eco park and a *lancha* (motorboat) ride leads you through the waterway.



GETTING AROUND

To explore the nearby nature parks and indigenous villages, you can easily catch a *colectivo* minivan from downtown for M\$15 per ride. Most combis have their destinations written on the dashboard; you just need to flag them down and hop on. Make sure to bring some coins with you.

Colectivos heading north to San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán leave from Calle Utrilla outside the Mercado Municipal, while those going east in the direction of the eco parks depart from the base of the Iglesia de Guadalupe. You can also book affordable day tours from the travel agencies along Real de Guadalupe, but the tours are mostly in Spanish.

Mexico City
✦

Cañón del Sumidero

CAÑÓN DEL SUMIDERO

THE GUIDE

CHIAPAS & TABASCO

TOP TIP

The national park is 18km north of downtown Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The easiest way to visit is to hire your own set of wheels. Alternatively, every travel agency in San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tuxtla Gutiérrez offers full-day trips, which usually include a two-hour boat ride, stops at the viewpoints, and two hours of free time in Chiapa de Corzo.

Giant 1006m-high rock walls frame the green waters and tree-studded landscapes of the Cañón del Sumidero: a canyon so deep you can see 35 million years of geological history in its walls. Declared a national park in 1980, the canyon sprawls across 54,000 acres of karst mountains and moss-covered rock formations.

Carved by the mighty Río Grijalva, Sumidero Canyon was created around the same time as the Grand Canyon in the US. While Sumidero only measures a mere 25km in length, it still manages to impress – head to one of the many panoramic viewpoints on the rim to see what we mean.

The national park's proximity to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas' largest city, makes it easily accessible, but problems such as pollution pose a threat. Logging companies and villages upstream are causing a buildup of waste in the canyon, which is at its worst in the rainy season (May to October).

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Árbol de Navidad waterfall (p327)

THE RIVER DAM

More than 30 years ago, the Grijalva couldn't have looked more different. The ferocious waters tumbled and tossed, so much so that they were not navigable even for the most skilled boatmen. The construction of the Chicoasén hydroelectric dam in 1981 changed everything – the water levels rose, resulting in a deep and calm 25km-long reservoir, which tour boats can now navigate with ease. Today, boat operators are organized into cooperatives, with about 60 boats running tours around the canyon.



Take to the Waters

GLIDE ALONG RÍO GRIJALVA

Without Río Grijalva, there would be no Cañón del Sumidero. It is this river that carved out the canyon, creating a brilliant landscape of forested banks and sheer escarpments laced with trickling waterfalls. The best way to explore the canyon is on a *lancha* that speeds between the canyon's lofty rock walls. Catch a boat from the pier in Chiapa de Corzo or the **Embarcadero Cahuaré**, 5km north of the town. Boats usually leave when they're full but it rarely takes more than 30 minutes for them to fill up (with a maximum of 20 passengers).

The two-hour journey takes you from one end of the river to the other, whisking you alongside massive cliffs and past tiny islets where endangered species roam. Not only are the waters the perfect place to ogle at the sheer scale of the rock faces, they're prime for wildlife-watching. As you glide along, look out for cormorants perched on tree branches, egrets fishing, turtles gliding in the water, and even a crocodile or two sunbathing on the river bank.

Along the way, the boat captain will point out a series of peculiar rock formations, including the **Cueva de los Colores**, a craggy cave naturally coated in a shade of pastel pink thanks to the magnesium that filtrates into the rock stack. The cave



MAIN ATTRACTIONS IN THE CAÑÓN DEL SUMIDERO

Ruins of Berlin

This fortified area built by the ancient Chiapa people is named after German explorer Heinrich Berlin.

Árbol de Navidad

The biggest waterfall in the canyon trickles into the shape of a Christmas tree.

Isla María

An islet rising from the riverbed, inhabited by huge flocks of herons and cormorants.



Árbol de Navidad

also houses a shrine dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, which draws in fleets of pilgrims every December 12, on the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe. Nearby is the **Árbol de Navidad** or 'Christmas Tree', which is in fact more of a waterfall than a tree. In the rainy season, the 106m cascade flows over a series of thick hanging moss, resembling a shimmering Christmas tree.

If you're feeling hungry, there are snacks and beverages on sale at the Embarcadero Cahuaré. While on the boat, you'll also find floating shops stocked full of chips, soft drinks and beers that will dock next to your boat during the tour. For a proper meal, most travelers head to Chiapa de Corzo, where there are several good restaurants offering regional specialties.

Drive Along the Canyon Rim

DRINK IN PANORAMIC VIEWS

The moment you roll up in the Cañón del Sumidero national park you feel it – you're entering someplace special. Though views from the water are stunningly beautiful, the canyon rim boasts more dramatic and staggering vistas. From this elevation, you'll see the horseshoe bend stretching out beneath you, with the serpentine Rfo Grijalva looping around rainforest-covered karst mountains and an endless sea of green all around.



BEST VIEWPOINTS IN THE NATIONAL PARK

La Ceiba

From this *mirador*, you can see the canyon beginning to take shape.

Los Chiapas

The highest point of the route offers an all-encompassing panorama of the Sumidero Canyon.

Atayala

At the last lookout, you'll find fantastic views, a cafeteria and kids' playground.



HIKING TRAILS

Circuit Cañón del Sumidero

A 6.1km moderate trail that takes you on a loop inside the rainforests.

Cerro Colorado

Challenge yourself to a 3.9km out-and-back hike up to the top of Cerro Colorado, to the east of Chicoasén dam, where soothing views await.

Miradores del Sumidero

This 10.8km route leads to three viewpoints, beginning at the Mirador La Coyota.



Aerial view of the Canyon



WHERE TO EAT IN CHIAPA DE CORZO

Jardines de Chiapa Restaurante

Sample regional dishes like *cochinito al horno* (oven-baked pork) at this atmospheric restaurant with a lush garden patio. \$\$

El Campanario

A traditional tavern dishing up quintessential Mexican and Chiapan dishes. \$\$

Mercado Municipal

The best spot for an inexpensive, authentic meal. \$

There are six miradores perched on different sections of the canyon rim, all of which can be visited on a short and sweet road trip from Tuxtla Gutiérrez or Chiapa de Corzo. Driving up the arduous serpentine road that leads to the canyon rim – Calzada al Sumidero – can be harrowing, but once you reach the vertex, it's an easy and leisurely cruise from one viewpoint to the next. There is no public transportation to get here, but renting a car from Tuxtla is affordable and some day tours include stops at the lookouts.

Make your first break at **La Ceiba** and see the canyon beginning to take shape, then briefly pop by **La Coyota** for your first views of the canyon walls. Go further and higher and you'll notice the canyon opening up at **El Roblar**. After rounding a bend, pull up at **El Tepehuaje** for a theatrical panorama. Besides a shaded watchtower, there's also a large car park with lots of space. Next up, **Los Chiapas** is a major pitstop for visitors with all-encompassing views, a small museum, shop and bathrooms. The final lookout, **La Atalaya**, has a kids' outdoor playground and cafeteria that serves up warm *tamales*. Note that the watchtowers are closed every Tuesday for maintenance, so try to visit during the rest of the week.



WHERE TO STAY IN CHIAPA DE CORZO

Hotel De Santiago

A no-frills colonial-style guesthouse steps from the white-and-red Templo de Santo Domingo. \$

Yaxché

This centrally located hotel is a humble setup with colonial stylings on the outside but few on the inside. \$

Hotel La Ceiba

With an inviting pool and an attractive garden, this is the most upscale hotel in town. \$\$

Stroll around Chiapa de Corzo

PROVINCIAL LIFE

Poised on the northern bank of the Río Grijalva, Chiapa de Corzo is the starting point for boat trips into the Cañón del Sumidero – but it's so much more than a basecamp for travelers. An underrated destination in its own right, Chiapa de Corzo is a sleepy, bucolic colonial town with a rich history that dates back to 1200 BCE.

Before the Spanish conquest, this city was home to the Chiapa warlike tribe. They fiercely fought the Spaniards when they arrived and posed a major obstacle. When Diego de Mazariegos invaded in 1528, hundreds of Chiapa people jumped off the canyon to their deaths instead of surrendering. Mazariego established a settlement here and named it Chiapa de los Indios.

Like most towns in Mexico, Chiapa de Corzo's focal point is the main plaza, where a glorious brick fountain named **La Pila** (also called Fuente Colonial) stands. Completed in 1562, this beautiful piece of art was designed in the Mudejar style to resemble the Spanish crown. On a sultry day, this leafy square is the best spot to plop down on a bench with an *elote* (grilled street corn) and soak up the lively ambience.

To reach the pier, follow Calle 5 de Febrero, where you'll pass one artisan shop after another. Stop by the prominent red-and-white **Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán**, and take a peek inside the ex-convent next door. The complex is now used as the **Museo de la Laca**, a museum dedicated to the local craft specialty of lacquered gourds.

For a slice of the town's history, head 1.5km east of the main square to the **Chiapa de Corzo Archaeological Site**, where remains of the ancient settlement still stand. Years of excavation have unearthed three Zoque pyramid structures that sit on mounds dating back to 750 BCE. In 2010 archaeologists found a 2700-year-old crypt, one of the oldest Mesoamerican pyramid tombs ever to be discovered.

Get Acquainted with the State Capital

DANCE THE MAMBA AND SIP COFFEE

The biggest city in Chiapas, **Tuxtla Gutiérrez** is what you would expect of a modern Mexican city – colonial churches juxtaposed against glass-roofed buildings, and American chains standing alongside traditional artisan shops. Most people pass through the modern shiny airport or bus station on their way to somewhere else, but the state capital is a decent place to get your bearings.

Tuxtla got its name from the Nahuatl word *tuchtlán* meaning 'place where rabbits abound'. Gutiérrez was later added



WHERE TO EAT IN TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

Taquitos Casa Blanca

Pig out on savory *tacos de cochito* (pulled pork tacos) at this local legend. It has opened up a few branches in the city but the original store is on Blvd La Salle. \$

Las Pichanchas

A lively courtyard restaurant famed for its Chiapan food, nightly live marimba music and traditional dances. \$\$

Restaurante La Mansión

Enjoy a multi-course dinner at the best steakhouse in Tuxtla. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

Hotel del Carmen

Centrally located in town, this budget hotel offers sparkling clean rooms at great prices. \$

Hotel Casa del Agua

A charming, colonial hotel with spacious rooms and a large and inviting pool. \$

The Lu'um House

Long-term travelers will enjoy the amenities and space in the stylish suites at this aparthotel. \$\$



BEST MUSEUMS IN TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

Museo de la Marimba

Take a crash course in the history of Marimba and get to know the city's famous musicians.

Regional Museum of Anthropology and History of Chiapas

The largest museum in Chiapas and one of the most important in the country.

Museo de las Artesanías de Chiapas

A display of Chiapas' famous handicrafts, with explanations on the historical background and their symbology.

Museo Chiapas de Ciencia y Tecnología

Kids will rejoice at this fun, interactive science and technology museum studded with digital displays and dinosaur figures.



Tuxtla Gutiérrez

to it to honor General Joaquín Miguel Gutiérrez, a local politician and militant. These days, you won't find rabbits around town, but the city buzzes with restaurants, bars, megastores and other amenities.

Tuxtla's main square, **Plaza Cívica**, stretches across two blocks flanked by government buildings. At its southern end stands the whitewashed **Catedral de San Marcos**, known for its clock tower musical tunes. The facade of the cathedral is the backdrop for a multimedia light show every Thursday to Sunday from 8pm onwards.

A block east of the plaza is the **Museo del Café**, a state-owned museum with displays on the cultivation of coffee in Chiapas. You'll get to learn all about Mexico's favorite bean and taste a cup o' joe in the building's courtyard. The museum hosts music events, movie showings and even barista competitions.

To take a look at local life, amble down to the **Parque de la Marimba**, eight blocks west of Plaza Cívica, in the evening. Every night, free marimba concerts are held in this lush garden, and everyone is invited to dance around the central pavilion. On weekends, it feels like the whole city shows up here for the outdoor dance party. Learn more about the marimba at the **Museo de la Marimba** by the park. The tiny museum showcases both antique and modern models of the quintessentially Mexican instrument, as well as the most celebrated marimba musicians.



GETTING AROUND

There's no direct public transportation to or around the national park, but you can catch a bus or *colectivo* from Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de las Casas to Chiapa de Corzo. *Colectivos* leave regularly from 1a Avenida Sur Oriente (between Calles 5a and 7a Oriente Sur) in Tuxtla, while the OCC bus leaves from Avenida Insurgentes. From the Chiapa de

Corzo pier, the canyon is just a short boat ride away on the *lancha*.

The best way to crisscross the national park is on four wheels. Tuxtla Gutiérrez has a number of car-rental agencies at the airport and in town. If you're planning to drive on your own, make sure you're confident navigating the steep, winding roads and hairpin bends. There's plenty of free parking, especially at the viewpoints.



COMITÁN

TOP TIP

Hwy 190 cuts right through the center of Comitán, to the west of Parque Central. The OCC bus terminal is located at the junction of Hwy 190 and Cristóbal Colón. You'll find regular departures to San Cristóbal de las Casas (two hours), Tuxtla Gutiérrez (three hours), and Palenque (seven hours). Catch combis to the center of Comitán across the road from the OCC terminal.

Set on a high plain 90km southeast of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Comitán de Domínguez is one of Chiapas' lesser-glimpsed colonial jewels. It's a quiet town that only receives a trickle of overnight visitors, but it's also a jumping-off point for the cerulean falls of El Chiflón, and therein lies Comitán's appeal.

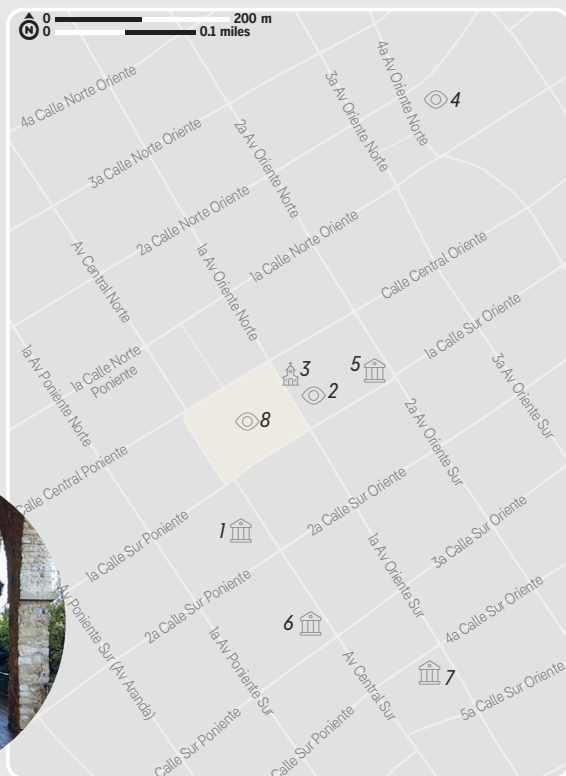
Founded in 1527 by the Spanish, this town has a pleasant highland atmosphere. Comitán is centered around a charming square filled with modern art sculptures and immaculately pruned flat-topped trees. Splaying out from the center are nine neighborhoods with grid-like streets and pastel-colored houses.

Comitán is the last town before the Pan-American Hwy (Hwy 190) gives way to sparkling lakes and Guatemala. If you're planning to head across the border, this is a good stop to refuel. In recent years, Comitán has improved its infrastructure, adding an entourage of well-priced hotels and decent restaurants.

SIGHTS

- 1 Casa Museo Dr Belisario Domínguez
- 2 Centro Cultural Rosario Castellanos
- 3 Iglesia de Santo Domingo
- 4 La Pila
- 5 Museo Arqueológico de Comitán
- 6 Museo de Arte Hermila Domínguez de Castellanos
- 7 Parque Central Benito Juárez

Centro Cultural Rosario Castellanos (p332)





SIMON MCGILL/GETTY IMAGES ©

Palacio Municipal

All Roads Lead to Parque Central

COMITÁN'S BEATING HEART

The colonial center is compact and walkable, overflowing with small-scale *posadas* and local *taquerías*. Its focal point is **Parque Central Benito Juárez**, just a few blocks east of where Hwy 190 meets Central Pte. Arranged around a jumble of manicured trees, flowerbeds and art sculptures, the square is a hive of activity, particularly in the evening. On weekends, artisans set up crafts stalls and street vendors sell steaming tacos, while locals put on their dancing shoes and gather here for free marimba concerts.

Flanking the leafy square is the **Centro Cultural Rosario Castellanos** (culture center) and the **Palacio Municipal** (city hall). The *pièce de résistance* here is the striking **Iglesia de Santo Domingo**, its neoclassical facade painted a pastel yellow color. Dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries, this church is distinguished by the unusual blind arcading on its Mudejar-style tower. Next door, the former monastery features an aesthetically pleasing wood-pillared patio with a large mural depicting local history.

Pay Homage to Comitán's Hero

GET YOUR CULTURE FIX

For such a small town, Comitán surprises with its bevy of historical museums. Just south of the main square is **Casa Museo Dr Belisario Domínguez**, a museum dedicated to Comitán's biggest hero. Dr Domínguez, who gave Comitán part of its name, was a doctor and political activist who was



BEST RESTAURANTS IN COMITÁN

Camino Secreto

Hunt down this nearly hidden spot for inexpensive and satisfying local food. \$

Ta Bonitío

Hugely popular with locals, this restaurant has a large menu featuring regional specialties and international food. \$\$

Mercado San José

Soak up cosmopolitan vibes at this hip and atmospheric food hall with a glass ceiling and arched walls. \$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN COMITÁN

Capital O Hotel Jardín de Tereza

Set around a pretty courtyard, this colonial hotel has large rooms with wooden-beamed ceilings. \$

Hotel Nak'An Secreto Maya

With a super central location and stylish contemporary rooms, this is Comitán's best value-for-money hotel. \$\$

Hotel Casa Delina

This 250-year-old mansion houses eight luxurious rooms that blend colonial grandeur with industrial chic. \$\$



Comitán

unfortunately assassinated at the end of his political career. This museum, converted from his family home and medical practice, provides fascinating insights into what life in Chiapas was like in the early 20th century.

A block further south is the **Museo de Arte Hermila Domínguez de Castellanos**, where you can browse Dr Domínguez's art collection as well as the works of famous Mexican artists, including José Luis Cuevas and Rufino Tamayo. Occasionally, the museum runs seminars and workshops on art history and artistic appreciation. Around the corner, **Museo de la Ciudad** details different stages of Comitán's history, from its ancient Maya days to the 19th century.

Just east of the main square, the **Museo Arqueológico de Comitán** is crammed with artifacts from the area's many archaeological sites including Tenam Puente (p336). In the main hall are schematic displays of the first hunter-gatherers and representations of the pre-Classic period. Entry is free and explanations are only in Spanish.

Dig Deep in La Pila

CELEBRATE A REVERED SAINT

Life in Comitán is lived in the *barrios* (neighborhoods) – a visit to the town is incomplete until you've explored its heartlands. Just three blocks to the northeast of the main square lies the oldest neighborhood: **La Pila**.

Terracotta-roofed houses flank the cobblestoned streets of La Pila, with their wooden balconies hanging overhead. Watch locals go about their lives as vintage Volkswagen Beetles



COMITÁN'S MUST-TRY SPECIALTY DISHES

Comiteco

Traditionally brewed in Comitán, this unique variant of mezcal is concocted with *maguey* (a type of agave) and *piloncillo* (cooked sugarcane).

Pozol de cacao o cacahuate

A thick mixture of *masa* (cornmeal dough), water and cacao or peanuts.

Cascara preparada

A massive rectangular wheat puff generously topped with cheese, corn, chili and cream.

Chinculguajes

Sink your teeth into these thick tortillas stuffed with beans, cilantro, and chili.

Pan compuesto

A round *torta* (sandwich) with chicken, pickled beets, carrots and a sprinkle of fresh cheese.

Hueso Comiteco

Pork leg (with bone included) slow cooked in a sweet and sour gravy.



BEST CAFES IN COMITÁN

Monarca – café de especialidad

This stylish cafe brews some of the best coffee in Chiapas and offers rooftop views. \$\$

La Comiteca 1948

An excellent breakfast joint with freshly baked *concha* buns and decadent pastries. \$\$

Perro Caffé

Get your sweet tooth satiated at this modern cafe and work space, with its flurry of frappes, cakes and bagels. \$\$

THE INDEPENDENCE OF CHIAPAS

Comitán was the first city in Chiapas to declare separation from the Spanish empire. In 1821 Comitán leaders voted for the state to become its own independent nation but as Guatemala's control over the area increased, Chiapas eventually decided to become the 19th state of Mexico in 1824.

In commemoration of this period of uncertainty, a large replica of the Chiapan Declaration of Independence, nicknamed '**the Book**,' now sits on the slopes of Comitán's hilltop cemetery. The monument features columns that look like beacons, complete with tiled mosaics of the coats of arms of Chiapas and Mexico.



JODAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Templo de San Caralampio

whisk past you and street vendors hawk *paletas* (popsicles) and *pozoles de elote* (a heavy corn drink).

The district's crown jewel is the **Templo de San Caralampio**, an orange-and-red neoclassical building featuring checkered stairs and plenty of ornate carvings. St Caralampio, a Greek Orthodox saint, is so highly revered in Comitán that the town celebrates a 10-day festival in his honor. On February 10, locals kick off the Fiesta de San Caralampio with a traditional pilgrimage that departs from El Chumís on the southwestern edge of town. Masked men and devil figures parade and dance in front of the church, before worshippers head inside to offer their flowers and prayers.



GETTING AROUND

Comitán is compact enough to walk everywhere. *Colectivos* have terminals on Hwy 190 between Calles 1a and 2a Sur Poniente, just north of the OCC terminal. These vans

leave for San Cristóbal and Tuxtla Gutiérrez. White taxis are also readily available around the main square.



Beyond Comitán

Comitán is a fantastic launchpad for exploring nearby natural and historical sights.

Comitán has no shortage of sparkling lakes and ancient archaeological sites within a two-hour drive. What's more, because these spots are plonked in the far southwestern edge of Chiapas, close to the Mexico–Guatemala border, they see very few tourists. If you're traveling overland to Guatemala, it's easy to turn the journey into one epic road trip, making stops at the numerous natural wonders studded along Hwy 190.

Southwest of Comitán lies the plummeting sapphire cascades of El Chiflón, Chiapas' poster girl and the emblematic symbol of southern Mexico. To the southeast are the stepped pyramids of Chinkultic and the fortified Tenam Puente ruins, while further east are the shimmering, pine-fringed lakes of the Parque Nacional Lagunas de Montebello.

TOP TIP

Guided day trips will give you limited time at each spot. We recommend traveling independently and spending a night at each place.



BATECHENKOFF/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cascadas El Chiflón (p336)

TOP TIPS FOR VISITING EL CHIFLÓN

Travel agencies in Comitán run daily group tours here for around M\$400 (along with Lagos de Montebellos), but they tend to move at a fast pace and you won't get to swim.

To visit independently, catch an Autotransportes Cuxtepeques bus from its Comitán terminal (hourly to the El Chiflón turnoff, 6am to 7pm).

Avoid visiting during Mexican holidays like Semana Santa as it gets crowded and entrance fees double.

Wear a bathing suit and water shoes and carry biodegradable sunscreen and insect repellent with you.

There are restaurants in both *centros* plus food carts lining the streets outside. You can also bring your own food and drinks.

There are no lifeguards at the swimming areas, so practice caution.

Chiapas' Loftiest Falls

CASCADES, POOLS AND TRAVERTINES

Lauded as the finest falls in Chiapas, **Cascadas El Chiflón** are a series of frothy cerulean cascades tumbling 120m off an escarpment into swirling cobalt blue pools. At about 20km southwest of Comitán, they are surprisingly easy to access, forested paths and boardwalks leading right up to various falls. The best time to visit is in the dry season (roughly February to July), when the cascades merge to form a foamy curtain and the water is safe to swim in. Avoid the rainy season as currents can turn the water muddy and brown, and swimming can be life-threatening.

Two community-run enterprises manage the cascades. The first is **Centro Ecoturístico Cascadas el Chiflón**, which has a number of attractive amenities including rustic riverfront *cabañas*, zip-lines, a campground and a small interpretive center with info on the river and wildlife. From the parking area, walk the 1km approach road then continue on the path for 1.3km alongside the forest-lined river to a sequence of increasingly dramatic waterfalls. Prepare to be drenched by the flying spray when you reach the right side of the 120m **Velo de Novia** (Bridal Vail), the highest falls at El Chiflón.

The second is **Centro Ecoturístico Cascada Velo de Novia**, with more swimming areas and newer, slightly cheaper *cabañas*. The trails here lead to the left side of the Velo de Novia where you'll get a more panoramic view of the falls but you won't get quite as close. Zip-lines whisk you across the river at various points along the route. If time isn't an issue, we recommend staying overnight in the riverside *cabañas* and visiting both ecotourism centers to experience the falls from different angles.

Overlooked Ancient Ruins

UNCOVERING STORIES CARVED INTO THE STONES

Receiving just a few tourists each year, the **Tenam Puente archaeological site**, 11km south of Comitán, is virtually unheard of but well worth a slight detour on your way to El Chiflón. It's one of those magical sites where the wild atmosphere is as captivating as the stories written into the stones. Tenam Puente was a minor Maya power during the Classic period and may have survived into the post-Classic period, possibly as late as 1200 CE. The sprawling ruins feature a 20m tiered pyramid, three ball courts and other structures rising from a wooded hillside. The main buildings have been fully



WHERE TO FIND MORE NATURAL ATTRACTIONS NEAR COMITÁN

Laguna Koila

A small lagoon with shallow, clear water and natural swimming pools, perfect to cool off in summer.

Piedras de Oro

Just south of Laguna Koila is a series of 15 natural pools and manmade slides popular with local families on weekends.

Cenote Chukumaltik

Dubbed Chiapas' best-kept secret, this open cenote, 13km west of Tenam Puente, has waters that go as deep as 70m.



Tenam Puente archaeological site

restored, but others remain covered by thick vegetation – giving the site an untamed, evocative atmosphere.

Also worth a short stop is **Chinkultic archaeological site**, 39km southeast of Comitán, located along the road to Lagos de Montebello. Of the 200 mounds scattered over a large area of dramatically situated ruins, only a few have been excavated, but it's easy to imagine the grandeur of this site in its heyday. The ruins are divided into two groups: if you take the left path at the entrance, you'll reach one of Chinkultic's biggest structures, E3, which is almost swallowed by the jungle. The path continues to a grassy square with several unrestored stelae and a ball court on the right. Another path leads to the Plaza Hundida (Sunken Plaza) then climbs steeply up to the Acrópolis, a partially restored temple sitting atop a stone ledge with an unobstructed vista of the surrounding lakes and forests and down into a cenote 50m below. The latter was used by the Maya for offerings of bones, pottery and obsidian knives.

Lagos de Montebello

PICTURESQUE ALPINE LAKES

Over 50 small lakes of varied hues make up the **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Montebello**, 56km southeast of Comitán.



WHERE TO STAY IN LAGOS DE MONTEBELLO

Cabañas Islas de Tziscaco

This budget-friendly option on the southern shores of Lago Tziscaco has comfortable, spacious cabins. \$

Villa Tziscaco

Stay in lakeside *cabañas* or comfortable hotel rooms and rent kayaks for a gorgeous country escape. \$\$

Parador-Museo Santa María

This beautiful hotel-museum is a restored hacienda that converted its chapel into an art museum. \$\$



GETTING TO THE RUINS

Transporte Ejidal Tenam Puente runs combis to Tenam Puente every 45 minutes from its terminal at 3a Av Poniente Sur 8 in Comitán from 7am to 4pm. A taxi costs about M\$400 return (with an hour at the ruins).

To get to Chinkultic, catch any combi to Lagos de Montebello and ask to be dropped at the Chinkultic intersection. The site is 2km north via a paved access road.



Laguna de Montebello



SECURITY CHECKPOINTS

Public transportation from Comitán is a snap; vans go all the way to Laguna Bosque Azul and Tziscaco, and will drop passengers at the turnoffs to Chinkultic and other lakes. With the Mexico–Guatemala border just across Lagos de Montebello, you'll find additional checkpoints in the area. Those taking public transport will most likely encounter police checks. Make sure to bring your passport with you.

The countryside here along the Mexico–Guatemala border is gloriously underdeveloped – a mix of emerald greens and iridescent blues, surrounded by thick temperate pine and oak forest. The area is beautifully cool and peaceful.

At the park entrance, the road forks: north to the **Lagunas de Colores**, and east to the village of **Tziscaco**. Lagunas de Colores is in fact five separate lakes with vivid colors ranging from spearmint to olive: Laguna Agua Tinta, Laguna Esmeralda, Laguna Encantada, Laguna Ensueño and, the biggest, Laguna Bosque Azul. In the Laguna Ensueño car park, locals offer multilake horseback excursions that include Dos Cenotes, a pair of sinkholes in the forest, or to Laguna de Montebello. There are also basic *comedores* slinging simple meals and drinks.

Take the eastward road for 3km and you'll find a track to the **Laguna de Montebello**, one of the area's larger lakes. The local *ejido* charges an extra entrance fee to access the lakes along the Tziscaco road; remember to keep your receipt. Near to Tziscaco, a track leads 1km north to the indigo **Laguna Pojoj**, which has an island in the middle that you can visit on bamboo rafts. **Laguna Tziscaco**, on the Guatemalan border, comes into view near the Pojoj junction. Eventually you'll reach the Chuj-speaking village of Tziscaco, a sweet hamlet stretching down to the lakeside.



GETTING AROUND

It's easy to catch combis or *colectivos* out of Comitán, but make sure you leave early or spend a night or two at each spot. There are hourly vans to the El Chiflón turnoff on Hwy 226 from the *colectivo* terminal 500m north of the OCC terminal. Vans to Lagos de

Montebello leave regularly from the same station and stop at Laguna Bosque Azul. The Mexico–Guatemala border is 4km south at La Mesilla, and combis and taxis ferry people between the two sides.

Mexico City



Tabasco

TABASCO

THE GUIDE

CHIAPAS & TABASCO

TOP TIP

Villahermosa International Airport, 13km east of the center, has daily flights from Mexico City. It also serves Cancún, Mérida, Monterrey and Guadalajara. ADO runs hourly minibuses to Palenque; buy tickets at their airport counter. Buses from other destinations arrive at the ADO bus terminal on Lino Merino 925.

Extending across the Gulf Coast north of Chiapas, the compact state of Tabasco is known more for its oil industries than its untamed rainforests and mammoth Olmec stone sculptures. But the state is slowly blossoming into an ecotourism destination, thanks to its amalgamation of biosphere reserves and protected areas.

Take a look at a map of Tabasco and you'll notice that the state is literally a patchwork of lagoons rivers, and wetlands. It's always hot and humid here, but drastically less so when you head to the breezy coast and venture into the southern hills. The area around Villahermosa and the Gulf Coast is subject to seasonal floods, so make sure to check for warnings prior to your trip.

Tabasco is also making a name for itself with its rich history – this was where the Olmec, mother of all Mesoamerican civilizations flourished. Today you can see remnants of La Venta, the largest Olmec city ever built, at the outdoor museum in Villahermosa.

LEV LEVIN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Parque Museo La Venta

TABASCO



CACAO HAVEN

Comalcalco made a name for itself with cacao production and small chocolate factories. **Hacienda La Luz** (haciendaluz.mx), just 300m from the central Parque Juárez, offers informative guided tours of its gardens and cacao plantation. You will see its traditional methods of turning home-grown cacao beans into chocolate and get to taste them. Tours can be booked on the website; English tours have to be reserved in advance.

Exploring the Capital

MUSEUMS AND OLMEC HEADS

Unlike what its name implies, **Villahermosa** is neither a *villa* (town) nor *hermosa* (beautiful). Like many modern Mexican cities, it values function over looks. Home to more than a quarter of Tabasco's population, the sprawling city is flat, hot and humid. Most travelers arrive into Villahermosa's international airport and use it as a starting point to explore Chiapas and beyond.

Villahermosa's main appeal is the fascinating **Parque Museo La Venta**, an outdoor park and museum created in 1958 to save the highly significant ancient Olmec settlement of La Venta when it was threatened by petroleum exploration. Archaeologists moved some of the most important sculptures here, 130km away from their original site.

A 1km sculpture walk lined with archaeological finds takes you through the park, where information in English and Spanish is on display. The start of the trail is marked by a 120-year-old giant ceiba tree (sacred for the Olmec and Maya). The most impressive sculptures; Stele 3, depicting a bearded man with a headdress, Stele 1, showing a young goddess (rare to find an Olmec representation of anything female); and Monumento



WHERE TO STAY IN VILLAHERMOSA

La Maja Suites

This riverfront budget hotel offers incredible value for money with cozy suites just a short walk from the center. \$

Sleep Inn Villahermosa

Just a block from Parque Juárez, this midrange business hotel is spotlessly clean, with work desks in the rooms. \$\$

Hotel Boutique Menta & Cacao

This plush hotel is housed in a century-old building, splashed with vivid hues and eclectic contemporary decor. \$\$\$



Comalcalco

1, the colossal head of a helmet-adorning warrior. Coatis and black agoutis roam the park freely.

Four kilometers south of the Parque Museo La Venta, the excellent **Museo de Antropología** is located inside a shiny modern building and contains some impressive exhibits on Olmec, Maya, Nahua and Zoque cultures in Tabasco. The most intriguing display is Tortuguero 6, the notorious tablet responsible for the dire 'end of the world' predictions for December 12, 2012.

Old-World Comalcalco

ANCIENT MONUMENTS AND DIVINE CHOCOLATE

Just 55km northwest of Villahermosa, Comalcalco is a nondescript town of little visual appeal, but it's home to some pleasantly under-visited historical remains. Engulfed in the lush jungle surrounding the town, the tiny but impressive **archaeological site of Comalcalco** contains the most westerly known Maya ruins. What sets it apart from the rest is that many of the buildings here were built with bricks and/or mortar made from oyster shells. Under the ruling of the Chontal, the ancient city reached its zenith between 600 and 1000 CE and remained an important center of commerce for centuries more.



WHERE TO EAT IN COMALCALCO

Cocina Chontal

Just outside the archaeological site, this restaurant rekindles half-forgotten traditional Tabasqueño dishes. \$

Barbacoa Chauy

A basic, fuss-free joint serving burritos and tacos with slow-cooked *barbacoa*. \$

Los 4 Acuerdos

This multi-story *palapa*-roofed restaurant caters to family celebrations with its contemporary menu and grassy environs. \$\$



BEST RESTAURANTS IN VILLAHERMOSA

El Teapaneco

This is undoubtedly the best breakfast joint in Tabasco, with a delicious array of *tamales* and eggs cooked in all kinds of ways. \$

La Cevichería Tabasco

This stellar seafood place is famed for artsy dishes that taste as good as they look. \$\$

La Lupita

Indulge in excellent seafood at affordable prices here. The star of the show is the *caldo de marisco* (seafood soup). \$\$

Mar & Co

Located on the strip known as Paseo Tabasco, this place serves well-priced, fresh-from-the-sea food. \$\$



FISHING FOR BLIND SARDINES

During *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), Tapijulapa holds one of the most unique rituals in Tabasco: *Pesca de la Sardinas Ciega* (Fishing of the Blind Sardine), an ancient pre-Hispanic ceremony that has survived till today. It begins with mass at the local church, then participants proceed on foot to the sacred **Cueva de las Sardinas Ciegas** (Cave of the Blind Sardines). Dressed in all-white traditional Tabasqueño wear, they dance and chant in *Zoque*, with baskets of copal in hand. Inside the cave, the dancers release the *cueza* (ground mullein seeds which have a narcotic effect on the fish) into the sulfurous water. The fishing thus begins and the event turns into a big party.



GILBERTO WILLIAMS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Tapijulapa

At the entrance to the complex you'll find a small museum with a collection of sculptures featuring carvings of human heads, deities, glyphs and animals. The next building you encounter is the impressive brick tiered pyramid, **Templo I**. At its base are large stucco sculptures, including the feet of a giant winged toad. More temples line Plaza Norte, including the **Gran Acrópolis** at the far (southeast) corner of the site. From its summit, you can drink in views over a canopy of palms to the Gulf of Mexico. The Acrópolis faces **Templo V**, a burial pyramid that was once flanked on all sides with sculptures of people, reptiles, birds and aquatic life.

There are frequent ADO buses to and from Villahermosa, but the best option is to take the Comalli vans that usually leave when full from 7am to 10pm. The Comalli terminal is at Reforma Sur 503. A taxi from Comalcalco center costs around M\$80 each way.

Tapijulapa Adventures

A THRIVING ECO DESTINATION

The *pueblo mágico* of Tapijulapa, 85km south of Villahermosa, is raved about as the prettiest town in Tabasco. It's set among the lush forested hills of Sierra de Tabasco in the southern reaches of the state, close to the Chiapas border.

It's believed that the *Zoque* people began settling in what is now known as Tapijulapa in the 5th and 6th centuries. Archaeological finds from the **caves of Cuesta Chica** proved that Tapijulapa was used as a ceremonial center during its heyday. Today, quaint Tapijulapa is centered around a 17th-



WHERE TO STAY IN TAPIJULAPA

Mesón de la Sierra

Two blocks north of the main square, this small inn has a Mediterranean feel and prime location. \$

Hotel Comunitario Villa Tapijulapa

This community-run hotel has clean, well-appointed rooms that won't bust your budget. \$

Kolem Jaa

A few kilometers out of town, this eco-retreat has brightly painted bungalows and an array of activities, from rappelling to zip-lining. \$\$

century church, and characterized by iconic white houses with red-tiled roofs and potted flowers.

Standing at the confluence of the Oxolotán and Amatlán rivers, the beautiful **Reserva Ecológica Villa Luz**, 4km south of town, boasts waters of various colors and dense jungles that are home to swinging howler monkeys. The easiest way to get there is on a five-minute boat ride from the village *embarcadero*. It is then a 1km walk to the **Casa Museo**, a museum converted from the former villa of Tomás Garrido Canabal, an anti-religious governor of Tabasco. Several paths continue on to dreamy cascades that tumble into the inviting pools (where you can swim) and swinging suspension bridges shrouded in vegetation. Tread further and you'll reach the **Cueva de las Sardinias Ciegas**, that has sightless fish swimming within the sulfurous river inside the cave.

Pantanos de Centla

LAKES, MANGROVES AND MARSHES

Covering over 3030 sq km of wetlands, the **Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla** is around 90km northeast of Villahermosa, making for an accessible day trip from Tabasco's urban capital. From Villahermosa, catch an ADO or Cardesa bus to Frontera, from where *colectivos* run the 15-minute trip to the reserve. A taxi from Frontera costs around M\$100. The best time to visit is from March to May, during the birding season.

Officially declared a biosphere reserve in 1992, Pantanos de Centla gives nature lovers a glimpse into the rugged wetlands surrounding two of Mexico's largest rivers, the Usumacinta and the Grijalva. The estuaries, mangroves, islands and savannas here are a peaceful sanctuary for a medley of endangered animals, including the West Indian manatee and q crocodile. It's also a natural habitat for tapirs, ocelots, jaguars, howler monkeys, 52 fish species and 255 bird species.

Start at the visitor center, **La Casa del Agua** (casadelagua.org.mx), 13km south of Frontera along the Jonuta road. Head up to the 20m-high observation tower for a panorama of the confluence of the Grijalva, the Usumacinta and the San Pedrito rivers – a spot known as Tres Brazos (Three Arms). If time permits, do a two-hour boat tour of the mangroves, run by local communities on rudimentary *lanchas*. You might spot caimans, iguanas, birds and, with luck, howler monkeys.



YUMKÁ SAFARI PARK

For more wildlife experiences, head 17km east of Villahermosa (near the airport) to see regional species including howler monkeys, jaguars, scarlet macaws and toucans. It's hardly an African game drive, but those traveling with kids may appreciate seeing animals from a tractor-pulled trolley. Yumká is divided into jungle, savanna and lake zones, representing Tabasco's three main ecosystems. The park was reported for alleged animal abuse around 2015, but the new administration team has overseen a revamp and the animals are now much better cared for.



GETTING AROUND

There are regular bus services from Villahermosa to other parts of Tabasco. They usually leave from the main Central de Autobuses de Tabasco on Av Ruíz Cortines

and Calle Castillo. ADO has a modern bus station on Calle Coronel Lino Merino and Av Francisco Javier Mina.

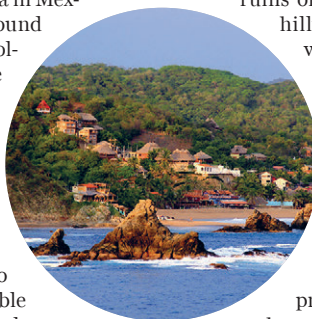


OAXACA

CULTURALLY RICH, UNIQUELY SUBLIME CORNER OF MEXICO

With astonishingly biodiverse coastal, valley and mountain regions, a culture pulsating with artistic creativity and deep-rooted indigenous traditions, Oaxaca represents everything that makes Mexico so special.

After the best-selling British author Oliver Sacks visited Oaxaca in 2000 with a tour group of fellow fern lovers, he described the epic nine-day trip in his travelogue *Oaxaca Journal* as a 'revelation.' But it wasn't just 'the richest flora in Mexico' that had such a profound impact on the famed neurologist and naturalist. Like most travelers discovering this amazing corner of southern Mexico for the first time, every day brought new surprises as Sacks experienced not only one of the most biodiverse regions in Mexico but also a place of incredible culinary, linguistic and cultural diversity that's strongly influenced by ancient indigenous traditions. In state capital Oaxaca, for instance, the recipe for that savory *mole* dish you're eating just



might be older than the city itself, while in the surrounding towns, artisans have been crafting intricate textiles and pottery since pre-Hispanic times. Sacks also heaps praise on the dramatically situated ruins of Monte Albán, a stunning

hilltop Zapotec city 'suffused with a sense of the divine.' Equally celestial are Oaxaca's cloud-capped forested highlands, the rugged cliff-backed beach coves and the coastal lagoons teeming with wildlife. And then, of course, there's mezcal country, where welcoming producers not only show you how their families have been making Oaxaca's signature alcoholic agave drink for centuries, but they actually invite you into their homes to tip one back with them.

EMILIANO BARBERI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

MARCOS BOTELHO, JR./SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE MAIN AREAS

OAXACA CITY

Historic and cultural capital. **p350**

SIERRA NORTE

Welcoming Zapotec mountain towns. **p371**

SIERRA SUR

Wildlife-watching and coffee country. **p374**

PUERTO ESCONDIDO

Home to the Mexican pipeline. **p377**



Above: Hierve El Agua (p369); Opposite: Mazunte (p383)

MAZUNTE & ZIPOLITE

Bohemian beach towns. **p383**

BAHÍAS DE HUATULCO

Nine ruggedly gorgeous bays. **p388**

ISTHMUS OF TEHUANTEPEC

Dune-backed beaches and urban Zapotec culture. **p393**

SANTIAGO APOALA

Mixtec mountain wonderland. **p396**

Find Your Way

Oaxaca is Mexico's fifth-largest state by area and roughly the size of Hungary. Oaxaca City makes a good base for exploring the outlying valleys and mountains, while main coastal destinations include Bahías de Huatulco and Puerto Escondido.

Santiago Apoala, p396

This tiny Mixtec mountain village makes for a thrilling outdoor adventure as you discover cascading waterfalls, pristine lagoons, deep canyons and ancient rock carvings.

Oaxaca City, p350

Oaxaca's historic and cultural capital captivates visitors with its exquisite gastronomy, intimate mezcal bars, evocative colonial architecture and creative arts and crafts.



KELLI HAYDEN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Puerto Escondido, p377

A fast-growing surf hub that's home to the Mexican pipeline, a flourishing culinary scene, ample outdoor activities and environs brimming with wildlife.

Mazunte & Zipolite, p383

A string of low-rise beach towns with intentionally rustic hotels, an unabashed do-nothing bohemian vibe and plenty of wildlife-watching opportunities.





CAR

A car is the most convenient option to reach remote mountain towns, out-of-the-way ruins and mezcal distilleries, and small coastal villages with little or no public transportation. However, ditch your wheels if you plan on spending a significant amount of time in the congested capital.



BUS

Oaxaca's efficient, comfortable and relatively affordable 1st-class bus system is generally the best way to get around along main routes. Older 2nd-class buses serve many of the smaller towns, while passenger vans ply the winding mountain roads to the coast, Sierra Norte and Sierra Sur.



COLECTIVOS

Colectivos (shared taxis) are often the cheapest and quickest mode for getting around town and reaching outlying areas. Some of these vehicles in coastal and mountain towns are covered pickup trucks, while in Oaxaca City and the Valles Centrales (Central Valleys) they're usually four-door economy cars.

Bahía de Campeche

Sierra Norte, p371

Zapotec villages in highly biodiverse mountains provide restful wilderness escapes. The region also holds great historical significance as the birthplace of Mexico's first indigenous president.

Isthmus of Tehuantepec, p393

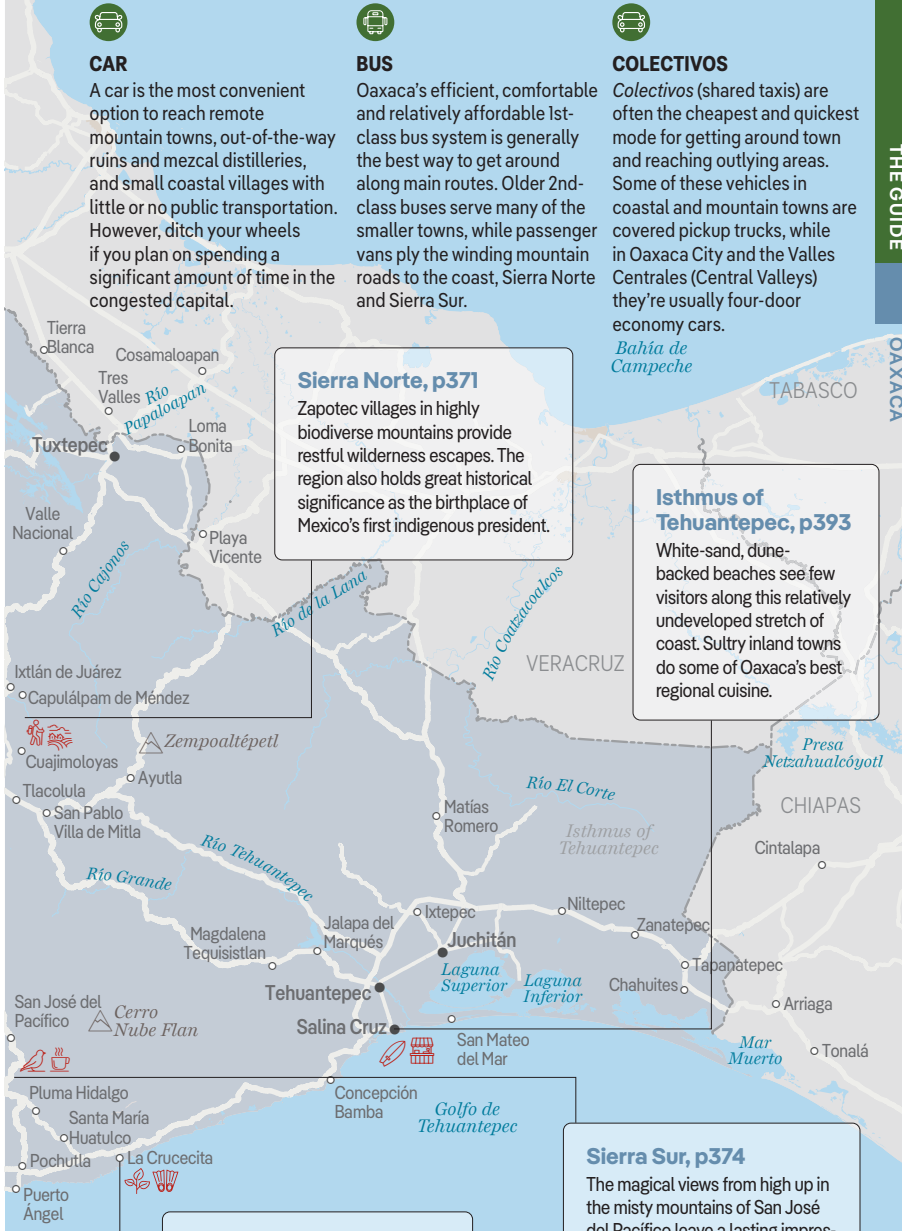
White-sand, dune-backed beaches see few visitors along this relatively undeveloped stretch of coast. Sultry inland towns do some of Oaxaca's best regional cuisine.

Bahías de Huatulco, p388

Nine attractive bays hug the rugged coast, while the city center's affordable taco joints, festive beach bars and humming main square provide authentic Mexican flavor.

Sierra Sur, p374

The magical views from high up in the misty mountains of San José del Pacífico leave a lasting impression, as do the equally impressive landscapes in coffee country.



Plan Your Time

You can easily spend weeks exploring Oaxaca's capital and outlying valley regions, not to mention its vast and varied mountain towns and beach communities.



© JASMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

El Tule (p368)



SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS

Dry winter months bring migrating whales to the coast, while the rainy summer means peak surf season. Visit in July for Guelaguetza or November for Day of the Dead celebrations.



JANUARY

A pleasantly cool time to visit and an ideal month to spot **migrating humpback whales** off Puerto Escondido's coast.



FEBRUARY

The weather remains mild and dry, allowing for exuberant **Carnaval** celebrations in colorful artisan villages like San Martín Tilcajete.



MARCH

On the third Monday of March, Oaxaca commemorates the **birthday of its native son Benito Juárez**, Mexico's first indigenous president.

Pressed For Time

- Make cultural capital **Oaxaca City** (p350) your base to feast on an array of tantalizing culinary delights, tap into the thriving art scene, hang in cool mezcal joints and visit first-rate museums. Nearby, don't miss the ancient Zapotec ruins of **Monte Albán** (p364), a fascinating hilltop site with dazzling panoramas.
- If time allows, head out to the splendid artisan workshops in **Teotitlán del Valle** (p368), **San Bartolo Coyotepec** (p367) and **San Martín Tilcajete** (p367) to watch the masters craft intricate Zapotec rugs, black pottery and brilliantly painted wooden animal sculptures.
- And don't forget to pay your respects to the fattest tree in the world at unmissable **El Tule** (p368).

Five Days in Oaxaca

● With a few additional days on your itinerary, you can set aside time to explore the extraordinary stonework at the archaeological site of **Mitla** (p369). On the same day trip, schedule a stop at **Hierve El Agua** (p369) to soak in dramatically situated clifftop mineral springs perched atop petrified waterfalls. For mezcal tasting, nearby **Santiago Matatlán's** (p366) main drag is chock-full of distilleries producing the potent alcoholic agave drink.

● If you prefer a nature escape, head up into the sierra (mountain range) for hiking and biking amid the **Pueblos Mancomunados** (p372), a commonwealth of eight welcoming Zapotec mountain villages.

If You Have More Time

● Most folks who plan to stay for a week or longer usually pencil in Oaxaca's gorgeous Pacific coast. Surfers gravitate to the Mexican pipeline in **Puerto Escondido** (p377), alternative lifestylers dig the anything-goes vibe in **Mazunte and Zipolite** (p383), while nature enthusiasts enjoy the protected jungle and coast of **Bahías de Huatulco** (p388), as well as the lagoon-fringed beach at **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua** (p381).

● As you're making your way to the coast, stop in coffee country **Pluma Hidalgo** (p376) or in **San José del Pacífico** (p375), a cloud-capped mountain town sitting pretty in the Sierra Sur.



JULY

The thermometer rises during this wet month but that hardly dampens the spirit of **Guelaguetza**, an iconic indigenous cultural event.



SEPTEMBER

Independence Day celebrations go off with a bang, while on the coast thousands of nesting **sea turtles** come ashore.



NOVEMBER

The rainy season ends ahead of lively **Day of the Dead festivities** on November 1 and 2, Oaxaca's **peak travel season**.



DECEMBER

Temperatures dip, hotel rates spike and the capital holds a unique radish-carving tradition, **Noche de Rábanos**, on December 23.

OAXACA CITY

Mexico City 

 Oaxaca City

Oaxaca City looms large in history and culture with its time-honored arts and crafts, deep-rooted indigenous traditions and an innovative culinary scene that draws on age-old recipes. Energetic and yet surprisingly easygoing for a large city, there's always something festive going on in the colonial capital, especially in July and early November when hordes of visitors flock to the city for cultural extravaganza Guelaguetza and Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), both of which exude a spirited Mardi Gras-like vibe as brass bands and traditional dancers parade through narrow streets. Given the capital's extensive sleeping, eating and nightlife options, travelers often use Oaxaca City as a base to explore nearby ancient ruins and outlying Zapotec towns endowed with captivating artisan workshops. Culture lovers come for the first-rate museums and galleries, while provocative street art and atmospheric mezcal joints offer glimpses of the city's gritty side.

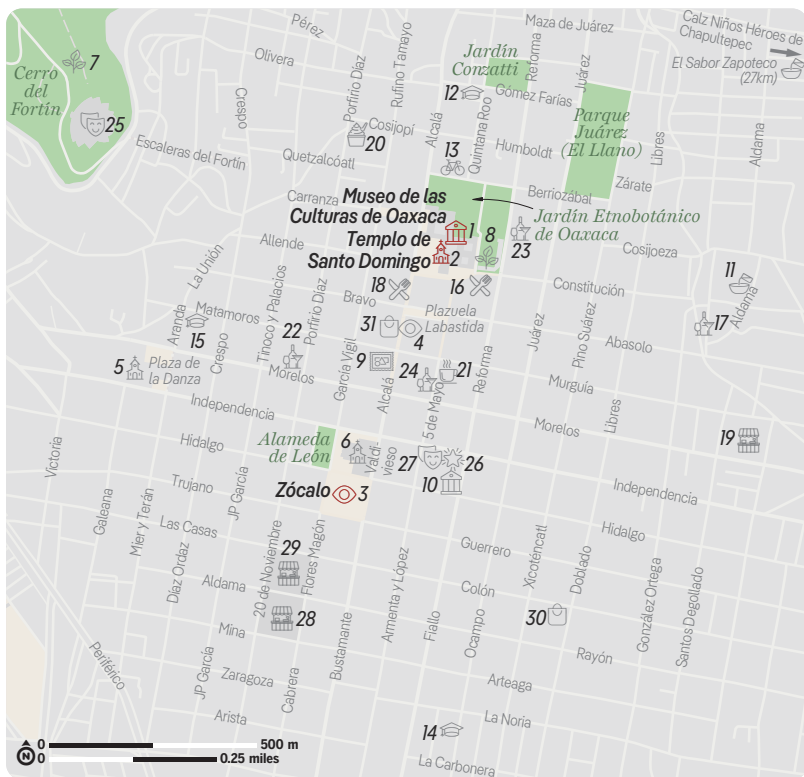
TOP TIP

To fully appreciate downtown, it's best explored on your own two feet. Hoofing it allows you to stumble across cool graphic art workshops, and hole-in-the-wall cafes and bars. Plus, the car-free experience eliminates the hassle of dealing with exceedingly rare parking, frequent roadblocks and navigating the capital's oft-confusing roads.



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Plaza Santo Domingo

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca
- 2 Templo de Santo Domingo
- 3 Zócalo

SIGHTS

- 4 Andador Turístico
- 5 Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad
- 6 Catedral Metropolitana
- 7 Cerro del Fortín
- 8 Jardín Etnobotánico
- 9 La Mano Mágica
- 10 Museo Textil de Oaxaca

ACTIVITIES & COURSES

- 11 Alma de Mi Tierra
- 12 Becari Conzatti Language School
- 13 Mundo Ceiba
- 14 Ollín Tlahtoalli
- 15 Spanish Immersion School

EATING

- 16 Casa Oaxaca
- 17 El Destilado
- 18 Los Danzantes
- 19 Mercado de la Merced
- 20 Rito

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 21 Chimalapa Cacao on Origen
- 22 In Situ
- 23 Mezcaloteca
- 24 Sabina Sabe

ENTERTAINMENT

- 25 Auditorio Guelaguetza
- 26 Centro Cultural San Pablo
- 27 Teatro Macedonio Alcalá

SHOPPING

- 28 Mercado 20 de Noviembre
- 29 Mercado Benito Juárez
- 30 Texier
- 31 Voces de Copal

**WHERE TO GET COFFEE IN OAXACA CITY****Boulenc**

French restaurant/bakery with organic specialty coffee hailing from the Mixtec region. Pair it with almond croissants.

Cafébre

Modern downtown cafe pouring single-origin coffee from the Sierra Sur region. You name the brewing method, they've got it.

Café Brújula

This mini-chain now has several downtown locations serving rich *café* produced near the Oaxaca coast.



BEST ART EXHIBITS IN OAXACA CITY

Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca

Draws on the vast collection of graphic art amassed by renowned painter Francisco Toledo.

Museo de Arte Prehispánico de México de Rufino Tamayo

Houses a fascinating exhibit of pre-Hispanic artifacts laid out in color-coded backlit cases.

Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo

Named after famed Mexican lenser Manuel Álvarez Bravo, this gallery displays weird and wonderful photos.

Museo de los Pintores Oaxaqueños

Exhibits contemporary works by mostly Oaxacan artists in a lovely 17th-century downtown building.

Historic Center Stroll

A CRASH COURSE IN ARCHITECTURE

Oaxaca's heart beats in the Centro neighborhood, and with some 1200 historic monuments dotting downtown, the city center has deservedly earned its Unesco World Heritage badge. Get your bearings at the **Templo de Santo Domingo**, a splendid baroque church adorned with intricate 3D gilt designs amid a profusion of paintings, including an intriguing ceiling mural with conquistador Hernán Cortés and other influential figures depicted on a tree of life. Also, don't miss the ornate **Rosary Chapel** on the building's south side.

Next, mosey down the **Andador Turístico**, aka Calle Alcalá, a traffic-free pedestrian corridor lined with colonial-era buildings that now house vibrant cafes, galleries, crafts shops and rooftop mezcal bars.

Several blocks south you'll come across the **Zócalo** and the adjoining Alameda de León plaza, where playful street artists, marimba musicians and brass bands work the crowds against iconic backdrops, such as the 16th-century **Catedral Metropolitana** (Metropolitan Cathedral) and the 19th-century **Palacio de Gobierno** (State Government Palace). Need a break? Plop down at a sidewalk cafe under the Zócalo's arcades to take it all in.

To gaze at another baroque wonder, head five blocks west of the Zócalo (along Avenida de la Independencia) and feast your eyes on the sparkling florid and gold-tinged interior of the **Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad**. Both the basilica and Templo de Santo Domingo were built with extremely thick walls to withstand Oaxaca's strong earthquakes.

Get Cultured

WORLD-CLASS MUSEO DE LAS CULTURAS

If you only have time to visit one museum while in Oaxaca, make it the **Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca**. Granted, you'll need at least a couple of hours to explore the 14 halls housed in the museum's sprawling campus – a former Dominican monastery – but the majestic 16th-century architecture is worth the price of admission alone.

Not only is the museum a must-visit for history buffs, it also provides a wealth of background information for anyone planning to visit the nearby Zapotec and Mixtec ruins.

The displays focus on regional history and culture from pre-Hispanic times to present day. A museum highlight awaits in exhibition **Hall III**, where you can marvel at a treasure trove of 14th-century Mixtec artifacts discovered in Tomb 7



WHERE TO STAY IN OAXACA CITY

Santa Cecilia Hotel

Excellent midrange option in the quiet Xochimilco quarter, one of Oaxaca's oldest neighborhoods. \$\$

Hotel Las Mariposas

Well-run solar-powered hotel that won't break the bank. Fan-cooled rooms surround quiet plant-filled courtyards. \$\$

Ollin Bed & Breakfast

Room rates remain relatively reasonable given the gourmet breakfast, swimming pool and hands-on staff. \$



FOR NATURE LOVERS

Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca (p362), behind the Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca, conducts highly informative guided tours in a manicured botanical garden that is replete with plants from around Oaxaca.

BEST RESTAURANTS IN OAXACA CITY

Casa Oaxaca

Reserve ahead to dine on the scenic rooftop at one of Oaxaca's finest restaurants. Chef Alejandro Ruiz' signature dishes include duck or braised rib in *mole* sauce. \$\$\$

Levadura de Olla

Rising star chef Thalia Barrios has designed a mouth-watering menu featuring popular ceremonial dishes, exquisite *moles* and savory tamales. \$\$

Los Danzantes

Old-timer still regarded as one of the best spots to get your Oaxacan fusion cuisine on while sipping excellent house mezcals. \$\$\$



Templo de Santo Domingo

at Monte Albán in 1932. Just imagine archaeologist Alfonso Caso y Andrade's surprise when he found an ancient skull encrusted with a turquoise mosaic, artfully crafted silver objects, pearls, carved bones, crystal goblets and many other magnificent items that the ancient Mixtecs had buried with a king in a reused Zapotec tomb. Now, that's a rewarding dig.

If open to visitors, browse the museum's impressive on-site **library**, which contains more than 30,000 titles, some more than 500 years old. The airy complex also affords views of the Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca, a former colonial-era orchard turned botanical garden.

Feast on Fabulous Food

FROM STREET FOOD TO MOLE

Oaxaca ranks among Mexico's top foodie cities and that's no small feat in a country known the world over for its creative cuisine. Signature eats include the renowned *mole* (a type of chili sauce) dishes, *salsa de queso* (cheese bathed in a spicy tomato sauce), *tlayudas* (large grilled tortillas filled with cheese, refried beans and topped with optional beef or Mexican sausage) and *garnachas istmeñas* (fried tortillas topped with shredded beef and pickled cabbage).



WHERE TO FIND BUDGET DIGS IN OAXACA CITY

Casa Ángel

Centrally located hostel with accommodations ranging from capsule-style dorms to rooms with private bathrooms. \$

Azul Cielo

A perennial backpackers' favorite featuring dorms and cheerful private rooms surrounding a sunny garden. \$

Hostal de las Americas

Dorms and private rooms, a well-equipped kitchen, impeccably clean and smack in the city center. \$



HOLY MOLE

Oaxaca is world famous for its savory seven *moles*, meaning 'sauces' in Náhuatl. Though *mole* dishes date back to the pre-Hispanic era, what people ate back then looked different than what you'll find today in Oaxaca, where a variety of multicolored sauces often feature dozens of ingredients, in addition to base components such as chili, tomato, nuts and/or chocolate. Three of the tried-and-true favorites in the ever-evolving *mole* universe include *mole negro* (black mole), *coloradito* (red mole) and *manchamanteles* (red 'tablecloth-stainer').

Ancestral, Casa Oaxaca and **Levadura de Olla** prepare superb labor-intensive *mole* dishes, while market stalls, such as **La Cocina de Frida** (in nearby Ocotlán), serve delectable homestyle versions of this Oaxacan classic.



VA FOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Barro negro (black pottery)

To get the full range of flavors and experiences, indulge in what many consider to be some of the best haute cuisine restaurants in Mexico. But, do not overlook the street and market food, which locals often praise as the most authentic eats; **Mercado de la Merced** is a good place to enjoy traditional fare.

In downtown's **Mercado 20 de Noviembre** you can munch on *chapulines* (crunchy grasshoppers) and wash the little buggers down with a frothy *tejate*, a pre-Hispanic ceremonial beverage made from toasted corn and cocoa.

For street food, in addition to the ubiquitous stalls and bike carts slinging *barbacoa* (slow-cooked beef or lamb) tacos, *marquesitas* (rolled crepes) and tamales, don't underestimate the decadent *tostiesquites*, a late-night snack piled with Tostitos tortilla chips, street corn, mayonnaise, cheese, lime, hot sauce and ground grasshopper salt. Look for them along the Andador Turístico.

Oaxacking runs acclaimed walking food tours led by local expert Omar Alonso.



WHERE TO SAVOR MARKET EATS IN OAXACA CITY

Fonda Florecita

In Mercado de la Merced, go for the spicy *salsa de queso*, and delicious hot chocolate. \$

Mercado 20 de Noviembre

The *pasillo de humo* (a smoky corridor of grilled meats) is a classic experience in Oaxaca. \$

La Cosecha

Small farmers market serving Oaxacan organic fare, plus pre-Hispanic beverages *tejate* and *pulque*. \$

Remembering Departed Loved Ones

CELEBRATION OF LIFE AND DEATH

Every year as October ends, Oaxaca turns its thoughts to the departed on **Día de Muertos** (Day of the Dead), a time-honored celebration that draws on ancient European and pre-Hispanic traditions. For better or worse, the festivity sees more visitors each year, especially in Oaxaca City, which has emerged as one of Mexico's premier Día de Muertos destinations. Officially, Day of the Dead falls on November 1 and 2, but cultural events start as early as October 28.

It's easy to see why Día de Muertos has become all the rage in Oaxaca. In Mardi Gras-like fashion, soulful brass bands, traditional folk dancers, and locals wearing festively macabre costumes parade through the city streets with great fervor, while in outlying areas, such as San Agustín Etla (p365), El Tule (p368) and Mitla (p369), the colorful altars and late-night fiestas are legendary.

During the day hit **Mercado Benito Juárez**, where vendors sell everything from *papel picado* (vibrant tissue paper decorations) and *pan de muerto* (a seasonal sweet bread) to *campesúchil*, the bright orange marigold flowers used to decorate altars. Meanwhile, a slew of restaurants prepare *pozole* (hominy stew) and elaborate *mole* dishes, two of the most traditional Día de Muertos meals.

Know before you go that hotel and airfare should be booked well in advance and expect to pay peak season rates. Also, when visiting cemeteries, do so with the utmost respect for the families who are there to leave offerings for their deceased loved ones.

A Shopaholic's Wonderland

BROWSE FOR UNIQUE FOLK ART

Oaxaca unquestionably produces some of the highest-quality folk art in Mexico. Stores and galleries, many clustered around the Andador Turístico (p352), sell everything from polished *barro negro* (black pottery) and *alebrijes* (brightly painted animal sculptures) to handwoven Zapotec rugs and palm-leaf baskets. For the one-stop shop experience, downtown's Mercado Benito Juárez and the nearby **Oaxaca Artisan Market** are lined with stalls selling fashionable handbags, *huipiles* (traditional embroidered blouses) and the aforementioned handicrafts.

Whenever possible, though, it's always best to buy crafts straight from the source. Purchases made in the nearby weaving village of Teotitlán del Valle (p368), ceramics hub San Bartolo Coyotepec (p367) and *alebrije* capital San Martín



BEST DÍA DE MUERTOS CELEBRATIONS

Panteones de Xoxocotlán

The candlelit vigils in the cemeteries of Santa Cruz Xoxocotlán, about 6km south of downtown, draw large crowds for their colorful altars and spirited serenades.

Barrio de Jalatlaco
Avenidas Hidalgo and Aldama are adorned with creative Day of the Dead murals year-round, providing the ideal backdrop for the *comparsas* (musical parades) that roll through the neighborhood's cobblestone streets.

Nazareno Etla
About 20km north of Oaxaca, the *muerteadas* (costume parades, marching band battles and general merrymaking) go until the wee hours in this refreshingly non-touristy neighborhood.



WHERE TO EAT IN OAXACA CITY

Ancestral

Traditional Oaxaca cuisine prepared with a gourmet twist in an open-air restaurant in Xochimilco. \$\$\$

Terraza Istmo

For a taste of Oaxaca's Isthmus region, snack on *garnachas istmeñas* and *molotes* at this rooftop restaurant. \$\$

Tendajón

Oaxacan fusion cuisine done right: try the smoky shrimp fettuccine with *huitlacoche* (corn smut). \$\$



BEST CRAFT STORES IN OAXACA CITY

Voces de Copal

The *alebrijes* at this downtown gallery cost a pretty peso, but you should definitely pop in to check out the intricate craftwork.

La Mano Mágica

Founded by master weaver Arnulfo Mendoza, this shop specializes in colorful rugs woven on treadle looms, and there's a good selection of handmade sculptures and jewelry, too.

Aripo

The Oaxacan Handicrafts Institute, aka Aripo, comprises several small shops selling traditional garments, silver jewelry, *alebrije* pieces, beautifully designed handbags and ceramics.

Tilcajete (p367) assure that the money goes directly to the artisans and helps empower local communities. Plus, it is fascinating to visit workshops for an up-close look at the crafts-making process.

If you want to learn more about the state's storied textile tradition, visit the **Museo Textil de Oaxaca**, a free museum that houses a collection of more than 10,000 textile pieces from Oaxaca and abroad, some more than a century old. The museum showcases traditional garments from various regions through exhibitions, workshops and a library. It also has a decent on-site store where you can find tasteful, albeit pricey, clothes and textile-themed art books. Prices are fixed in most crafts stores; however, it's okay to do some friendly haggling with market vendors.

Party at Guelaguetza Fest

OAXACA'S TOP CULTURAL EVENT

Guelaguetza, an indigenous cultural extravaganza and one of the most animated fiestas of the year, showcases folkloric dance, music and food hailing from Oaxaca's eight regions. Usually held over the last two weeks of July, the main event features brilliant traditional dance performances in the open-air **Auditorio Guelaguetza**, an 11,000-seat hillside venue with sweeping views of the city.

Guelaguetza is a Zapotec term that is loosely translated as 'reciprocal offering', and though the current format dates to 1932, the celebration goes back to the pre-Hispanic era when indigenous communities would come together each year to pay their respects to Centéotl, the Mexica deity of corn.

In addition to the auditorium shows, which are normally held on the first two Mondays after July 16, the two-week shindig draws thousands of visitors for its many parallel activities, including *calendas* (exuberant street parades with brass bands), free concerts, art exhibits, food festivals, and a mezcál and craft beer fair.

Some locals prefer to experience smaller, more intimate celebrations of Guelaguetza held in the capital's outlying areas: nearby Tlacolula (p366), Atzompa (p364), Mitla (p369) and San Agustín Etlá (p365) tend to feel less commercialized than Oaxaca. Book hotel and airfare in advance if you plan on visiting during the busy Guelaguetza season.

If you're not around in July, **Hotel Quinta Real Oaxaca** stages weekly Guelaguetza dinner show performances. Other notable cultural venues for concerts and the like include **Centro Cultural San Pablo** and **Teatro Macedonio Alcalá**.



WHERE TO DRINK MEZCAL IN OAXACA CITY

Cuish

After sampling the small-batch mezcál, you can purchase three-bottle sets encased in beautiful hand-painted boxes.

In Situ

Stocks a variety of artisanal mezcáls, including a rare one fermented in cowhide vats.

Mezcaloteca

Pours meticulously selected mezcál, *sotol* and *destilados de agave* (mezcál-like spirits).



Oaxaca's aqueduct

The World of Mezcal

SIP OAXACA'S SIGNATURE SPIRIT

Oaxaca overflows with restaurants, atmospheric *mezcalerías* (small mezcal bars) and tasting rooms serving mezcal, a distilled spirit that is enjoying an unprecedented boom as a growing number of agave aficionados see tequila as too mainstream.

Even non-drinkers will find it fascinating to take a deep dive into the mezcal world given the incredible variety of agave species and intriguing production methods that go into each bottle of spirit.

To familiarize yourself with the taste distinctions of mezcal and *destilados de agave* (an alternative term for similar distilled agave drinks) produced in Oaxaca and beyond, book a tasting session at **Mezcaloteca**, where experts go into great detail about where the drinks are produced, the production process behind each beverage and how to identify the distinctive flavor profiles of various *magüey* (a type of agave) plants, some of which take 25 years to mature. **In Situ** is another good spot to get schooled on mezcal.

If you're just looking to do some casual socializing over drinks, the options abound. For top-shelf mezcal and craft cocktails, **Sabina Sabe**, **El Destilado** and **Selva Oaxaca**

OAXACA'S ICONIC AQUEDUCT

As you stroll beside Oaxaca's emblematic Cantero stone aqueduct, you'll notice that some of the arches serve as entryways into homes and small businesses. That's because after nearly 190 years of bringing water into the city from the outlying hills of San Felipe, the famed *acueducto* ceased to operate in 1940, but it remains an integrated landmark. If the arches look familiar, perhaps you saw them in a scene in the 2006 film *Nacho Libre*, in which a festively plump monastery cook played by Jack Black gets into a comical street fight. North of Hwy 190, in the old weaving barrio (neighborhood) of Xochimilco, the aqueduct functions as a wall in the rear patio of the delightful open-air restaurant **Ancestral**.



WHERE TO DRINK COCKTAILS IN OAXACA CITY

Selva

After dinner at the excellent Los Danzantes, grab a nightcap upstairs at this fashionable haunt.

Sabina Sabe

The well-prepared cocktails at this upscale mezcal bar please visitors and locals alike.

El Destilado

Stocks Mexican corn whiskey and makes innovative cocktails that pair nicely with the fish tacos.

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO SEE STREET ART



Uriel Barragán Cruz (aka Boulter), muralist and visual artist, shares his favorite spots to see innovative art in Oaxaca.
@bouleroaxaca

Jalatlaco and Xochimilco

Murals and graffiti are everywhere in the city but Jalatlaco and Xochimilco, along with the Centro, have the highest concentration of murals and protest art.

EnmolArte

They are doing a lot of cool things, such as painting with *mole* on the streets, and they have their own space that you can visit.

Casa Bestia and Espacio Zapata

For spaces focused on contemporary art and youth culture, I really like Casa Bestia and Espacio Zapata. But, for me, the best galleries in Oaxaca are on the street because that's where I began as a graffiti artist.



ESPERALVA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Agave fruit

stock some of Oaxaca's best brands, and they prepare mixed mezcals concoctions using local ingredients such as Mexican pepperleaf, cocoa, and salt with ground *maguey* worms and chili.

While consuming mezcals, keep in mind that it packs a punch (usually 40 to 50% alcohol content, and sometimes higher). *¡Salud!*

The Gift of Gab

SPANISH AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE COURSES

Rest assured that there's no better way to immerse yourself in a culture than a language course. While you can get by just fine speaking English in the tourist centers of Oaxaca, you'll have far more enriching experiences shooting the breeze with locals in their native tongue. Spanish, of course, is the main language and a phonetically friendly one at that, meaning the words often sound the way they're spelled, whereas Zapotec and Mixtec languages require students to learn more challenging tonal inflections. **Ollin Tlahtoalli** and **Becari Conzatti Language School** (there's also a Bravo branch) impart Spanish and Zapotec language courses, or look into **Spanish Immersion School's** flexible one-on-one sessions.



WHERE TO EAT CHOCOLATE IN OAXACA CITY

Chimalapa Cacao Con Orgien

If you have no time for a cacao tasting, purchase one of their exquisite chocolate bars. \$

Texier Chocolatería

The hazelnut and 'cacao-crush' chocolate bites will have you instantly hooked. \$

Caracol Púrpura

Greet the new day with a robust coffee and a bittersweet almond and sea salt chocolate bar. \$

STREET ART WALK

Local artists have transformed the streets of Oaxaca into an outdoor gallery with brightly painted murals and satirical stencils adorning the walls of the historic centers of Jalatlaco, Xochimilco and the Centro. All three barrios lie within walking distance of one another, making them easy to explore on a self-guided walking tour.

In Jalatlaco check out the murals inspired by Día de Muertos along **1 Calle Hidalgo**, **2 Calle 5 de Mayo** and **3 Calle Aldama**, many of which are the works of the renowned Oaxacan muralist Boulter. Next, drop by Boulter's store, **4 Escarabajo**, where the artist sells graphic tees and autographed drawings. He also conducts street art tours that include a visit to his work studio.

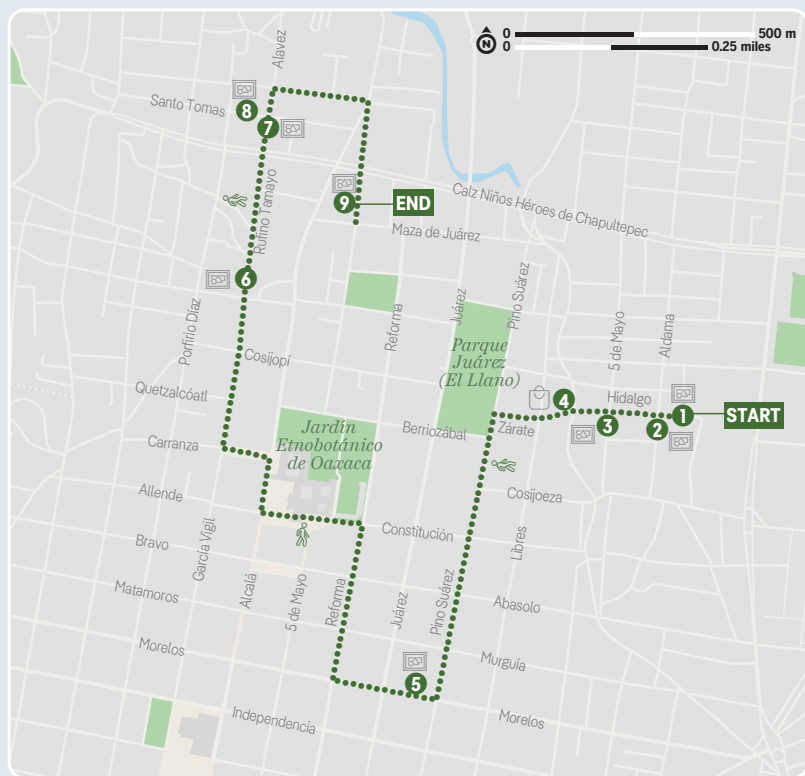
While in the Jalatlaco area, head about five blocks south to the workshop/store of **5 Efedefroy**, a street artist known for his playful wheat-paste murals depicting Mexi-

can film icons in reimagined scenarios, such as Golden Era star María Félix garbed in Princess Leia attire, posing alongside Luke Skywalker.

As you wander around the **6 Centro** among the murals and graphic art, you'll come across a range of innovative techniques, including *mole* murals (that's right, who needs paint when you have red and brown *mole* sauces).

Next, make your way over to the Xochimilco barrio and take in the vibrant murals that color **7 Calle Alavez** and **8 Calle Santo Tomas**, then head a few blocks south to watch artists paint with *mole* at the **9 EnmolArte studio**. Here, they offer art residencies to anyone interested in an extended stay in Oaxaca.

For a guided tour, **Coyote Aventuras** runs a street art bike ride that visits three neighborhoods with stops at several workshops along the way.





MEZCAL VERSUS TEQUILA

Mezcal and tequila, Mexico's two most commercialized spirits, share some similarities as both are distilled agave drinks, but they have some notable differences. Among the main distinctions, mezcal can be produced from about 40 agave varieties, whereas tequila is made from just one, the Blue Weber, also known as blue agave.

Production methods also vary: the mezcal *piña* (agave heart) is usually slow-cooked in an earthen pit, sometimes giving it a smoky flavor, whereas tequila is typically roasted or steamed in brick or clay ovens.

Lastly, Denomination of Origin (DO) status dictates mezcal can legally be produced in 10 states, including the top-producing region of Oaxaca, while tequila hails from five states, most of which comes from Jalisco.

Cooking Classes with Chefs

LEARN THE SECRETS OF OAXACAN CUISINE

Have you ever wondered how to make a savory *mole* or authentic Oaxacan *tamales*? A cooking class reveals not only what goes into Oaxaca's most iconic dishes but also traces the history of the recipes, such as pre-Hispanic *tejate*. Numerous restaurants in the capital offer cooking classes, many of which also incorporate visits to nearby food markets. For rural flavor, head out to the nearby weaving town of Teotitlán del Valle, where **El Sabor Zapoteco's** Reyna Mendoza, who has collaborated with celebrity American chef Rick Bayless, teaches Zapotec cooking in her delightful open-air kitchen. Meanwhile, in Oaxaca City, Nora Valencia's cooking school **Alma de Mi Tierra** conducts five-hour classes in her quaint Jalatlaco home.

Bike Through History

NIGHTTIME BIKE RIDE

Oaxaca remains a work in progress when it comes to cycling culture but frequently organized nighttime bike rides, known as **Paseos Nocturnos**, have certainly helped in making the city more bicycle friendly. **Mundo Ceiba** rents bikes and organizes the convivial nocturnal outings that traverse downtown Oaxaca's scenic streets. Cyclists meet on Calle Alcalá outside the Templo de Santo Domingo just before 9pm every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The leisurely 90-minute spin covers about 8km and provides a safety-in-numbers approach as you pedal past the city's landmarks and illuminated historic sights after dark.

Oaxaca's Sentinel Hill

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE CAPITAL

Greet the new day with a morning walk or jog up Oaxaca's sentinel **Cerro del Fortín**, a hilltop park and lookout area affording panoramic views of the city. Head up the stairway off Calle Crespo, which rises up to the Auditorio Guelaguetza (p356), an 11,000-seat amphitheater that hosts concerts and the annual Guelaguetza Festival. Above the concert venue, a paved road leads to a **statue of Benito Juárez** (a Oaxaca native and Mexico's first indigenous president). In the late 15th century, the hill served as a strategic military garrison for the conquering Aztecs. When visiting Cerro del Fortín, the upper reaches of the park are best avoided at dusk and after dark.



WHERE TO DRINK AND DANCE IN OAXACA CITY

Txalaparta

The live music and DJ sets pack 'em in at this saloon-style bar with *cumbia* (Colombian dance music) tunes.

La Otra Popular

DJs spin tunes in the perennially packed rear bar. Hungry? Order the *cenizo* (ash) ceviche.

La Cantinita

This small dimly lit cocktail bar at the Hotel Sin Nombre is often hopping on weekends.



Cacao beans

Get Your Chocolate Fix

CACAO AND CHOCOLATE CRAWL

Mexico's love affair with cacao (cocoa) goes back an estimated 4000 years, and perhaps much earlier than that. The ancient Olmecs and Maya drank cacao as a ceremonial beverage to honor the gods, and it was later introduced to the Aztecs and Zapotecs. The word cacao comes from the ancient Olmec term *kakawa*, while 'chocolate' stems from the Náhuatl word *xocolātl*.

In present-day Oaxaca, ancestral cacao traditions are alive and well. You'll see stalls in the 20 de Noviembre (p354) and Benito Juárez (p355) markets preparing frothy *tejate* as well as hot chocolate beverages, which are a sweeter, more contemporary take on the beverage.

Cacao beans are the base ingredient of chocolate and come from three main seed varieties, all of which you can sample in a tasting session with the good folks at **Chimalapa Cacao Con Origen**. Founder Eruit Hernández will also show you how to prepare your own Oaxacan-style hot chocolate. And for anyone interested in taking a deeper dive, they run a multi-day excursion to a remote cacao-producing region.

Another must-visit for chocolate enthusiasts is **Rito**, a *chocolotería* that is famous for its creamy chocolate ice cream with cacao nibs.

Also, make it a point to drop by **Texier**, where French chocolatier David Texier creates habit-forming chocolate bites and bars, the latter with ingredients such as ground grasshoppers and *pasilla* chili peppers.



OAXACA'S DISAPPEARING LANGUAGES

Oaxaca is home to one of Mexico's largest populations of indigenous speakers, with about a third of its inhabitants speaking one of 16 languages. As you roam around the marketplaces and public squares in Oaxaca and its surrounding areas, you'll likely hear locals chatting in Zapotec or Mixtec, the two most widely spoken indigenous languages in Oaxaca. But, despite Oaxaca's impressive linguistic diversity, some of these languages are facing the threat of extinction because many indigenous youth are finding more job opportunities as Spanish or English speakers in Oaxaca's tourism-dependent economy. Nevertheless, there remains a broad undercurrent of pride in Oaxaca's indigenous communities and hopefully that will be enough to save some of the vanishing languages.



WHERE TO FIND DIVE BARS IN OAXACA CITY

El Sal3n de la Fama

A classic cantina atmosphere awaits behind the swinging doors of this well-worn drinking establishment.

Pollos Bar

Cool juke box tunes and friendly neighborhood bar vibe – who could ask for more.

Pulquería Mayahuel

Nice little joint to try *pulque*, a viscous alcoholic drink made from fermented agave.

OAXACA CITY'S BEST STAYS

NaNa Vida

Above-and-beyond service, central downtown location and stylish rooms with local artwork. \$\$\$

Casa de las Bugambilias

The 10 rooms at this B&B are works of art with their colorful decors, plus there's a great restaurant. \$\$\$

La Casa de Mis Recuerdos

Cozy rooms overlook a central patio at this welcoming guesthouse, plus it has an excellent cooking school. \$\$\$

Hostal Guelaguetza

No dorms here, just five smallish but pleasant rooms ideally located in delightful Jalatlaco barrio. \$

Casa Antonieta

A colonial-era convent now housing spacious hotel rooms and the excellent Muss Cafe. \$\$\$

Quinta Real Oaxaca

A former 16th-century convent turned five-star hotel. \$\$\$

La Casona de Tita

Exclusive heritage hotel featuring a mix of old furnishings and new artwork. \$\$\$



JESS KRAFT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca

Nature Encounter in Jardín Etnobotánico

BOTANICAL GARDEN TOUR

Did you know that the word Oaxaca comes from the Náhuatl term *Huāw̄yacac*, which means 'place of the *guaje* trees'? Or that Oaxaca has more chili pepper varieties and more plant species than any other state in Mexico? You'll learn that and other fun facts on a guided tour at the **Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca**, the perfect place to familiarize yourself with the state's vast and varied flora before heading out into Oaxaca's great outdoors.

Occupying the Templo de Santo Domingo's former monastic grounds, and also once a colonial-era orchard, the space got a makeover in 1998 when botanists and local artists came together to create the present-day botanical garden. Tours in English, Spanish, German and French take visitors along manicured dirt paths lined with plants and trees from arid, tropical and temperate climates, making it a fascinating demonstration of Oaxaca's biodiversity. The garden also integrates art with nature thanks to the works of artists including Francisco Toledo and Luis Zárate, who designed intriguing water features such as a Zapotec-themed fountain and a mirror pool reflecting a section of tall organ pipe cacti.

Visits to the botanical garden are by guided tour only due to previous acts of vandalism. Get there 15 minutes early to secure your spot as group sizes are limited.



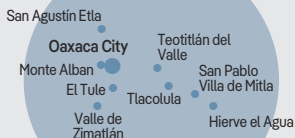
GETTING AROUND

City buses, *colectivos* (shared taxis) and the ride-hailing app DiDi make getting around in Oaxaca easy and affordable. Street taxis are generally considered safe, but negotiate the fare before getting in the vehicle. If you're spending most of your time in the city center, it's best explored on foot. Rental vehicles are useful for visiting outlying towns but you can just as easily reach the surrounding areas in

taxis or transportation departing from the 2nd-class bus station. From the main avenue outside the 1st-class ADO terminal, 'Juárez' city buses will take you three blocks east of the Zócalo plaza, while the 'Tinoco y Palacios' line plies a route three blocks west of the central square. Bus drivers carry change and you can hail them from practically any corner.



Beyond Oaxaca City



Radiating from Oaxaca City, the Central Valleys are filled with ancient ruins, Zapotec culture, bustling markets and intricately crafted folk art.

Oaxaca's Valles Centrales, three Central Valleys backed by the scenic Sierra Madre mountains, have stood as the regional center of civilization since pre-Hispanic times. Stretching about 50km east, the Valle de Tlacolula's main draws include the weaving village of Teotitlán del Valle, mezcal mecca Santiago Matatlán, the petrified waterfalls of Hierve El Agua and the Zapotec archaeological site of Mitla. Spanning about 40km north, Valle de Etla's calling card is its world-class arts center, while in Valle de Zimatlán, which runs about 100km south of Oaxaca, visitors gravitate to Monte Albán's dramatic hilltop ruins and the artisan workshops producing iconic wood sculptures and polished black ceramics. These largely Zapotec towns make for ideal day trips from Oaxaca.

TOP TIP

Rent a car if you want to explore the Central Valleys in depth; alternatively, affordable buses and shared taxis go to most places.

AURORA ANGELES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Teotitlán del Valle



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

To appreciate Monte Albán in all its splendor, get there early to beat the heat and tour bus crowds. To reach the ruins, Transportaciones Turísticas Mitla (aka Autobuses Turísticos) runs hourly buses from Mina 501 in downtown Oaxaca. The heart of the site, Monte Albán's Gran Plaza, is wheelchair accessible via ramps. To gain a deeper understanding of Monte Albán's storied history, hire an official English-speaking guide outside the ticket booth. If you have your own car, consider hitting the nearby Zapotec ruins of **Atzompa**, where unlike busy Monte Albán, you may have the seldom-visited site all to yourself.



MARB02/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Ball court, Monte Albán

Mysterious Monte Albán

ZAPOTEC RUINS WITH A VIEW

Graced with astonishing vistas of Oaxaca's valleys and distant mountains, it's no wonder the ancient Zapotecs chose to build their capital atop this privileged hillside location some 2700 years ago. What came after that was a rich 1300-year history, with the city reaching its peak between 700 and 300 CE. While it remains a mystery why the settlement was abandoned, the site's intact structures make it easy to picture a glorious city of temples, tall stepped platforms, majestic palaces and terraced dwellings that were once home to an estimated 30,000 people.

To get a bird's-eye view of **Monte Albán**, the **Plataforma Norte** (North Platform) affords the best vistas, and its ceremonial complex features the **Patio Hundido** (Sunken Patio), a temple and 12 column bases. As you gaze out across the grassy **Gran Plaza**, a 300m-long square, on the opposite end you'll see the **Plataforma Sur** (South Platform), Monte Albán's tallest structure, which you can climb for spectacular panoramas. From this vantage point, one can appreciate how difficult it must have been for the Zapotecs to level the broad hilltop.

Down on the plaza's west side, you'll see the **Edificio de los Danzantes**, where replicas and carved reliefs of *danzantes* (dancing figures) likely point to the Olmecs' influence on the Zapotec civilization. Duck into the small passage here and you'll see original carvings depicted in dance-like postures. For more information about Monte Albán, a **site museum** near the entrance houses ceramic artifacts, *stelae* (standing monuments) and skeletal remains.



WHERE TO EAT BEFORE HITTING MONTE ALBÁN

Memelas Doña Vale

In the Central de Abastos market, indulge in Doña Vale's beloved *memelitas* topped with *salsa morita*. \$

La Abuelita

For five generations, this has been a classic Oaxaca breakfast spot in downtown's Mercado 20 de Noviembre. \$

Restaurante Monte Albán

Enjoy lovely views on the terrace at Monte Albán's on-site restaurant. \$\$

Soak Up Culture in Etla

ABSORBING MODERN ART AND HIKING

Nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Norte mountains, **San Agustín Etla**'s relaxing small-town feel provides a welcome respite from the hubbub of Oaxaca City. Most visitors pencil in Etla (18km north of Oaxaca City) as a day trip to check out the superb exhibits, concerts and occasional dance performances at the impressive **Centro de las Artes de San Agustín**, a 19th-century textile factory that was converted into a modern arts center by artist Francisco Toledo. CASA, as the space is known, exhibits extraordinary visual art in an innovative ecologically designed complex (sublime pools comprise part of a gravity-powered water system that keeps the buildings cool).

If you visit Etla on Sunday, save your appetite for **Los Encalíptos**, a traditional open-air food and crafts market, then take a little stroll through the surrounding gardens.

For a longer walk, tackle the nearby **Aqueduct Trail**, which rises up into the mountains and provides far-reaching views of the Valle de Etla. The trail runs parallel to an aqueduct that supplies Etla with its water and it leads to an abandoned waterworks building said to be haunted. In theory, hikers are required to register beforehand at the Agencia Municipal (on Avenida Independencia) but irregular office hours make that tricky. **Coyote Aventuras** runs guided hikes along the trail. If you're visiting in early November, don't miss Etla's famous *muerteadas* (Day of the Dead fiestas with festive marching bands and costumed dancers).

Meet the Mezcal Producers

TOURING MEZCAL COUNTRY

If you've never visited mezcal distilleries, known as *palenques*, it's an intoxicating learning experience to say the least. Not only do you get to sample the final product, you can also observe the fascinating production process behind Oaxaca's signature agave spirit. Consider visiting the facilities accompanied by a bilingual guide who can go into detail about the plant varieties, cultivation techniques, distilling methods and history of the family-run businesses. What's more, a tour allows you to leave the driving to someone else, and after a few potent mezcals, you'll be glad you did!

For tailor-made mezcal tours, reach out to local expert Leyver Ramírez of **Xolo Trips** (www.instagram.com/xolo_trips), whose educational outings also include stops at traditional crafts workshops and under-the-radar eating spots. **Experience Agave**, founded by mezcal and tequila guru Clayton Szczech, operates day tours and an immersive multi-day camping



THE TOLEDO LEGACY

Renowned artist and cultural philanthropist Francisco Toledo's amazing achievements continue to have a profound impact on art and culture in Oaxaca. The Zapotec artist gained fame for his unique paintings depicting mythical animal figures, and he was also a staunch defender of Oaxaca's cultural heritage. He founded the **Centro de las Artes de San Agustín**, Oaxaca's **Graphic Arts Institute** and the **Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo**, all top-notch art spaces and free to the public! Toledo also famously led a protest that prevented McDonald's from opening a branch in the capital's Zócalo (main plaza). With the rallying cry of 'Tamales, yes! Hamburgers, no!' the demonstration reminded *oaxaqueños* (people from Oaxaca) of the importance of preserving their culinary traditions.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN SAN AGUSTÍN ETLA

Mia Arroz

Flanked by cornfields, this airy Asian restaurant provides a break from Oaxaca cuisine. \$\$

Casa Maria

Small hotel with a worthwhile restaurant and adjoining cocktail bar; good-value rooms, too. \$\$

Cervecería La Cura

Tour micro-brewery La Cura, then sample the craft cerveza (beer) in their adjoining beer garden. \$\$

I LIVE HERE: HOW TO EXPERIENCE MEZCAL



Eduardo 'Lalo' Ángeles, master distiller and owner of Mezcal Lalocura, has some tips about visiting Oaxaca's distilleries. @lalocuramezcal

It's important to research which distilleries are producing authentic mezcal, and if you get out and explore, you'll find plenty of mezcal-producing communities beyond the Ruta de Mezcal, a well-traveled tourist route promoted by businesses and the government. Santa Catarina Minas is the closest town for visitors wanting to see a production process using clay stills. An important part of the mezcal experience involves hanging out at the producer's house, because for us mezcal is more than a trendy drink, it's part of a beloved culture meant to be shared with others.

experience where you can participate in the mezcal-making process.

Of course, you can always get out and explore mezcal country on your own. **Santa Catarina Minas**, a town about 40km south of Oaxaca City, is home to **Mezcal Lalocura**, which makes first-rate mezcals using ancestral methods (pit-cooked, hand-crushed *maguety* is distilled in clay pots). In mezcal capital **Santiago Matatlán**, about 50km east of the capital, a slew of mezcal factories line the town's main strip, and you can also visit the nearby Zapotec ruins of Mitla from here.

Zapotec Market & Ruins

SAVOR TLACOLULA'S INDIGENOUS FLAVOR

Every Sunday the town of **Tlacolula** sees thousands of visitors descend on its weekly open-air *mercado*, one of Oaxaca's biggest and oldest markets. For centuries it has served as a popular gathering place for indigenous Zapotec villagers who make the trip from outlying rural communities to buy household supplies and sell handmade crafts. Among the sea of stalls, you'll come across everything from *huipiles* and hand-woven rugs to *alebrijes* and tantalizing street eats.

Inside the town's busy food market, the **Mercado Municipal**, patrons sit at shared tables while indulging in savory *barbacoa*, while elsewhere you'll find fresh-made *pan dulce* (sweet bread) and *tejate*.

After the market visit, duck into the **Templo de Santa María de la Asunción** to marvel at a baroque chapel filled with indigenous-influenced decorations. Among the ornate ceiling ornamentation, look for the plaster martyrs holding their own severed heads.

While in the area, hit the archaeological site of **Yagul**, which emerged as an important Central Valley Zapotec settlement after the decline of Monte Albán. Known as 'Pueblo Viejo' (Old Village), the small hillside site is ideal if you like ruins without hordes of tourists. Its ball court is one of the largest in Mesoamerica, second only in size to Chichén Itzá's.

Get Crafty

WATCH FOLK ART GETTING MADE

In several nearby towns in the **Valle de Zimatlán**, artisans give free tours and demonstrations in their rustic workshops, allowing you to get an up-close look at how some of Oaxaca's most iconic folk art is made. To observe the *barro negro* process, head to ceramics mecca **San Bartolo Coyotepec** (15km south of Oaxaca) and drop by **Alfarería Doña Rosa**,



WHERE TO DRINK IN MEZCAL COUNTRY

Mezcal Lalocura

After touring the distillery, sample over a dozen mezcals produced using sustainable and ancestral methods.

Fabricas de Mezcales el Sabino

Santiago Matatlán-based producer of Mezcal Macurichos, one of Oaxaca's top ancestral agave spirits.

Real Minero

Reserve ahead for a tasting session at this famed distillery in Santa Catarina Minas.



FOR QUALITY CRAFTS

Oaxaca City art gallery **Voces de Copal** (p356) sells intricate wooden animal sculptures and beautifully crafted ceramics hailing from the workshop of Jacobo and María Ángeles in San Martín Tilcajete.

ALEBRIJES ART

Oddly enough, *alebrijes*, Oaxaca's signature wooden animal sculptures, were conceived by an artist from Mexico City, Pedro Linares. (Linares, who also coined the term *alebrijes*, meaning imaginary animal figures, said the inspiration came to him in a fever dream.) But it was Oaxacan sculptor Manuel Jiménez Ramírez who took the art to another level when he started using wood rather than papier-mâché to craft the brilliant creatures. As tourism grows in Oaxaca, so too has the *alebrijes* craze. In San Martín Tilcajete, a small town about 28km south of Oaxaca, dozens of family workshops dedicate themselves exclusively to producing the exquisite pieces.



Mezcal distillery, Santiago Matatlán

the shop that invented the method of burnishing *barro negro* with quartz stone to give the pottery its distinctive shine. They invented the technique in the 1950s, but Oaxaca's ancestral black pottery tradition goes back well over 2000 years. Next, mosey over to the main square, where you'll find the small but worthwhile **Oaxaca Popular Art Museum**.

About 14km south of San Bartolo Coyotopec, look for the turnoff to **San Martín Tilcajete**, Oaxaca's *alebrije* center and home to the fascinating workshop of **Jacobo and María Ángeles**. While touring the busy facility, you'll come to appreciate the labor-intensive process behind the brilliantly painted wooden animal sculptures, some of which can take months, or even years, to make. If you feel inspired, inquire about their painting and ceramics workshops.

After the tour, grab lunch at nearby **Almú**, a scenic open-air Oaxacan restaurant that doubles as a sustainable farm for copal trees, the wood source for *alebrijes*. On your way out of town, don't miss the creative murals lining **Calle Progreso**.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN TLACOLULA

Barbacoa Juanita

Eat *barbacoa* at their market stall or the quieter restaurant location on Calle Zaragoza. Sundays only. \$

Tejate Ofé

See Ofelia Martínez in the Mercado Municipal for a refreshing *tejate*. \$

Doña Adolfa

Look for this popular market stand serving lamb and goat *barbacoa* on handmade tortillas. \$

I LIVE HERE: HOW TO IDENTIFY QUALITY TEXTILES



Bulmaro Pérez, master weaver in Teotitlán del Valle, on how to choose a well-made rug. @bulmaroperez_rugs

Natural Dyes

Of the many weaving families in Teotitlán, only about six of us still use natural dyes, such as indigo, alfalfa and cochineal. It's what our ancestors did and we want to preserve that tradition.

Fiber Quality

We use many imported fibers, such as mohair and alpaca, for their great texture and durability, while textiles made from *ixtle* (a *maguey* plant fiber) can last for hundreds of years.

Unique Designs

We continue working with designs inspired by traditional Zapotec styles like what you might see at the archaeological site of Mitla. We also sometimes work with Maya, Olmec and Toltec designs.



JOSEPH SORENTINO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Rug weaving, Teotitlán del Valle

The World's Fattest Tree

BEHOLD THE MILLENNIA-OLD TULE TREE

History comes alive in the Valle de Tlacolula where Zapotec culture has thrived since pre-Hispanic times. Make your first stop in **El Tule** to marvel at a tree with the world's widest trunk, measuring 14m in diameter. The *ahuehuete* (Montezuma cypress) is believed to be at least 2000 years old, meaning it sprouted up when Monte Albán was emerging as a large-scale settlement. The 42m-high **El Árbol del Tule** towers over the 17th-century church beside it. After tree-gazing, grab lunch or breakfast in El Tule's market, or dig into classic Oaxacan fare like *salsa de queso* (cheese in spicy tomato sauce) at **El Milenario**, a longtime local favorite.

Embrace Ancient Zapotec Traditions

WATCH WEAVERS WORK THEIR MAGIC

After visiting El Tule, don't forget to stop in **Teotitlán del Valle**, a weaving village that is famous for its intricate Zapotec rugs and tapestries. Exhibits in the **Centro Cultural Comunitario**, a small community-run museum, shine a light on the town's storied textile and culinary heritage. To get a sense of the traditional production process, visit master weaver **Bulmaro Pérez** at his workshop. Pérez is one of only a handful of weavers in town who still use natural dyes to make one-of-a-kind rugs, and he'll gladly show you how it all works. Here in Teotitlán you can also learn the secrets of homestyle cooking at El Sabor Zapoteco (p369), where Zapotec cook Reyna Mendoza conducts classes in an open-air kitchen.



WHERE TO EAT IN VALLE DE ZIMATLÁN

Almú

Homestyle Oaxacan eats are prepared over wood-burning grills at this countryside San Martín Tilcajete restaurant. \$\$

Carnes Asadas Conchitas

In Ocotlán, the combo platters with grilled meats are feasts fit for a king. \$\$

La Cocina de Frida

Savory *mole* dishes served by an affable woman who really likes artist Frida Kahlo; in Ocotlán's Mercado Morelos. \$

Ancient Zapotec Ruins of Mitla

MARVEL AT SOPHISTICATED STONEMWORK

The ancient ruins of **San Pablo Villa de Mitla**, known simply as Mitla, may not enjoy the bucket list status of nearby Monte Albán, but one look at the site's extraordinary geometric stonework and it becomes clear that you're standing before something truly special.

Mitla, which means 'place of the dead' in Náhuatl, reached its peak between 750 and 1520 CE after establishing itself as the Zapotecs' main religious center. The ubiquitous geometric patterns adorning the structures, known in Spanish as *geometricas*, are believed to symbolize the sky and earth, a feathered serpent and other important figures, carved in refined stylized forms. Each little piece of stone, or 'mosaic,' was then set into the wall individually. The intricate architecture draws on both Zapotec and Mixtec influences after the Mixtec controlled the settlement from 1000 to 1200 CE.

Of Mitla's five groups of structures, look for some of the most impressive works in the **Grupo de las Columnas** (Columns Group), then duck into a passage at **Grupo Norte** (Northern Group) that leads to a palace adorned with some of Mitla's most exquisite fretwork.

Given Mitla's history as an important Zapotec burial site, Day of the Dead remains one of the town's most important celebrations. The weeklong Día de Muertos festival (p355) kicks off in late October and features monumental altars, pre-Hispanic dance performances and parades with brass band music.

Soak in Astonishing Clifftop Springs

UNIQUE SWIMMING AND HIKING EXPERIENCE

Even the most jaded traveler succumbs to the stunning natural beauty of heavily visited **Hierve El Agua**, where clifftop mineral springs afford expansive panoramas of the mountainous countryside. Rising 50m above the valley floor, the **cascada chica** (small waterfall) and nearby **cascada grande** (big waterfall) are encrusted with petrified calcium carbonate and other mineral deposits, giving off the appearance of frozen waterfalls.

Above the *cascada chica*, the recreation area closest to the parking lot, you can swim in four natural and artificial mineral-rich pools said to have healing properties. Hierve El Agua means 'The Water Boils' but it refers to the bubbling springs rather than the water temperature, which feels refreshingly cool. The rock formations began taking shape more than 2000 years ago when the ancient Zapotecs figured out how to channel the spring water into canals for irrigation purposes.



BEST EATS & STAYS IN MITLA

Casa Lyobaa

Solar-powered B&B with artfully decorated rooms and an inviting pool surrounded by spacious gardens. \$\$\$

Restaurante Doña Chica

After visiting Mitla's ruins, chill over a tasty *mole* and some locally produced mezcal. \$\$

Panadería del Centro

Famous for its *pan de muerto* and decorative icing classes in November. \$



WHERE TO EAT IN TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE AND EL TULE

El Sabor Zapoteco

If you can't take a class, this Teotitlán cooking school does lunch on Tuesday and Friday. \$\$

El Milenario

Handmade tortillas, frothy hot chocolate and spicy egg dishes: El Tule breakfast at its best. \$\$

Teotitlán del Valle Market

Belly up to the counter for traditional market fare in the heart of Zapotec country. \$



BEST BIKING & HIKING OUTINGS

Zapotrek

Founded by English-fluent Eric Ramirez, Tlacolula-based Zapotrek conducts off-the-beaten-track hiking, biking and driving trips amid Zapotec villages.

Tierraventura

Operates hiking tours to seldom-visited places, including the prehistoric caves of Mitla, a Unesco-protected area where you can see ancient paintings that date back 12,000 years.

Bicicletas Pedro Martínez

This Oaxaca City shop, owned by Olympic medalist Pedro Martínez, runs hiking and biking trips to Mitla's surrounding areas. La Culebra-Las Salinas ride visits natural pools and a waterfall.



KOSHINA TATIANNA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Hierve El Agua (p369)

After a dip, escape the crowds on a **loop trail** that leads to the *cascada grande* and descends to the semi-desert valley floor. The view from below allows you to appreciate the towering white rock formation from a completely different perspective. To see more of the area, on-site guides go off-path on horseback tours.

For a more ambitious approach, tour outfit **Zapotrek** does a 9km walking tour that visits a remote waterfall and natural pool before heading uphill to Hierve El Agua.

Note that Hierve El Agua is usually packed by noon so get there early to beat the crowds, especially on weekends. In Mitla, pickup trucks to Hierve El Agua depart from Avenida Zempoaltepétl, starting at 9am, and they leave when they have enough passengers. If you're driving, the rugged *libre* (toll-free road) provides spectacular views, but the narrow dirt route is best avoided during the rainy season. Alternatively, drive through Mitla and take Hwy 179, which parallels a toll road, then look for the Hierve El Agua turnoff about 18km east of Mitla. When hiking around Hierve El Agua, visitors are not allowed to stray off designated paths unless accompanied by official guides.



GETTING AROUND

Consider renting a car or hiring a private taxi if you have a lot of ground to cover or want to visit hard-to-reach ruins and mezcal distilleries.

Affordable *colectivos* run along fixed routes in and around Oaxaca and 2nd-class buses serve most Central Valley towns. Some buses will drop you at highway turnoffs, meaning you may have to walk a few kilometers to get into town.

It's quite easy to bike to nearby communities, such as San Bartolo Coyotepec and Teotitlán del Valle, and a bicycle path runs from Oaxaca City to El Tule along Avenida Ferrocarril.

Tips for Taking Colectivos

Colectivos are cheaper than regular cabs, but you'll be squeezed into a car with at least three other passengers, so think of it more along the lines of a carpool. The maroon-and-white taxis are usually a quicker option than 2nd-class buses, and the cheapest ride to reach towns in the surrounding Central Valleys. If you're heading east toward the Valle de Tlacolula, look for *colectivos* just past the Eduardo Vasconcelos baseball stadium. To reach the Valle de Etla, cabs congregate around Calle Trujano near the 2nd-class bus station. Most taxis display their destination on the windshield.



SIERRA NORTE

The Sierra Norte (aka Sierra de Juárez) spoils nature enthusiasts with its biodiverse forested highlands, welcoming Zapotec mountain towns and successful community-run ecotourism ventures. In the Pueblos Mancomunados, a commonwealth of eight villages devoted to subsistence farming and sustainable tourism, visitors can explore the pristine countryside along some 100km of connected trails on hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking and bird-watching outings.

To get even further off the beaten track, continue your way up north to San Pablo Guelatao, the birthplace of Benito Juárez, Mexico's first indigenous president. Then spend some quiet time unwinding in the crisp mountain air of nearby Capulámpam de Méndez, known for its traditional medicine centers and glorious views of the surrounding sierra. All of these tranquil destinations provide fascinating glimpses into Zapotec village life under shared self-governance systems.

TOP TIP

The Sierra Norte towns are best reached by car. A rental vehicle allows for more flexibility to explore remote areas and bus service tends to be limited. Alternatively, arrange day trips, overnight stays and multi-day tours with Oaxaca City-based Expediciones Sierra Norte, a community-run tourism agency.



Bridge above Benito Juárez (p371)



HOW TO VISIT THE PUEBLOS MANCOMUNADOS

The helpful folks at Oaxaca City-based **Expediciones Sierra Norte** will answer any questions you might have about visiting the Pueblos Mancomunados and other Sierra Norte towns. The community-run travel agency can help arrange accommodations, transportation to and from the villages and various outdoor activities. If you visit on your own, keep in mind that hikers are required to pay access fees for treks of 8km or longer. Expediciones Sierra Norte has basic maps for sale, but due to a lack of signposting on some trails you're better off navigating the routes with an app, such as Gaia GPS, which has excellent offline capabilities. Remember to pack warm clothes.



Green Getaways in Zapotec Villages

HIKE THROUGH MAJESTIC CLOUD FORESTS

The **Pueblos Mancomunados**, a commonwealth of eight mountain villages, stands as a shining example of what a successful ecotourism program should look like. Established in 1998 to empower local indigenous communities and to protect the area's natural resources, today the sustainable tourism venture encompasses the towns of Amatlán, **Benito Juárez**, Cuajimoloyas, La Nevería, Lachatao, Latuvi, Llano Grande and Yavesía, all of which provide rustic adobe cabins and up-close communions with Zapotec villagers.

Book a guided hike through **Expediciones Sierra Norte** to discover deep canyons, waterfalls and panoramic lookouts. The pine and oak forests here are home to some 400 bird species and nearly 4000 plant varieties, making it a fascinating playground for birders and botanists. You can easily spend days wandering along trails ranging in elevation from 2200m to 3200m. For a doable day hike, set out on the 3½-hour walk from **Cuajimoloyas** to lookout point **Piedra Larga**, where you can scramble up a rock formation for views of **Pico de Orizaba**, Mexico's highest mountain peak. If you have more time, consider tackling the scenic **Latuvi-Lachatao canyon trail**.

For mountain biking, rent some wheels in **Benito Juárez** and hit the **Circuito Taurino Mecinas Caballos** route to pictur-



WHERE TO STAY IN THE SIERRA NORTE

Centro Ecológico Cabañas Latuvi

The morning and late-afternoon views from these adobe cabins in Latuvi are simply spectacular. \$

Centro Ecológico Cuajimoloyas

These rustic cabins provide a good base for day hikes and bike rides to nearby villages. \$

Cabañas Xhendaa

In Capulálpam de Méndez, these cozy mountaintop cabins with spacious balconies exude tranquility. \$\$



Capulálpam de Méndez

esque **Latuví**. You can also hook up horseback rides and forage for mushrooms at a fair in Cuajimoloyas held in July or August.

Getting off the Beaten Track

HISTORIC SITE AND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Get away from it all by spending a day or two in several mountain retreats full of history and unadulterated local flavor. Departing from Oaxaca, stop for an early lunch at **Luz de Luna** in low-key San Andrés Huayápam, where they prepare tasty ribs in *salsa chicatana* (a sauce made from flying leaf-cutter ants).

Next, make your way to the tiny village of **San Pablo Guelatao** where Benito Juárez, Mexico's first indigenous president, was born. Beside the pretty lake at the center of town you'll see a statue of young Benito as a shepherd and a replica of the adobe house where he lived as a boy. A small **museum** on the town square houses an exhibit that traces his remarkable ascent to the presidency. Before leaving town you can take in a view of Guelatao from its vertigo-inducing glass-bottom **lookout point**.

From Guelatao, head 13km east to reach **Capulálpam de Méndez**, a flower-bright mountain town with a 16th-century stone church at its center. It's the ideal setting to unwind and recalibrate your energy under the care of indigenous healers. Traditional medicine centers, such as **Manos Que Curan**, carry out *limpias* (spiritual cleansings), deep tissue massages and temascal steam baths using ancient healing methods.

The hillside cabins at **Cabañas Xhendaa** afford lovely vistas of the surrounding countryside, as does **El Verbo de Méndez Café**, where you can sip coffee or mezcal while watching the sun go down.

OAXACA'S FAVORITE SON

Elected as Mexico's first indigenous president in 1861, Benito Juárez' incredible life story began in San Pablo Guelatao as a poor shepherd. When Juárez was 12, he moved to Oaxaca City where he would go on to study law and embark on a prolific career path as a lawyer, justice minister, state governor and, eventually, president of Mexico. Among his most notable accomplishments, the liberal leader enacted a series of reform laws that sought to break the power of the Catholic Church. He also made primary education free and compulsory. Countless markets, squares and streets preserve his memory, and even the capital's official name, Oaxaca de Juárez, pays homage to this illustrious national hero.



GETTING AROUND

San Pablo Guelatao and Capulálpam de Méndez are best reached by car. Alternatively, catch an Ixtlán de Juárez-bound passenger van departing from a depot near Oaxaca City's

ADO bus terminal. In Ixtlán de Juárez, catch a *colectivo* to Capulálpam. Once in Guelatao and Capulálpam, you can easily roam around on foot.

SIERRA SUR

Mexico City

Sierra Sur

Most travelers zip right past the Sierra Sur region en route to warmer climes on Oaxaca's coast, and now that a new Puerto Escondido highway is expected to cut travel time in half between the capital and the beach, the winding Sierra Sur route is poised to become the road less traveled. But this remarkable destination should not be overlooked. San José del Pacífico, a misty mountain town perched atop a celestial cloud-shrouded forest, delivers mesmerizing views of the surrounding valleys, fascinating wilderness escapes and traditional temascal steam baths to cleanse the body and soul.

Further south, off the potholed road to Bahías de Huatulco, you'll reach the turnoff to Pluma Hidalgo, an enchanting coffee-producing region with wondrous mountain surroundings that invite you to unwind and reconnect with nature. Here you can hike to a cascading waterfall or simply chat with locals in scenic cliffside cafes over a robust cup of joe.

TOP TIP

San José del Pacífico marks the halfway point between Oaxaca City and the coast, making it a useful stopover if you're feeling motion sickness from the windy mountain road.



JULIO ORTEGA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

San José del Pacífico



Bird-watching & Detoxing

RECONNECT WITH NATURE

If you do just one thing while in **San José del Pacífico**, allow yourself to experience the golden hour when epic cloud formations roll in from the coast just before sundown. Perched about 2500m above sea level, the small mountain town is mainly known for its magic mushrooms, which are officially illegal to consume in Mexico, but one doesn't need shrooms to appreciate the spellbinding scenery. Many visitors come for yoga retreats or bird-watching outings; Teotitlán del Valle-based **Oaxaca Birding Tours** conducts excursions in a semi-deciduous forest that's home to Mexican hermits, grey-crowned woodpeckers and other endemic species. Alternatively, if you're pressed for time, you can always take a quick hike up to the town's highest lookout point (look for the hillside Hollywood-esque **Mirador sign**).

San José is also known for its temascal steam baths, an age-old detox ritual usually involving ceremonial chants and herbal vapors. **Teteo innan Alma**, on the south end of town, has a rustic sweat lodge, and the excellent restaurant there hosts a small but worthwhile wild mushroom festival in July or August.

If possible, venture out to nearby **San Mateo Río Hondo** (19km southeast), a laid-back mountain community that,



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN SIERRA SUR

Huitzil

Small open-air restaurant with an affinity for hearty soups and *moles* prepared with wild mushrooms. \$\$

Tatsu

Scenic hillside spot with a menu featuring Asian cuisine classics such as pad thai and Mongolian beef. \$\$

Taberna de los Duendes

Duck into the 'elves tavern' for generous portions of pasta and Oaxacan craft beer. \$\$

Rancho Colibri

In San Mateo Río Hondo, serves delectable Italian food with equally delicious vistas. \$\$

La Morenita

The go-to roadside spot for affordable eats like mushroom quesadillas. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN JOSÉ AND SAN MATEO

La Puesta del Sol

Cozy wood-paneled cabins with private porches for relishing the unforgettable sunset views. \$\$

Refugio Terraza de la Tierra

Solar-powered rustic cabins on a hillside property with waterfalls, a yoga room and vegan restaurant. \$

Posada Yegoyoxi

In San Mateo Río Hondo, the location and warm service make this a preferred backpackers spot. \$



BEST PLACES TO STAY IN PLUMA HIDALGO

Casa Niebla

The views from these modern hilltop cabins extend all the way to the Pacific coast, so set aside some balcony time for those life-affirming sunsets. \$\$\$

Finca Don Gabriel

The no-frills rooms and cabins are comfortable enough but it's the cliffside pool, lush gardens and open-air restaurant that make this place memorable. \$\$

Finca Margaritas

Escapists will love the *finca's* verdant grounds with waterfalls, temascal sweat lodge and, of course, the excellent coffee and mountain views. \$\$\$

Posada Isabel

Decent bare-bones rooms for anyone looking to pinch pesos. \$



Coffee berries, Pluma Hidalgo

MARI TERESHUTTERSTOCK ©

much like San José, has become a magnet for alternative lifestyle. For a San Mateo highlight, head up to **Rancho Colibri**, a remote Italian restaurant where you can gaze out at a delightful mountainous countryside over pasta and wine.

Soak Up the Coffee Culture

HIKING AND TOURING COFFEE FARMS

There's not a whole lot going on in the quiet coffee-producing community of **Pluma Hidalgo** but therein lies its appeal. Get things started with a strong coffee – preferably at **Cafetería Origen Mágico**, a hillside cafe with a deck affording a lovely panorama of the surrounding mountains. Coffee shops on the small town square and most hotels can arrange visits to the coffee farms. But if you prefer a more in-depth outing, book an excursion with English-speaking guide Oscar Velásquez, the knowledgeable founder of Huatulco-based **Oscar Tours**.

Another worthwhile activity involves hiking out to the **Cascada Arcoiris**, an impressive 70m cascading waterfall where you can cool off in a shallow natural pool. The trail cuts through a humid tropical forest and winds past a coffee farm with a small chapel. If you're pressed for time, mototaxis in town will zip you out to the falls.

Pluma Hidalgo has limited eating options, but you can always count on the restaurant at **Finca Don Gabriel**, a coffee plantation with a tiny museum and well-manicured grounds. For a more immersive coffee-themed escape, consider an overnight at **Finca Margaritas**, one of the oldest and most beautiful coffee farms in all of Oaxaca.



GETTING AROUND

To reach Pluma Hidalgo, Huatulco 2000 operates frequent passenger vans between Bahías de Huatulco and Oaxaca City. The same vans stop in San José del Pacífico. *Colectivos*

run along the 7km-stretch from the Hwy 175 turnoff to San Mateo Río Hondo. While in the towns, you can get around in affordable mototaxis or on your own two feet.

PUERTO ESCONDIDO

Mexico City ✪

Puerto
Escondido

THE GUIDE

OAXACA

Once upon a time, long before paved roads reached this part of Oaxaca, Puerto Escondido was just a small fishing village while truly living up to its name as the 'Hidden Port.' Nearly a half-century later, it has transformed itself into a legendary surf destination and one of Oaxaca's fastest-growing beach resorts. Even if you have no intention of braving the Mexican pipeline's 6m barrels here, you can find plenty to do along the spread-out stretch of coast. By day you can go snorkeling, diving, or perhaps whale-watching during the migration season from November to March. By night a busy restaurant, cafe and bar scene brings live music and unpretentious dance parties, especially in and around surf hub Zicatela. Many visitors come to take beginner surf classes or immersive Spanish courses, and some schools even sell a twofer package, allowing you to juggle both activities in one fell swoop.

TOP TIP

Puerto Escondido's peak surf season runs from late April to September. If you're a first-time surfer, you'll find smaller waves from November to mid-April, especially on the relatively calm bay of Playa Carrizalillo. Playa Zicatela has extremely strong rip tides and is considered dangerous for inexperienced surfers and swimmers.



ARAKAU SCHELL / SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Puerto Escondido



PUERTO ESCONDIDO'S TOP RESTAURANTS

Almoraduz

A favorite on the blossoming Rinconada culinary scene, this gourmet restaurant features a changing tasting menu and innovative seafood entrées. \$\$\$

Chicama

This excellent sand-floor Peruvian restaurant prepares super-fresh ceviche in tiger's milk and an exquisite fish tartare with mango and avocado. \$\$\$

Pez Gallo

After delighting in this beach club's fish tacos or coconut-encrusted shrimp, go for a swim in the inviting waters of Playa Bacocho. \$\$\$

Mercado de Zicatela

Open-air breakfast joints like Restaurante Aleli serve classic fare such as *salsa de huevo*, and it comes with an ocean view. \$



HIGHLIGHTS

1 Playa Zicatela

SIGHTS

- 2 Mercado Benito Juárez
3 Playa Carrizalillo

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS

- 4 Big Wave Diving
5 Gina's Tours
6 Instituto de Lenguajes Puerto Escondido
7 Omar's Sportfishing

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 8 Mar & Wana
9 Puerto Brewing Company

Wet & Wild Water Adventures

SURFING, DIVING, WHALE-WATCHING AND SPORTFISHING

Not surprisingly, most of the action in surf capital Puerto Escondido revolves around water activities. At the center of it all, **Playa Zicatela**, home to the pounding waves of the Mexican pipeline, draws surfers and curious onlookers from all over the world, especially in November when an international surfing tournament comes to town. But you don't need to be a pro surfer to have a good time here.

Puerto Surf, in the modish **Punta Zicatela** neighborhood, imparts one-on-one and group classes, and for multi-day courses you can shack up in its seven-room guesthouse. You'll also find board rentals and surf instructors on the lovely horse-shoe-shaped bay of **Playa Carrizalillo**, where the beginner-friendly breaks make it one of Puerto Escondido's most swimmable beaches as well.



WHERE TO STAY IN PUERTO ESCONDIDO

Hotel Casa de Dan

Up above Playa Zicatela, grab one of the breezy and spacious apartments upstairs. \$\$

Villas Carrizalillo

Private villas 'Mitla' and 'Colorada' provide outstanding sunset views, as does on-site restaurant Espadín. \$\$\$

Hostal One Love

Pure budget bliss: from its circular music-themed rooms to its casual restaurant and verdant gardens. \$

If you're in town from November to March, don't miss the thrilling opportunity to go whale-watching. **Omar's Sportfishing** runs three-hour tours to a protected whale-watching zone where you'll typically see migrating humpback whales gliding through the water. Omar also operates sportfishing charters, allowing for both wild dolphin-watching and the chance to hook striped marlin and Pacific sailfish.

Meanwhile, from November through May, **Big Wave Diving** conducts scuba and snorkeling outings to nearby sites. Admirably, this Zicatela dive shop only opens from November through May, the best months to enjoy optimal water conditions and high visibility. Amid reefs of volcanic rock, you'll see spotted eagle rays, turtles and large schools of fish.

Neighborhood Hopping

EXPLORE PUERTO ESCONDIDO'S MANY SIDES

If you really want to get the full flavor of Puerto Escondido, venture out and explore its notably distinct neighborhoods. Perhaps start with some beach time on the north end of town, where you can escape to the crowd-free sands of **Playa Corral**. Later, in the afternoon, on neighboring **Playa Bacocho**, you can participate in year-round turtle releases.

South of Playa Bacocho, the low-key residential **Rinconada** neighborhood makes a good base to visit **Playa Carrizalillo**, a beloved (albeit increasingly popular) bay that's ideal for swimming and beginner surfing. After that, make your way to Benito Juárez street, a culinary hot spot where travelers intermingle at busy sidewalk restaurants and convivial bars such as **Puerto Brewing Company**.

For affordable homestyle eats, head uptown for a meal at Mercado Benito Juárez (p355), the city's oldest food and crafts market. Next, spend some time on Playa Zicatela and live vicariously as a surf bum while chilling in beach bars like **Mar & Wana**.

South of Zicatela, in the hip **La Punta** neighborhood, you'll find an exploding hotel, bar and restaurant scene. In fact, it's growing so fast that some locals disparagingly call the development boom the 'Tulumification' of Puerto Escondido, in reference to the Mexican Caribbean's rapidly gentrifying Tulum.

To see more of the city and its environs, **Gina's Tours** runs guided excursions to turtle nesting beach Playa Escobilla (p382) and she does fun food tours as well. For immersive Spanish classes, **Instituto de Lenguajes Puerto Escondido** is a solid option for both language instruction and guided hikes to unspoiled beaches.

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO EAT LIKE A LOCAL



Gina Machorro, a highly knowledgeable and energetic guide who conducts food and cultural tours in and around Puerto Escondido, recommends her favorite seafood joints.

@GinaPuerto

Along the Adoquín corridor, I like **Restaurante Alicia** for the beautiful view and wonderful *camarones a la diabla* (shrimp in red chili sauce). You can also go to **Sabor a Mar** on Zicatela's Playa Mariner, which is a great place for fresh foil-wrapped fish. Uptown, **Horno Escondido** makes excellent oven-baked fish in garlic, and in the Rinconada neighborhood you can go to **Metxcalli**, where they prepare an octopus in chili sauce unlike anything you've ever tasted before – it's not too spicy and simply delicious.



GETTING AROUND

Affordable *colectivos*, aka *camionetas* (shared transport in covered pickup trucks), run frequently along a fixed route up and down the coastal highway. You can also get around in inexpensive buses marked 'Zicatela' or 'La

Punta', which head to downtown's bus station and Mercado Benito Juárez. Taxis within town usually cost M\$50 to M\$150, depending on the distance and your negotiating skills. Puerto Escondido has no rideshare options.



Beyond Puerto Escondido

Nature buffs and escapists can fuel their wanderlust while exploring Puerto Escondido's wildlife-rich environs and old fishing villages full of local flavor.

Puerto Escondido's biodiverse surroundings provide several unique outdoor activities that allow you to embrace the coastal region's wild side. In Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua, sprawling mangroves harbor a wide variety of bird and plant species, not to mention a large crocodile population, while its low-rise beach settlement invites visitors to hang in a past fishing village. At **Laguna de Manialtepec**, a big-time birders' destination, most visitors go to glide across the lagoon's bioluminescent waters on nocturnal boat tours. South of Puerto Escondido, at the turtle sanctuary of Playa Escobilla, you can witness a truly impressive natural phenomenon when thousands of sea turtles come ashore to lay their eggs during nesting season.

Parque Nacional
Lagunas de
Chacahua

Laguna de
Manialtepec

Puerto
Escondido

Playa
Escobilla

TOP TIP

Consult reliable tour operators to find out when is the best time to observe bioluminescence and mass turtle nesting events.



Laguna de Manialtepec



Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua

Wildlife-rich & Laid-back Chacahua

BOATING, SURFING AND HIKING IN A NATIONAL PARK

As your motorboat zips through tunnel-like mangrove canals teeming with aquatic birds, you couldn't ask for a more dramatic entrance into one of Oaxaca's most remote and biodiverse beach settings. Welcome to **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua**, a 149-sq-km national park encompassing five wildlife-rich lagoons and a laid-back beach community with a touch of Afromestizo (people of mixed African, indigenous and European descent) culture.

During your visit make it a point to take a **boat tour** to get a closer look at the mangrove forests that harbor 130 bird species, crocodiles, various sea turtles and more than 240 plant varieties.

An estuary divides Chacahua into two neighborhoods. Most visitors stay on the west side, known as 'La Isla,' where you'll find a higher concentration of accommodations and restaurants. To reach the east side, aka 'La Grua,' it's just a short water taxi ride away. In La Grua, a walk around the village takes you to a **lighthouse** with panoramic views of the surrounding lagoons, **arco de piedra** (an arch rock formation on the beach) and a small **crocodile sanctuary** that provides refuge for several hundred rescue crocs and caimans.



BEST PLACES TO STAY IN CHACAHUA

Cabañas La Isla

Fairly basic beachside cabins, but the surfable beach and swimmable estuary are right at your doorstep. \$\$

Cabañas Altamar

Fan-cooled cabins with ocean views and a few modern touches. Rooms upstairs with balconies and hammocks catch a refreshing ocean breeze. \$\$

Hotel Sanmara

An upscale option by Chacahua standards, this 'luxury' hotel provides creature comforts such as snug beds, air-con and a small pool and bar on its upper deck. \$\$\$

Cabañas El Piojo

Basic cabins and rooms on the beach with plenty of hammocks for lazing around; longtime budget traveler fave. \$



WHERE TO EAT IN CHACAHUA AND MANIALTEPEC

El Punto

Whole fish, such as sea bass, is cooked to perfection at this Chacahua thatched-roof restaurant. \$\$

Lia del Mar

A convivial restaurant owned by a Chacahua fisherman, so you always know you're getting the freshest catch. \$\$

Restaurante 2 Hermanos

Serves inexpensive breakfast, soups, seafood and corn-based snacks on the town square. \$

WHY I LOVE OAXACA'S COAST



John Hecht, writer

Oaxaca's ruggedly beautiful coast usually stays with me long after I leave. Unlike some beach destinations in Mexico that have grown increasingly more homogenized of late (sorry, Riviera Maya), Oaxaca's largely unspoiled Pacific coast keeps things interesting as the coastal highway leads to unspoiled fishing villages, under-the-radar surf spots and sublime nature escapes bursting with wildlife. Even Bahías de Huatulco, a large tourist resort by Oaxacan standards, feels relatively unobtrusive and low-key, especially when hiking out to some of its more remote and pristine jungle-backed bays.



DOLEBIV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Baby turtle, Playa Escobilla

Back on La Isla, life moves at a leisurely pace. By day you can go surfing, explore the community's sandy backstreets and eat superb fresh fish while nursing a cold beer in ocean-front thatched-roof restaurants, most of which offer rustic accommodations. Chachahua and numerous settlements around the Oaxaca-Guerrero border are home to a sizable population of Afro-Mexicans, descendants of slaves who escaped from the conquering Spanish.

Observe a Unique Turtle Phenomenon

WILDLIFE-WATCHING AT PLAYA ESCOBILLA

If you've never witnessed an *arribada*, an astonishing phenomenon when thousands of sea turtles come ashore in a mass-nesting event, you're missing out on a truly remarkable sight. From July to February, well over a million olive ridley sea turtles arrive at **Playa Escobilla**, a protected 15km-long stretch of undeveloped beach about 30km east of Puerto Escondido. The numbers usually peak for a week or so around full moons, but for more precise information on when to observe this natural wonder, contact Gina's Tours (p377) for the latest updates. If you aren't fortunate enough to be around during an *arribada*, you can participate in afternoon turtle releases at Playa Escobilla's **Centro Ecoturístico Escobilla**, which allows visitors the exciting opportunity to watch tiny hatchlings scurry into the imposing ocean for the first time.



GETTING AROUND

Pinotepa Nacional-bound passenger vans departing from Avenida Hidalgo can drop you at Laguna de Manialtepec and at the highway turnoff to El Zapotalito, where taxis will take you to the motorboats offering service to Chachahua. There you can board shared skiffs or hire private *lanchas* (motorboats) that whiz

along scenic canals en route to the beach - beware of boat operators attempting to charge excessive fares. Alternatively, you can take a more affordable 10-minute boat ride across the lagoon and catch a pickup truck into town, but the scenery is far less epic. Playa Escobilla is best reached by car, or go with Gina's Tours.

MAZUNTE & ZIPOLITE

Mexico City ✪

Mazunte &
Zipolite

Mazunte and Zipolite, a pair of carefree beach enclaves attracting an international class of sunbathers, yoga gurus and stoner folk, have managed to retain much of their bohemian appeal even as both undergo rapid development. Zipolite, the largest of several neighboring beach communities along this narrow strip of coast, is famous for its clothing-optional beach, superb *palapa* (thatched-roof) seafood restaurants and a small but interesting counterculture scene. For a more subdued vibe, head about 4km west to San Agustín where you can swim and learn to surf in the sublime waters of Playa Elefantes. Further west, in Zipolite counterpart Mazunte, you'll find a large turtle center with an indoor aquarium, while at dusk it's all about taking in epic sunsets from lookout Punta Cometa. At La Ventanilla, a small beach village 4km west of Mazunte, visitors can take boat trips on a lagoon to observe crocodiles, turtles and birds.

TOP TIP

Once in Zipolite, it's easy to reach San Agustín and Mazunte in *camionetas* and taxis. Keep in mind that Zipolite and Mazunte have more of a party atmosphere than tranquil San Agustín. Beware of strong undercurrents when swimming in Zipolite, which appropriately means 'beach of the dead.'



Zipolite

MAZUNTE & ZIPOLITE

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga
- 2 Punta Cometa

SIGHTS


- 3 Playa del Amor
- 4 Playa Elefantes
- 5 Playa Miermejita
- 6 Playa Rinconcito
- 7 Playa Zipolite

ACTIVITIES & COURSES

- 8 Instituto Iguana
- 9 Pflia Palmera

ENTERTAINMENT

- 10 Cine Luciernaga

 Servicios Ecoturísticos
 La Ventanilla (2km);
 Lagarto Real (2km)



Punta Cometa (p.386)



Avenida Roca Blanca

Channel Your Inner Bohemian

TAP INTO ZIPOLITE'S ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE

A bastion of counterculture expression for decades, **Zipolite** attracts independent-minded travelers who come for its clothing-optional beach, freewheeling party scene and chilled-out, anything-goes vibe.

Most of the action unfolds along the lengthy beach and **Avenida Roca Blanca**, a strip of oceanfront seafood restaurants, intentionally rustic hotels and *palapa* bars. On the western end of Playa Zipolite, you'll see naked sunbathers and swimmers soaking up the beach atmosphere, while on the east end nudist beach **Playa del Amor** is a favorite spot for gay men.

If you get tired of lazing around on the beach, take a stroll along Calle Pelicano and visit the interesting crafts shops. At **Piña Palmera**, a rehabilitation and social integration center for disabled people from rural communities, you can purchase handicrafts or participate in workshops to learn how to make woodcrafts and pottery. Next, mosey down a couple of blocks south and drop by **Taller La Joya** to arrange a tie-dye or jewelry-making class with April Shannon, a talented designer who possesses a wealth of knowledge about Zipolite and beyond.



WHERE TO STAY IN ZIPOLITE

Casa Kalmar

The cliffside infinity pool, tasteful ocean-facing rooms and attentive service make for a memorable stay. **\$\$\$**

Las Casitas

Six reasonably priced bungalows with kitchens and spacious hangout areas on a terraced property. **\$\$**

Castillo Oasis

Good-value guesthouse praised for its verdant tropical garden and tastefully designed rooms. **\$**



ZIPOLITE'S BEST RESTAURANTS

Boca del Mar

The fish tacos at this unassuming *palapa* restaurant get rave reviews and deservedly so. **\$\$**

Mao Mau

Take a break from the seafood routine at this open-air Asian food restaurant with dishes such as green papaya salad and pad thai. **\$\$**

La Providencia

The contemporary Mexican cuisine here is the closest thing that Zipolite has to fine dining, but it's quite a casual place. Reserve ahead. **\$\$\$**

Sal y Pimienta

The *pescado a la talla al ajo* (grilled whole fish in garlic) here rocks. **\$\$\$**

Orale Café

Tropical-garden cafe with some of the best breakfast in town. **\$**



BEST PLACES TO EAST IN MAZUNTE

Armadillo

The vegan menu here features a delectable Moroccan platter and a must-try roasted cauliflower dish with potato and curcuma. \$\$\$

La Pizzería

Italian-owned open-air restaurant revered for its delectable wood-fired pizzas, calzones and outstanding tiramisu. \$\$

Maralto

Bakes its own pastries and bread, and prepares tasty sandwiches to accompany its robust coffee hailing from Pluma Hidalgo, one of Oaxaca's top coffee-producing regions. \$\$

La Cuisine

Reasonably priced French restaurant with a menu that changes daily according to the market-fresh ingredients available. \$\$

La Baguette

Small bakery known for its addictive *libritos*, a layered chocolate morsel. \$



JOEL CARLLETTO/IMAGES ©

Playa Mermejita

For another unique experience head over to **La Galera de Zircolite**, a circus school where, for a nominal fee, you can learn how to perform acrobatics, prolonged handstands, fire juggling and African dancing, all great skills to have when whooping it up at Zipolite's beach bashes.

From December to March, **Cine Luciernaga** opens its make-shift cinema and screens mostly English-language films with Spanish subtitles. The open-air venue also hosts live music and karaoke nights from time to time.

An Up-Close Experience with Turtles

WILDLIFE-WATCHING AND SUNSETS IN MAZUNTE

Mazunte is growing fast, too fast some might say, but it remains a beautiful place of sandy beaches, rustic restaurants and hotels, and much like its twin town Zipolite, it marches to its own modern-primitive beat.

Mazunte is known first and foremost for its **Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga**, a research and rehabilitation facility for a variety of turtle species. You can get a close-up look at marine turtles swimming in the aquarium's wide tanks. Some turtles, such as the hawksbill, are surprisingly large. Mexico is home to seven sea turtle species and 29 varieties of freshwater and terrestrial turtles. Recent conservation efforts have allowed endangered turtle species, such as the olive ridley, to make a comeback, but with only 1 in 1000 hatchlings surviving into adulthood it's always a challenging task.

Another must-see in Mazunte is **Punta Cometa**, a rocky cliff providing spectacular views of the coastline, especially at sunset (however, that's also when the lookout attracts hordes of Instagrammers). You'll find the trail to Punta Cometa off Camino Mer-



WHERE TO STAY IN MAZUNTE

Cabañas Amaia

Expect immaculate *cabañas*, spot-on service and plenty of peace and quiet at this well-run B&B. \$\$

Oceanomar

With well-crafted rooms and a gorgeous pool overlooking Playa Mermejita, it's the ideal escape. \$\$\$

Hotel Casa Pan de Miel

On Mazunte's east end, visitors enjoy marvelous ocean views from a privileged cliff-top location. Adults only. \$\$\$

mejita. If you continue walking south along Camino Mermejita, the dirt road leads to **Playa Mermejita**, a golden sand beach that sees far fewer visitors than the oft-packed **Playa Rinconito**, Mazunte's main beach. Along the way you'll stroll past **Mermejita Circus** (yes, circus culture is all the rage here). Here, you can learn contortion and aerial skills, contemporary dance and other performing arts under a thatched-roof practice space. Meanwhile, if you're looking to learn Spanish while in Mazunte, **Instituto Iguana** imparts tailor-made one-on-one classes.

Unwind in San Agustínillo

BEACH-BUMMING AND SURFING

Hugging perhaps the prettiest slice of coast in these parts, low-key **San Agustínillo** has exactly what you need if you don't mind doing a whole lot of nothing. The bulk of hotels and restaurants line the coastal road that cuts through town, though a growing number of guesthouses have been cropping up on the hillsides. At **Playa Elefantes**, named after the beach's elephant-shaped rock formation, you couldn't ask for a more idyllic spot to swim or pick up surfing. A surf school with a small office along the main strip conducts classes for beginners and also rents boards. **Casa Bagus**, a six-room oceanfront hotel, puts Playa Elefantes right at your doorstep. For comfortable and well-run budget and midrange sleeping options, check out **Posada Recinto del Viento** and **Bambú Ecocabañas**.

Spotting Wildlife in La Ventanilla

BOAT TOUR IN A BIODIVERSE LAGOON

About 2km northwest of Mazunte you'll find the turnoff to **La Ventanilla**, a small beach community that runs ecotours across a mangrove-fringed lagoon harboring hundreds of river crocodiles, sea turtles and a variety of endemic and migratory waterbirds. Two rival cooperatives conduct the tours: **Lagarto Real** and **Servicios Ecoturísticos La Ventanilla**. They basically provide the same services, however, the latter's tour includes a visit to an island with enclosures for deer, spider monkeys and coatis. Both outfits also run bird-watching tours and turtle releases, allowing visitors to observe olive ridley, leatherback and green sea turtle hatchlings crawl into the ocean for the first time. After the tour, set aside some time to hang in La Ventanilla's quiet oceanfront seafood restaurants before heading back to 'civilization'.



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN SAN AGUSTÍNILLO

El Navegante

This sand-floor restaurant features an excellent changing menu of mostly seafood dishes prepared by a talented Catalan chef. Reserve ahead. \$\$

Restaurante La Mora

A San Agustínillo institution, this part-restaurant, part-guesthouse whips up delicious breakfasts served with fair trade coffee, plus Italian and seafood dishes for the dinner crowd. \$\$

La Termita

We would be remiss if we didn't mention La Termita's wood-fired pizzas, which regulars praise as the best 'za on the coast. We'll let you decide. \$\$\$

Bistro Paloma

Hit this budget inn's shady cafe for tasty *chilaquiles* (fried tortillas with green salsa). \$



GETTING AROUND

You can get around mostly on foot; however, to move between towns simply hop into the back of a *camioneta* or *colectivo*. Flag them down anywhere along the coastal road. Eclipse 70 and Líneas Unidas operate passenger vans from San José del Pacífico and Oaxaca City, and both run multiple daily

departures from Zipolite. In Mazunte and Zipolite, taxi bases provide somewhat pricey service to the neighboring towns and airports in Puerto Escondido and Bahías de Huatulco. You can get anywhere you need to go from Pochutla, the region's main bus hub.

BAHÍAS DE HUATULCO

Mexico City ✪

Bahías de Huatulco

Huatulco was just a smattering of small fishing villages until the mid-1980s, when a government-funded tourism agency developed a sprawling resort town around nine ruggedly beautiful bays. Since then, Huatulco has morphed into one of the largest tourist centers on the Oaxaca coast, and yet even with the addition of a cruise ship pier, the government has trodden more gently here than in mega-resort areas like Cancún. Developed with an ecological focus, a large area of lowland jungle and marine habitats is protected within a national park, making some of its quieter coves a joy to experience while hiking, snorkeling and swimming. Meanwhile, in La Crucecita, a downtown area with the highest concentration of restaurants, hotels and bars, visitors get plenty of local flavor amid the old weaving workshops, busy food market and sidewalk restaurants overlooking the sun-soaked main square and colonial-style church.

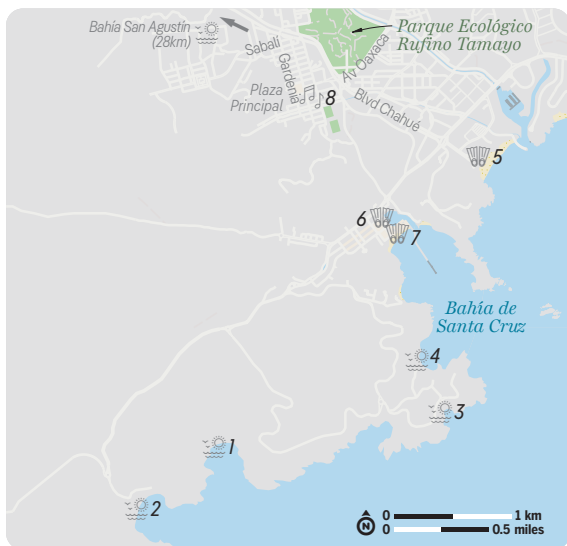
TOP TIP

The downtown area of La Crucecita, about 1km north of Santa Cruz Huatulco, has many budget and midrange accommodations, bus stations and inexpensive restaurants. Along the coast, Tangolunda is home to a row of luxury resort hotels, while centrally located Chahué provides somewhat more affordable sleeping options.



SPACEWALK/GETTY IMAGES ©

Huatulco

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Bahía El Órgano
- 2 Bahía Maguey
- 3 Playa el Violín

- 4 Playa La Entrega

- ACTIVITIES,
COURSES & TOURS**
- 5 Huatulco Dive Center

- 6 Huatulco Salvaje
- 7 Hurricane Divers

- ENTERTAINMENT**
- 8 La Crema

Walk on Huatulco's Wild Side

HIKING, SNORKELING AND NATURE EXPERIENCES

Graced with 119 sq km of protected land, sea and shoreline, **Parque Nacional Huatulco** comprises a vast area of wild-life-rich jungles, wetlands and sublime beaches hugging a stretch of splendid coastline. The national park is home to whales, dolphins, sea turtles, more than 300 types of birds, some 9000 plant species and about 45 hectares of coral reefs.

Some people visit the park's most remote bays on boat tours departing from the **Santa Cruz harbor**. This is a good option if you want to see various beaches while getting in some snorkeling along the way. But you can also access several beaches along trails that cut through Huatulco's dense jungle. **Playa Cacaluta**, a seldom-visited beach that sits on one of five bays within the park limits, can be reached on the 2.5km-long **Sanate trail** (4km west of Santa Cruz). If Cacaluta's scenery looks familiar, that's because the beach and its small



BEST RESTAURANTS IN HUATULCO

Ocean Restaurant

Come to this airy oceanfront *palapa* restaurant for the *pulpo zarandeado* (grilled octopus) and the *garnachas istmeñas* (a regional Oaxacan snack). \$\$\$

Rocoto

Fresh ceviche and stuffed fish crab get high praise at this tried-and-true favorite in La Crucecita. \$\$\$

Aroma

This fusion restaurant at the Quinta Bella Hotel prepares innovative Asian and Oaxacan dishes. \$\$

Cafe Huatulco

The food here is okay but it's the locally produced Pluma Hidalgo coffee that makes this park kiosk the ideal spot to greet the new day. \$



WHERE TO STAY IN BAHÍAS DE HUATULCO

Hotel Nonni

One of the best budget deals in town, and the rooftop restaurant does a tasty breakfast. \$

Misión de los Arcos

Comfy colonial-style midrange hotel off the main square that provides good-value, albeit spotty wi-fi. \$\$

Quinta Bella Hotel

Overlooks Blue Flag-certified Playa Chahué and is home to some of Huatulco's top restaurants. \$\$\$



BEST RESORT HOTELS IN HUATULCO

Las Palmas

Perched on a hill overlooking jungle-fringed Playa el Violín, the tastefully appointed apartments and villas are ideal for families looking for spacious digs. \$\$\$

Quinta Real

On quiet Tangolunda Bay, the architecture at this luxury oceanfront hotel draws on Moroccan and Mexican styles, and the 28 suites are done up with elegant touches throughout. \$\$\$

Secrets Huatulco Resort & Spa

Affording outstanding views of Playa Conejos, this adults-only resort has Vegas-sized super rooms and suites with private balconies. \$\$\$

island served as a location in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*, a movie starring Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal as two horny teens.

About 1.3km east of Cacaluta, you can tackle an easier 1km walk along a path that leads to **Bahía El Órgano**, a wondrous crowd-free cove where you can snorkel and picnic (bring your own food and drinks) under the shade of a rocky hillside. **Playa La Entrega** and **Bahía Maguey** have decent snorkeling as well, and both are backed by rows of *palapa* seafood restaurants, but they tend to get crowded on weekends or when cruise ships coast into town.

Unmissable Water Activities

WATER SPORTS AND FUN GALORE

Huatulco may not have much going on when it comes to cultural offerings but you'll find plenty to do in the great outdoors. In **Santa Cruz Huatulco**, the area's main harbor, tour operators such as **Huatulco Salvaje** conduct boat tours to nearby bays, where you can go snorkeling and swimming in jungle-backed coves, plus they do birding excursions, turtle releases and whale-watching expeditions from November to March. For a diving adventure, **Huatulco Dive Center** on **Playa Chahué** is a great option for two-tank dives, or if it's your first time, take a Discover course in their sea salt pool. With an average visibility of 6m to 15m, Huatulco's 30-plus dive sites are home to some 150 fish species, sea turtles and humpback whales during the migration season.

Top snorkeling locations include the coral plates at **Playa La Entrega**, Bahía San Agustín, **Playa el Violín** and the inshore side of the island at Playa Cacaluta (p389). Hook up snorkeling outings with **Hurricane Divers** in Santa Cruz. For Class I to III river rafting expeditions in nearby Río Copalita, reach out to the old pros at **Rancho Tangolunda Huatulco**. You can enjoy challenging rapids from July through October in the height of the rainy season. Just west of the Río Copalita you'll find a footpath leading to the golden sands of **Playa Conejos**, a gorgeous horseshoe-shaped bay with natural pools.

Come nighttime, when the temperature drops a few degrees, shake your booty at Chahué beach bar **La Papaya**, or party inland while rocking out to live music at **La Crema**, a Huatulco institution.



GETTING AROUND

Taxi bases on the main squares in La Cruccecita and Santa Cruz Huatulco post their fares to the airport and surrounding bays. *Lanchas* will take you out to most beaches from the Santa Cruz harbor. Fares are posted as well. Blue-and-white buses run back and forth from La

Cruccecita and Santa Cruz Huatulco. If you're staying in La Cruccecita, you can easily walk the 2km to the nearest beach at Playa Chahué. Consider renting a car if you're looking to explore remote beach towns in Huatulco's outlying areas.



Beyond Bahías de Huatulco

Bahías de Huatulco's picturesque environs present primo opportunities for surfing and carefree beach-bumming. Simply unplug, unwind and enjoy the captivating scenery.

Getting out and exploring Huatulco's surrounding areas pays big rewards for anyone looking to catch some amazing waves or simply bask in the delight of crowd-free beaches and jungle-fringed coves. In Barra de Cuatunalco and Playa Salchi, about 20km southeast of the airport, you'll find several hidden beaches that you may have all to yourself, while about 10km west of downtown follow the signs to Playa La Bocana, a low-key surfers' destination with an excellent boutique hotel. For serious surfers, it's all about the right-hand point break at Barra de la Cruz, a small town that has hosted numerous international competitions. The huge swells reach their peak in June and July.



TOP TIP

Bahías de Huatulco's outlying beach towns are best reached by car. Bring plenty of cash and expect spotty wi-fi at best.

THIAGO DIZ/GETTY IMAGES ©



Barra de la Cruz (p392)



BEST HOTELS AROUND HUATULCO

Hotel El Risco

In tranquil Barra de Cuatunlco, a hilltop hotel with gorgeous coves nearby. \$\$\$

Casa Mauna

Playa Salchi boutique hotel featuring six modern suites with private balconies and ocean views. \$\$\$

Casa Bocana

Even if you don't stay in this superb Playa La Bocana hotel, you should eat at the restaurant. \$\$\$

Bungalows Buena Vista

Barra de la Cruz' top-end option on the beach if you feel like living it up on a surf holiday. \$\$\$

Posada Blanca

Well-run Barra de la Cruz budget inn offering comfortable rooms with air-con. \$



BRUCE RAYMOND/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Playa La Bocana

Get Barreled & Bronzed

SURFING AND SUN-WORSHIPPING

Granted, Bahías de Huatulco rarely feels all that hurried, but if you really want to slow things down, its outlying beach towns beckon for a chilled-out day trip or overnight escape. For a lovely day of swimming, head 20km east of the airport and look for the **Barra de Cuatunlco** turnoff, then look for **Playa El Arroyito**, a seldom-visited cove edged with rocky outcrops. There's a good chance you'll have the sublime swimmable waters all to yourself. You can also usually enjoy crowd-free sands in nearby **Playa Salchi**, though the ocean is rougher there. Truth is, there's not much going on in the area and yet you'll find no shortage of accommodations designed for the sole purpose of rest and relaxation.

On your way back to Huatulco, stop for a meal at the *palapa* seafood restaurants in the fishing village of **Bahía San Agustín**, an attractive white-sand, crescent-shaped bay with calm, turquoise waters. For surfing outings, make your way about 10km east of La Crucecita along Blvd Benito Juárez, then take the turnoff to **Playa La Bocana**, which has a fine right-hand break, several seafood *comedores* (eateries) and the **Bocana Surf School**, a small business offering surf lessons and board rentals. Experienced surfers, however, prefer the long, double overhead break at **Barra de la Cruz**, a renowned surf site about 20km east of Playa La Bocana. Here, you can rent surf and body boards on the beach. Large swells roll in from March to October and the biggest sets usually come in June and July.



GETTING AROUND

Colectivos run to Barra de la Cruz from the national park just east of La Crucecita's ADO bus station. Barra de Cuatunlco, Playa Salchi and Bahía San Agustín are best reached by

car or taxi. Once settled in, you can walk to most places or hail an affordable mototaxi. Playa La Bocana is a 15-minute taxi ride from downtown.

ISTHMUS OF TEHUANTEPEC

Mexico City

Isthmus of Tehuantepec

The sultry Isthmus of Tehuantepec, known as the Istmo, is undoubtedly one of Oaxaca's most under-the-radar destinations. Travelers visit for a taste of the region's uniquely savory cuisine, the Zapotec culture and the wild dune-backed beaches. Stretching about 200km wide from the shores of Veracruz to the Gulf of Tehuantepec, the Istmo forms Mexico's narrowest corridor between the Atlantic and Pacific, making it a key transport route since colonial times. The Istmo boasts a storied history of political resistance, most famously in 1496 when the Zapotecs defeated invading Aztecs at Guiengola, a pre-Hispanic stronghold. And judging by the frequent protester roadblocks nowadays, the resistance movement is alive and well. In Tehuantepec monthly neighborhood patron saint fiestas are celebrated with fervor, while along the coast Playa Chipehua's and Playa Azul's windswept dunes evoke visions of landscapes that time forgot.

TOP TIP

Tehuantepec's main bus station, on the north end of town, is a 1.3km walk to the city center. To reach Juchitán, catch an eastbound bus along the highway just outside the terminal. Do not hail mototaxis on the street in Juchitán, especially after dark. Beach towns are best reached by car and have fairly basic accommodations.



Dancer, Isthmus of Tehuantepec



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN THE ISTHMUS

Na' Vicenta

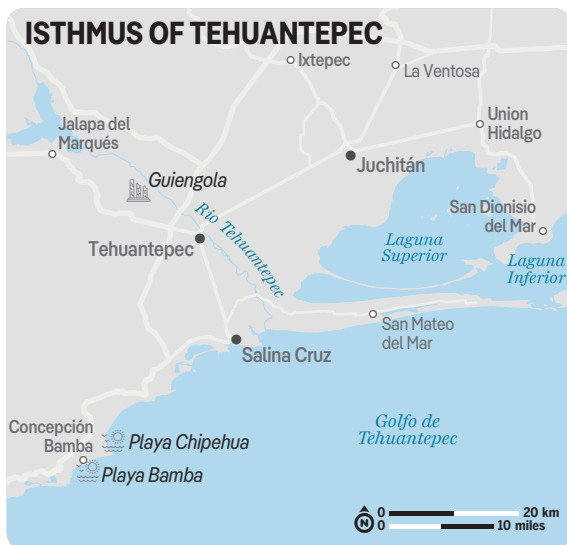
In fishing village Santa María Xadani, baked fish is prepared in wood-burning clay ovens at this atmospheric seafood joint. \$\$

Lidxi Guendaro

For a real *istmeña* treat, try the *mixto* dish featuring chicken smothered in grilled onions and accompanied with three *garnachas* (fried tortillas topped with shredded beef). \$\$

Jesús Carranza Market

Ask anyone where to eat in Tehuantepec and locals invariably point to this downtown market, where stalls whipping up homestyle fare spill onto the streets. \$



Surfing & Dune-backed Beaches

EXPLORE A SELDOM-VISITED COASTAL REGION

If the inland cities start to feel unbearably hot, head for the Isthmus' wild coastal region to cool off on crowd-free white sands. Granted, this mostly undeveloped stretch of coast has little in the way of tourism infrastructure but it makes up for that with its stunning dune-backed beaches and sweet surf spots. **Playa Bamba** and nearby **Playa Chipehua** are known for their sweeping sandy beaches, big swells and colossal sand dunes. Playa Bamba, aka La Bamba or Concepción Bamba, sits on a beach with two point breaks in the middle. Peak surfing season is from March to October. Here, you'll also see a protected enclosure on the beach where olive ridley and green sea turtle eggs are collected and released between October and March. In Chipehua, even if you don't surf, the monster sand formations on the south end of the beach are a sight to behold, especially during the rainy season (May to October) when natural freshwater pools form, dotting the sandy landscape with sparkling swimming holes. Sandboarding is possible here, but you'll need to bring your own equipment.

For traditional *istmeña* cuisine, try the *pescado al horno* (oven-baked fish) at **Hotel Las Palmas**, one of a couple dozen *palapa* seafood restaurants in town, some of which dou-



WHERE TO STAY IN THE ISTHMUS

Hotel Calli

The verdant garden, large pool and immaculate rooms make this tranquil Tehuantepec old-timer a good deal. \$\$

Hotel Central

No-frills downtown hotel that puts Juchitán's colorful open-air food market right at your doorstep. \$

Punta Conejo Resort

Right on the beach, this midrange surf resort feels relatively upscale compared to the competition. \$\$

ble as bare-bones budget hotels. Up the coast you'll find more immense dunes at low-key **Playa Azul**, while further east, next to **Punta Conejo Resort** (a popular surfers' haunt), you can climb up a cactus-dotted lookout for far-reaching views of the coast and nearby lagoons.

A Taste of Juchitán

DISCOVERING UNIQUE REGIONAL CUISINE

Most folks cruise right past the Isthmus region while making their way to Chiapas or Bahías de Huatulco, but **Juchitán's** unique regional eats and its urban Zapotec lifestyle certainly make for an interesting stop. In and around **Parque Benito Juárez** and the open-air **5 de Septiembre** market, you'll find women dressed in traditional Zapotec garments selling regional treats such as *bupú* (a foamy pre-Hispanic cacao drink), *garnachas istmeñas* and *molotes* (filled, corn-based pastry). Meanwhile, at nearby **Playa Vicente**, waterfront seafood restaurants prepare fresh fish in old clay ovens.

It's worth mentioning that the US State Department urges visitors to exercise increased caution when visiting Juchitán due to crime. Avoid using mototaxis and do not roam around unfamiliar neighborhoods at night.

Reveling in Tehuantepec

NEIGHBORHOOD FIESTAS AND MARKET EATS

Even if you're stopping for just a short while in steamy Tehuantepec, plan on visiting its main market to delight in home-style *istmeña* cooking or browse for traditional *huipiles* and other regional handmade crafts. Run mostly by female vendors, the **Jesús Carranza Market** is a fascinating microcosm of Tehuantepec's predominantly matriarchal society. The friendly yet bustling city is home to 15 barrios and each neighborhood has its own colonial church and patron saint fiesta, meaning there's always some festive brass band music going on somewhere, especially in July and August.

If you're up for a trek, the nearby Zapotec ruins of **Guiengola**, where King Cosijoeza famously repelled an Aztec invasion in 1496, lack the wow-inducing impact of other Zapotec sites, but they're a good excuse to get out into the hilly countryside.

MARVELOUS MUXE CULTURE

Juchitán is well known for its *muxe* culture – a Zapotec third-gender system recognizing openly gay and frequently cross-dressing people who are assigned male at birth. As you wander around the city center, you might see *muxes* dressed in *huipiles*. In November, Juchitán hosts a festive *vela* (vigil) that celebrates all things *muxe* with parades, dancing and an annual 'crowning-of-the-queen' ceremony. Given Juchitán's famed tolerance toward *muxes*, the third-gender culture has been chronicled in documentaries on HBO, Vice and in numerous feature films. The fact that indigenous men can cross-dress while assuming female roles, and get legit respect while doing so, speaks volumes of a society that puts a premium on progressive values.



GETTING AROUND

Second-class Istmeños buses run frequently between Tehuantepec and Juchitán, along Hwy 185. It's safe to take mototaxis around Tehuantepec but avoid them in Juchitán (use authorized cabs instead). Both cities have easily walkable city centers. To reach

the coastal cities, buses between Bahías de Huatulco and Salina Cruz will drop you at the highway turnoffs, where you can usually find a mototaxi or cab to zip you into town. A car is your best bet for touring the coastal region.

SANTIAGO APOALA

Mexico City ✪

Santiago Apoala

Apoala means 'river where the lords come from' and indeed the scenery is divine in the mountain village of Santiago Apoala, which, according to legend, is one of the first ancient Mixtec settlements. Nestled in a valley that sits 1970m above sea level and flanked by dramatic Yosemite-like rock formations, Santiago Apoala is a farming community of stunning natural beauty, and its 1000 Mixtec villagers know they live in a special place. Particularly impressive are a pair of mighty waterfalls that gush into natural pools with exceptional force, especially during the rainy season. In addition to the falls, hiking outings lead to a series of turquoise lagoons, ancient carvings and paintings, and challenging sites for rock climbing (if you bring along your own equipment). As well as the unforgettable outdoor activities, locals here go out of their way to make visitors feel welcome in their little slice of mountain paradise.

TOP TIP

Once you arrive in Santiago Apoala, the local community-tourism office will ask you to pay a nominal visitors fee that includes a complimentary guided tour. You are welcome to explore on your own, but local guides can point out where to spot ancient rock paintings, and they are excellent sources of information about the area's flora and fauna.





Cola de Caballo waterfall

Mixtec Marvel

SUSTAINABLE HIKING AND SWIMMING

Tucked away in a remote mountain village in the Mixtec region, **Santiago Apoala** presents an extraordinary opportunity to get off the beaten path while enjoying hiking, swimming and rock climbing. Upon arrival in town, check in at Ecoturismo Comunal Yutsa To'on, the community-tourism cooperative where you pay a visitors fee that includes an optional guided tour along one of three hiking routes. The most awesome trail, which you can easily do without a guide, leads to the **Cola de Serpiente** (Serpent's Tail) and **Cola de Caballo** (Horse's Tail) waterfalls, each more than 50m high and astonishingly beautiful. Further down the path you'll reach a series of turquoise swimming holes. Along the second route, guides point out hidden caves and ancient rock paintings as you make your way beside a river toward the towering **Peñas Gemelas**, twin peaks divided by a narrow gorge. The third route ascends to the **Cueva del Diablo** (Devil's Cave), a *danzante* (an ancient rock carving depicting a dancing figure) and **El Mirador**, a lookout point affording sweeping views of the verdant countryside.

If you decide to stick around for a night or two, the ecotourism center rents rustic *cabañas* (cabins) and camping sites at a tranquil riverside location with grazing sheep. The *cabañas* have bathrooms with hot water and comfortable beds, and right at your doorstep are a pair of open-air restaurants serving Oaxacan homestyle fare. In town you'll find a small grocery store, several restaurants and a tiny library housing a copy of a book containing ancient Mixtec codex.



TIPS FOR VISITING SANTIAGO APOALA

Most visitors approach Santiago Apoala from a road accessed in Asunción Nochixtlán, a town 83km northwest of Oaxaca City. If you're planning on camping or rock climbing, bring your own gear and stock up on supplies in Nochixtlán.

Remember to bring plenty of cash and keep in mind that wi-fi in this remote mountain village is spotty at best. A car is ideal for stopping at the seldom-visited mountain towns along the way, some of which provide spectacular vistas as you motor higher up into the Sierra Mixteca.

Tierraventura and **Coyote Aventuras** run day trips and two-day guided tours to Santiago Apoala.



GETTING AROUND

Buses to Nochixtlán depart frequently from Oaxaca's 1st-class bus station. From Nochixtlán, a taxi is the quickest way to reach Santiago Apoala if you don't have your own wheels. Alternatively, you can take an affordable *camioneta* that departs from

the corner of 2 de Abril and Altamirano on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday at around 11am, although hours and days are subject to change. In Santiago Apoala you can get anywhere you need to go on foot.



BUTANANTHRAVEL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Above: Mazatlán (p404); Opposite: Puerto Vallarta (p415)

CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

BEACHES, SURFING, COASTAL CITIES & MOUNTAIN TOWNS

Lively oceanfront metropolises, ancient petroglyphs, laidback surfing spots, wild stretches of undeveloped coast, and historic towns of the Sierra Madre await you on the Pacific coast.

Gigantic aquamarine breakers provide the backdrop to any visit to Mexico's central Pacific coast, the hiss of retreating waves revealing some of the country's most beautiful beaches. The coastline is dotted with resorts. The former

Hollywood haunt of Acapulco, whose star has somewhat faded, still titillates with its diving spectacles, while at characterful Zihuatanejo, villas peek out of greenery-laden hillsides overlooking a magnificent bay. In buzzy Puerto Vallarta – Mexico's gay beach capital – clubs pulsate till dawn and cobbled streets are lined with galleries brimming with psychedelic Huichol artwork. Old-school Mazatlán brings German *banda* music and tropical neoclassical architecture.

Separating these resort towns are stretches of some of Mexico's wildest, most undeveloped and untouched coastline, with small, isolated settlements interspersed with surfing spots frequented only by those in the know. Inland the cloud forest that

covers the Sierra Madre hides a handful of centuries-old *pueblos mágicos* (magical villages) that brew an equally ancient firewater, while petroglyph sites deep in the jungle and along the coast testify to the region's millennia-old appeal to humans.

Whether you're looking for a carefree beach holiday complete with giant sunsets; surfable waves all to yourself; seafood-heavy cuisine and creative cocktails; spotting humpback whales breaching on the horizon; or an ancient city that once rivalled the Aztecs' stronghold, you'll find it all here.



PIERO DAMIANI/GETTY IMAGES ©

THE MAIN AREAS

MAZATLÁN

Coastal city; great seafood. **p404**

PUERTO VALLARTA

Mexico's gay beach capital. **p415**

TRONCONES

Up-and-coming surfing destination. **p446**

ACAPULCO

Beach resort with cliff divers. **p457**

Mazatlán (p404)

Strung along a series of white-sand beaches, this appealing coastal city grooves to the oom-pah rhythms of *la banda* – a nod to its German heritage.

Puerto Vallarta (p415)

Buzzy, gay nightlife, stellar dining, numerous art galleries, superb stretches of white sand, whale-watching, and water-sports galore are among Vallarta's many boons.



Find Your Way

The central Pacific coast comprises some of Mexico's best beach destinations, plus mountain towns and a remote stretch of Michoacán coast. We've picked the places that best capture its history, outdoor pursuits, indigenous culture and natural beauty.

**BUS, COLECTIVO & COMBI**

Apart from the coast between Troncones and Manzanillo, served by infrequent daytime buses, all major towns and cities are well-connected to each other and to nearby villages with a network of air-conditioned buses, cheaper non-AC buses, and air-conditioned combis and *colectivos* (vans).

Zacatecas**CAR HIRE**

Some of the surfing breaks are seriously remote; a car allows surfers to explore off the beaten track. Otherwise, you can get by with public transportation and taxis. Major car-hire companies operate in Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Zihuatanejo/Ixtapa and Acapulco. One-way drop-off fees are hefty.

**WATER TAXI**

Wallet-friendly and efficient, water taxis connect Puerto Vallarta's Los Muertos pier and the beach destinations south of Vallarta, such as Colomitos, Las Ánimas, Quimixto, Majahuítas and Yelapa. If you're lucky, you may see whales and dolphins en route.

Troncones (p446)

World-class breaks, kayaking in coastal mangroves and a laidback, boho lifestyle await at this one-street, dusty surfer haven strung between two fishing villages.

Acapulco (p457)

Daredevil cliff divers, an ancient pilgrimage site, a splendid Diego Rivera mural and numerous beaches draw travelers to the former grand dame of Mexican beach resorts.



Plan Your Time

Home to some of Mexico's most rugged and least developed coastline, the central Pacific coast has it all: unspoiled beaches, world-class surfing, art-rich coastal cities, remains of pre-Hispanic civilizations and centuries-old mountain towns.



ERXSTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Pier, Playa de los Muertos (p423)



Seasonal Highlights

While there's no particularly bad time to visit the central Pacific coast, December to March tends to be busiest, with numerous festivals throughout. The rainy season is July to September.



JANUARY

An excellent time to catch migrating humpback whales in the waters around Puerto Vallarta; whale sharks and gray whales occasionally spotted.



FEBRUARY

Mazatlán hosts Mexico's most flamboyant Carnaval celebrations during the week leading up to Ash Wednesday, complete with epic fireworks displays.



MARCH

Puerto Vallarta's two-day *raicilla* festival features tastings and local producers of this resurgent firewater, as well as food and live music

A Long Weekend

- If you only have a few days, spend them in **Puerto Vallarta** (p415). Tour the art galleries, walk the *malecón* of the *centro histórico*, and climb up to the Mirador del Cerro de la Cruz viewpoint for epic city views.
- While away a few hours on the Zona Romántica's **Playa de los Muertos** (p423), check out the burgeoning dining scene in Versailles and paint the town pink in bars and clubs that bounce till the wee hours.
- Take a boat taxi to **Yelapa** (p428), south of **Vallarta** (p424), spotting whales en route, hike to and swim in a waterfall and wander the jungly trails of the botanical gardens.

A Week

● Head into the Sierra Madre for two or three days: wander the cobbled streets of **San Sebastián del Oeste** (p439), summit **La Bufa peak** (p440), dine at the exceptional **Jardín Nebulosa** (p440) and go in search of ancient petroglyphs in the vicinity of **Mascota** (p440).

● Back on the coast north of Vallarta, try your hand at surfing the breaks or paddleboarding in **Sayulita** (p430), indulge in superb dining and shop at fair-trade boutiques.

● Further north, do a jungle trek to the **Altavista petroglyphs** (p435) near Chacala, and go bird- and croc-spotting in **San Blas** (p437) before returning to Puerto Vallarta.

If You Have More Time

● You could spend a month exploring the central Pacific coast. Watch the cliff divers of **Acapulco** (p460), marvel at the ancient city of **Xihuacan** (p455), beach hop and shop for coffee in **Zihuatanejo** (p453), and 'hang five' at beach breaks around **Troncones** (p447) and neighboring **Saladita** (p451).

● Take a few days to drive the wild stretch of the **Michoacán coast** (p449), stopping at remote surfing spots and fishing villages, or else head north from San Blas, taking a boat to the Aztec homeland of **Mexcaltitán** (p413) and spending several days exploring **Mazatlán's old town** (p404), dining scene and beaches.



APRIL

Mexi Log Fest - a popular surfing festival - migrates from year to year, with participants 'hanging 10' in Saladita, Sayulita and more.



MAY

Puerto Vallarta's exuberant Pride celebrations draw thousands of people and involve live music, parades and much more.



NOVEMBER

On November 2 - Day of the Dead - locals head for the cemeteries, while Vallarta hosts a gourmet festival and Mascota celebrates *raicilla*.



DECEMBER

In early December Mexico celebrates the Virgin of Guadeloupe, the country's patron saint, with particularly feisty fiestas in Vallarta and Mazatlán.

MAZATLÁN

Mazatlán

Mexico City

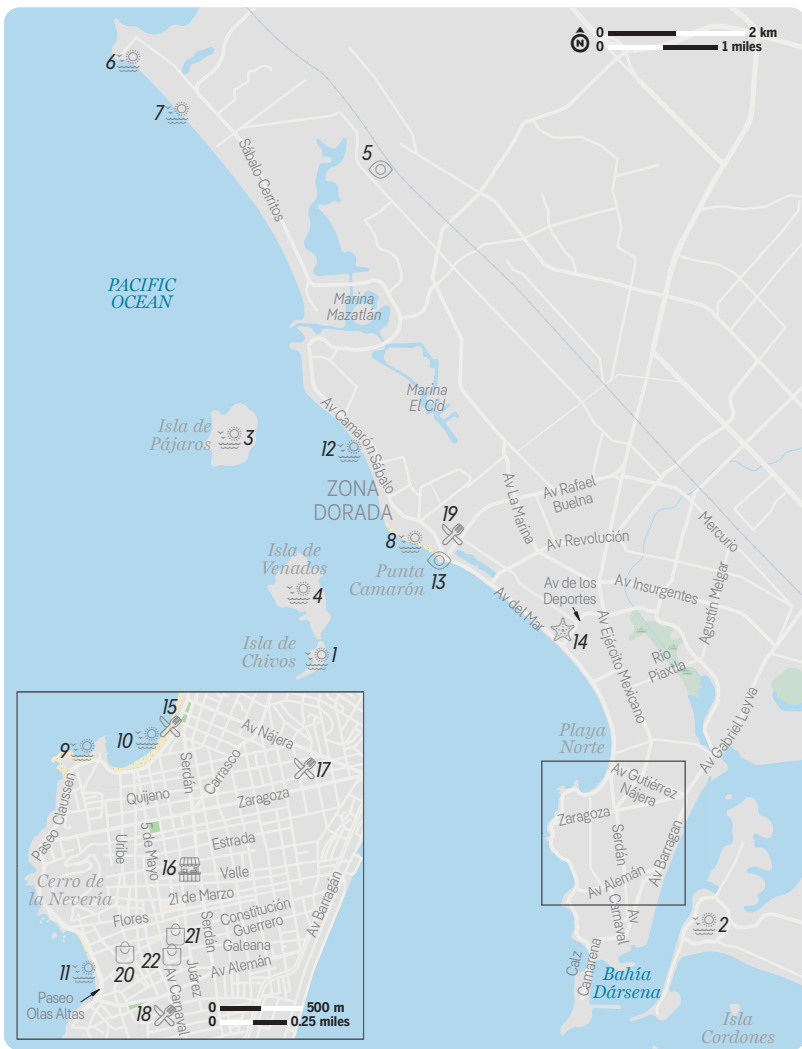
Thanks to 30km of sandy beaches, Mazatlán (which means 'Place of Deer' in the Náhuatl language) became one of Mexico's most alluring and inviting beach destinations in the mid-20th century, prior to which it had worn other hats: smuggler haven, thriving Pacific port. Though the city has gone through a slump since the 1980s, the cruise ships are now back and Mazatlán's characterful 'tropical neoclassical' *centro histórico* (historic center) has got its second wind, with creative restaurants sitting alongside sensitively updated 19th-century buildings and mural-adorned walls. The result is a coastal city with plenty of allure, its cosmopolitan heritage evident in its architecture, and German influence felt in the strains of local *banda* (big-band music) and in the cold, crisp taste of Pacifico beer. There's much to entice active travelers, too: from world-class deep-sea fishing and a plethora of water sports to horseback riding and zip-lining.

TOP TIP

To take the pulse of Mazatlán, go to the Zona Dorada (Golden Zone) for the beaches, then return to wander the streets of the old town and to linger on the *malecón* (beach promenade) for the sunsets and people-watching. Avoid visiting during the humid, sweltering, rainy summer months.



PHOTOMANZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Isla de Chivos
- 2 Isla de la Piedra
- 3 Isla de Pájaros
- 4 Isla de Venados
- 5 Mazatlán International Center
- 6 Playa Bruja
- 7 Playa Cerritos

- 8 Playa Las Gaviotas

- 9 Playa Los Pinitos
- 10 Playa Norte
- 11 Playa Olas Altas
- 12 Playa Sábalo
- 13 Punta Camarón

ACTIVITIES

- 14 El Acuario Mazatlán

EATING

- 15 El Muchacho Alegre
- 16 Mercado Pino Suárez
- (see 19) Mi Ranchito de Osuna
- 17 Tacos El Veneno
- 18 Taquería Playa Sur
- 19 Taquería San Pablo

SHOPPING

- 20 Casa Etnika
- 21 Gandarva Bazar
- 22 Nidart



JELLYFISH, SHARKS & FISHY MOSAICS

Located a block from the middle of Playa del Mar, halfway between the *centro histórico* and the Zona Dorada, **El Acuario Mazatlán** – one of Mexico's largest aquariums – has tanks with hundreds of species of freshwater, pelagic and reef fish (mostly from Mexico's waters). The eerie jellyfish tanks are particularly mesmerizing and the on-site museum houses a gray whale skeleton and fearsome-looking shark jaws. Avoid the animal shows, though.

Near the Marina Mazatlán golf course, the **Mazatlán International Center** is well worth a taxi ride for its perspective on sea life, its 25m-high mosaic mural – the world's largest – dubbed 'Sea of Cortes.' Covering an entire outer wall, it depicts a conquistador, a mermaid and all manner of Poseidon's subjects, from dolphins and whales to octopuses and rays.

Beach-Hopping in Mazatlán

MAZATLÁN'S BEST BEACHES

After the Great Depression killed off Mazatlán's manufacturing industry, the city reinvented itself as a fishing port and beach resort. Its strands of sand remain popular with vacationers from around the country and abroad to this day.

With over 20km of beaches, you're spoiled for choice. The following beaches are listed in geographical order, from south to north.

In Old Mazatlán, crescent-shaped **Playa Olas Altas** is where tourism first flourished from the 1920s onwards; buffeted by heavy surf, it's popular with bodyboarders but isn't safe for swimming. Just west of the tip of the promontory, the small, sheltered **Playa Los Pinitos** cove is popular with local families and the water is usually calm and swimming-friendly.

Backed by a promenade popular with joggers and cyclists, the golden sands of the vast **Playa Norte** begin just north of Old Mazatlán, beyond the tip of the promontory. The southern end is dominated by beached fishing boats (and you'll see fishers doing a brisk trade in their daily catch early in the mornings), and the restaurants dotted along its length – including **El Muchacho Alegre** (p407) – vie for your custom. The surf can be heavy, so Playa Norte is better for strolling than swimming. The beach arcs toward **Punta Camarón**, a rocky point dominated by the conspicuous, castle-like Fiesta Land nightclub complex.

Beyond Punta Camarón the most luxurious hotels face pretty **Playa Las Gaviotas** and **Playa Sábalo**, the latter extending north of the Zona Dorada. Sheltered by picturesque islands, the waters here are generally calm and ideal for swimming and water sports; parasailing and whizzing along on banana boats are popular here.

Further north, past Marina El Cid and the ever-evolving Marina Mazatlán, are **Playa Bruja** – a frequently serene beach that's backed by the megaresorts of Nuevo Mazatlán – and **Playa Cerritos**. Both have a smattering of seafood restaurants and decent surf. To reach these northern beaches, catch a 'Cerritos-Juárez' bus along Avenida Camarón Sábalo in the Zona Dorada.

Mazatlán's Island Escapes

BOAT TRIPS TO ISLANDS

Resembling breaching whales, the three photogenic islands jutting from the sea some 2km offshore from the Zona Dorada offer secluded beaches and clear waters ideal for snorkeling, plus great multitudes of seals and marine birds. The



WHERE TO STAY IN CENTRO

Casa de Leyendas

Elegant two-story hacienda featuring eight adults-only rooms, with Jacuzzi, tequila tasting room and terrace. \$\$\$

Las 7 Maravillas

Intimate B&B with six country-themed rooms, superb breakfast, Jacuzzi with a view and tours. \$\$\$

Villa Serena Centro

Nineteenth-century vine-clad former cigar factory, with high ceilings, full kitchen and courtyard pool. \$\$



Isla de la Piedra

islands are part of a wildlife refuge designated to help protect the local birds and marine fauna. On the left is **Isla de Chivos** (Goat Island); **Isla de Pájaros** (Bird Island) is on the right. The most-visited is the largest one, in the middle, the 1.8km-long **Isla de Venados** (Deer Island), where there are tide pools for snorkeling, a compact white-sand beach and kayak rental. Any boat operator can take you out here; day tours typically depart from Marina El Cid around 9:30am, returning at 4pm, with prices (around M\$1500) including lunch, activities and drinks.

Southeast of Old Mazatlán across the harbor and a popular half-day escape from the city for locals, **Isla de la Piedra** is not technically an island. Rather, it's a peninsula that features a beautiful, long, sandy beach bordered by coconut groves. Surfers come for the waves, and its simple **palapa** (thatched-roof) restaurants serving similar menus of catch-of-the-day and *aguachile* (raw shrimp with a punchy chilli salsa) draw Mexican families, particularly on Sunday, when the *palapas* pulse with music. Water taxis depart frequently from the Playa Sur *embarcadero* (dock) near Mazatlán's ferry terminal. 'Playa Sur' buses leave for the *embarcadero* from the corner of Serdán and Escobedo, two blocks southeast of Plaza Principal in Old Mazatlán.



BEST RESTAURANTS IN MAZATLÁN'S CENTRO

Nao Kitchen Bar

Innovative chef Andrea Lizarraga combines local ingredients with Far Eastern touches in *ceviche verde* and slow-cooked Korean-style ribs. \$\$

Cenaduria Chayito

Family-run Sinaloan restaurant: tacos with *machaca*, *chilorio* (stewed pork), *pozole* (hominy stew) and *menudo* (tripe stew). \$

Pedro y Lola

Stylish eatery on Plaza Machado serves outstanding small plates: shrimp and octopus dishes and slow-cooked pork tacos. Live jazz on weekends. \$\$

El Muchacho Alegre

Local institution overlooking Playa Norte, with live *banda* music and terrific seafood, including *aguachile*. \$\$



WHERE TO HAVE BREAKFAST IN CENTRO

Looney Bean

Terrific beachside coffee shop serving strong coffee, juices, smoothies and ample Mexican or American breakfasts. \$\$

La Olivia

Feast on oatmeal, eggs your way, berry waffles, French toast or *chilaquiles*, coupled with excellent coffee. \$\$

Totem

Superb Mexican breakfasts and specialty coffee in a rooftop garden; venue morphs into a hip nightspot. \$\$

CYCLING TOUR

Old Mazatlán

This cycling tour brings together the best of the varied attractions of historic Mazatlán, including its main plaza, top museums, a daredevil diving spot and several excellent viewpoints. Rent your bicycle from Baikas (baikas.com.mx), and take at least four hours to complete the loop, allowing around an hour for the hike to El Faro. Start early and take plenty of water, bearing in mind the heat and the steep coastal road.

1 Playa Olas Altas

Begin at the *malecón* of the crescent-shaped Playa Olas Altas, where tourism first took off in the 1920s. The waters are not safe for swimming but if you're a decent surfer, you can rent a board at Looney Bean (p407).

The Ride: Follow the ups and downs of the coastal road south for 2.5km, pausing at the Paseo Clausen and Observatorio Mazatlán viewpoints, to the foot of the Faro Mazatlán hill.

2 Faro Mazatlán

At the Mazatlán peninsula's southern end is a prominent rocky outcrop crowned with

an 1879 lighthouse, some 135m above sea level. It takes around 20 minutes up the zigzagging, paved footpath to reach the see-through plexiglass Miradór de Cristal at the top, from where you get tremendous views of the city and coastline.

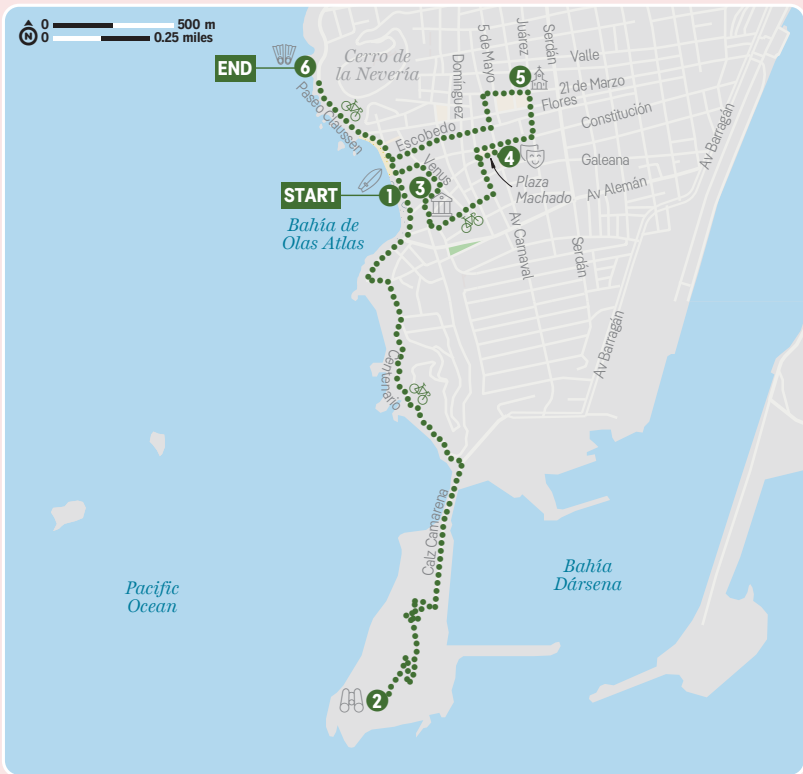
The Ride: Retrace your steps to Playa Olas Altas and take the right into Calle Sixto Osuna.

3 Museo Arqueológico de Mazatlán

This absorbing museum focuses on pre-Hispanic Sinaloan civilizations. Stand-out exhibits include Aztatlán pottery (900–1200 CE), a funereal urn, *malacates* (spin-



View from Faro Mazatlán



dles), an intricate upper torso adornment made of 1922 pieces of shell and coral, and a hunchback statue, *Jorobado de la Nautical*, believed to possess special powers. The mammoth skeleton harks back to the days when these beasts roamed Sinaloa.

The Ride: Continue east along Calle Sixto Osuna to the palm-tree-studded main Plaza Machado, surrounded by restaurants.

4 Teatro Ángela Peralta

Just off the plaza, and named after a 19th-century soprano (who died at the hotel next door), this 1366-seat theater was constructed between 1869 and 1874 and has been the heart of Mazatlán's cultural life for over a century. Its opulent three-level interior, restored to its former splendor, is worth your time, as are the temporary art exhibitions.

The Ride: Head north for two blocks up Avenida Carnaval from Plaza Machado, then take a right along Calle Flores to reach the Plaza República.

5 Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción

In front of you is this striking 19th-century Romanesque and neo-Gothic cathedral with yellow twin towers. The dramatic interior has gilt ceiling roses supporting chandeliers and blocks of stone in alternating colors.

The Ride: Take Calle Flores west to the *malecón*, then head north for 200m.

6 El Clavadista

Although not as famous nor as spectacular as Acapulco's cliff divers, local *clavadistas* cast their bodies from a couple of platforms at the eponymous viewpoint into the treacherous ocean swells for your enjoyment. Tip accordingly. They usually perform around 11am and in the late afternoon, once enough spectators have gathered.



STREET FOOD IN VALLARTA & ZIHUATANEJO

Love tacos? Who doesn't, right? Eat your way around the best of Vallarta's street eats (p419), or else get your fill of fresh tortillas piled high with edible morsels on the streets of Zihuatanejo (p453).

BEST BARS IN MAZATLÁN

Cervecería Tres Islas

Four core beers (IPA, American amber ale, blonde ale and stout) at Mazatlán's oldest microbrewery, plus five seasonal brews.

Metl Mezcalería

Rafa and Barbara are happy to introduce you to mezcal, served neat or in cocktail form.

Joe's Oyster Bar

Beach-bar-by-day morphs into a DJ-fueled disco after 11pm, when it's packed with college kids dancing on tables and each other.

Veintiocho

Zona Dorada restobar run by Seattle transplants. Knock back a Pacifico beer while grooving to local live bands.



Street food stall

Taquerías to Markets: Mazatlán's Best Street Food

TACOS, MARKETS AND HOME COOKING

At any time of day, some of the city's best bites are to be had at humble *taquerías* (taco stands), other street-food stalls and Mazatlán's bustling food markets. Explore on your own or join a small-group **Flavor Teller tour** with Dutch expat and longtime Mazatlán resident Maaïke, drawing on 15 years' worth of street-food exploration to bring you the best of the city's typical eats. 'Mercado & More' takes you on a walking tour of Old Mazatlán, while the 'Barrio Bites' and 'Night Eats' tours whisk you off further afield by *auriga* (pickup truck).

Come evening, **Taquería Playa Sur**, just south of the *centro histórico*, becomes fragrant with smoke from the grill and fills up with hungry customers. The three specialties are beef tacos, *chorreada* (thick tortilla fried in pork fat and topped with beef, cheese and onions) and *papa loca* (baked potato with melted cheese, beef and more).

At Old Mazatlán's central market – **Mercado Pino Suárez** (6am to 6pm Monday to Saturday, to 2pm Sunday) – you can



WHERE TO STAY IN THE ZONA DORADA

Wandering Monkey

Guesthouse Facility-packed hostel, walkable to the beach, with pool, kitchens, hammocks, fire pit, bike/surfboard rental. \$

Motel Marley

Comfortable seafront apartments, with well-equipped kitchens, an oceanfront lawn, a pool and beach access. \$\$

Inn at Mazatlán Resort & Spa

The pick of Mazatlán's family-friendly resorts, with numerous water sports, excellent spa, Jacuzzis and pools. \$\$\$

fill your boots with marlin tacos and *tostadas de camarón* (deep-fried shrimp tortillas) come lunchtime.

Avenida Rafael Buelna marks the southern boundary of the Zona Dorada, and is lined with wallet-friendly *taquerías*. One of the most popular is **Taquería San Pablo** (noon to 2am), specializing in tacos and *vampiros* (crunchy Sinaloan tacos with melted cheese), *asada* (grilled beef) and *pastor* (pork), plus shrimp tacos and quesadillas.

Also on Avenida Rafael Buelna is **Mi Ranchito de Osuna** (8am to 8pm), a little restaurant locally renowned for its friendly service and hearty Sinaloan dishes. Come here for a breakfast of eggs with marlin or cooked *nopales* (cactus paddles) with tomatoes and chilies, pile your *chilaquiles* high with *machaca* (dried meat) or chow down on slow-cooked grilled meats.

Leather Masks, Weavings & Ceramics

SHOPPING IN OLD MAZATLÁN

Old Mazatlán really shines when it comes to Mexican art and high-quality crafts from across the country.

Family-run **Casa Etnika** offers quality gifts made by Mexican artisans, from Huichol beadwork, psychedelic weavings and tiny, brightly painted papier-mâché skeletons to copper-wire and wool jewelry, bold contemporary art, colorful weavings and fair-trade coffee.

Around the corner, toward Plaza Machado, cross the creeper-choked courtyard gallery and jump from stone to stone across the little moat to check out colorful Mexican masks and dolls made from gourds at **Gandarva Bazar**. Other offerings include antique African masks, hand-made Mexican journals and some interesting reproduction Chinese (an early-1st-millennium culture in Nayarit) ceramics too.

A block south of Plaza Machado, the wonderful **Nidart** gallery specializes in handmade leather masks by local artists Rak Garcia and Loa Molina, plus sculptures and beautiful ceramic bowls and coffee mugs from its in-house studio. Also look out for acrylic paintings, 3D art cubes and local photography.

ZONA DORADA'S TOP RESTAURANTS

Pancho's

Monster margaritas and ice-cold beers with huge seafood platters and *aguachile* on Playa Las Gaviotas. \$\$

Los Arcos

Monster shrimp stuffed with smoked marlin or baked with chipotle, and sweet Teacapan oysters shine. \$\$\$

F.I.S.H.

Half a dozen ceviche types, sashimi and fish-and-chips at this trendy bistro. Don't miss the oyster shooters! \$\$

Rico's Café

Crepes, waffles, salads and burritos, plus 'strong as sin' coffee. Two other branches around town. \$



MORE CRAFT SHOPPING

If you're heading south down the coast, don't miss Vallarta's superb galleries (p421) for high-quality ceramics, art and textiles from different parts of Mexico, or peruse Zihuatanejo's excellent mask and textile shops (p453).



GETTING AROUND

Mazatlán is great for cycling: the *malecón* (beach promenade) extends from the *centro histórico* all the way to the Zona Dorada. Baikas (baikas.com.mx) offers city bikes and pricier hybrid hire.

Sábalo-Centro buses connect downtown's Mercado Centro with the Zona Dorada, while Playa Sur buses run from Mercado Centro to the ferry terminal and lighthouse.

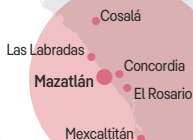
Mazatlán's unique *pulmonía* taxis (modified, open-air VW Beetles) run along the *malecón* between the *centro histórico* and Zona Dorada. Trips within a zone cost around M\$50, whereas between the two zones it's M\$80 to M\$100, depending on your bargaining skills. There are also *aurigas* (pickup trucks with shaded seating in the back, costing around M\$50 for a trip between zones), plus regular taxis. Taxis to the airport cost around M\$400 to M\$500.



Beyond Mazatlán

Millennia-old petroglyphs; pretty, centuries-old towns with cobbled streets; and the Aztecs' ancestral homeland await within day-tripping distance of Mazatlán.

Volcanic rocks at Las Labradas along the coast, some 60km north of Mazatlán, display hundreds of ancient petroglyphs, believed to be tied to the summer solstice. Another ancient site – albeit still lived in – is a shield-shaped island in the mangrove wetlands, found three hours south of Mazatlán. Some historians believe that what's now a soporific shrimping village was once Aztlán, the Aztecs' ancestral homeland, from whence Mexico's fearsome warriors migrated to legendary Tenochtitlán (Mexico City). Finally, the foothills of the jungle-clad Sierra Madre range that shadows the coast are home to a smattering of appealing towns, their centuries-old churches, adobe houses drowning in bougainvillea and ceramic industries providing additional draws.



TOP TIP

Check safety conditions before venturing into the Sierra Madre, as the towns occasionally see some trouble from local cartels.



Mexcaltitán

Ancient Etchings by the Sea

SINALOA'S OLDEST PETROGLYPHS

Featuring some of Mexico's oldest pre-Hispanic art and around 640 petroglyphs etched into volcanic rocks along the shoreline some 60km north of Mazatlán, **Las Labradas** was in continuous use for over 3000 years as a ceremonial center for indigenous peoples inhabiting coastal Sinaloa before being abandoned in 1200 CE. Many carvings are tied to the summer solstice, as evidenced by the solar and geometric engravings, alongside depictions of human figures and marine creatures (spot the stingrays!). Besides its importance as Sinaloa's oldest archeological site, with some petroglyphs believed to be 4500 years old, Las Labradas is also a great day out; you're likely to have the wave-battered, dramatic beach mostly to yourself.

A half-day tour or a 45-minute drive from Mazatlán along Hwy 15 and Hwy 15D gets you to the dirt road just past Km 51; it's a 5.5km drive to the parking lot and new museum (9am to 5pm daily; M\$50) that provides some much-needed context.

Mexcaltitán: Origin Place of the Aztecs

MYTHICAL MANGROVE ISLAND

A place that time forgot, this shield-shaped island village sits among mangroves off the coast three hours' drive south of Mazatlán. As the boat makes its way through the green maze along silt-darkened waterways, you'll spot egrets fishing in the shallows, and the distant silhouettes of small shrimping boats making their way home.

These days, shrimp are Mexcaltitán's *raison d'être*, and as you wander the dirt streets of this soporific village, you'll see them drying in great heaps on the ground, their pungent scent accompanying your perambulations. Yet thousands of years ago, the 'Venice of Nayarit', whose streets turn into canals during the rainy season, is believed to have been none other than Aztlán, the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs. Legend has it that, following instructions from their gods to seek out a new homeland, they left around 1091 CE to begin their generations-long migration to Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City). Proponents point to the striking similarities between the cruciform design of Mexcaltitán's streets and early Tenochtitlán's urban layout. A pre-Hispanic bas-relief in stone found in the area is also provided as evidence – it depicts a heron clutching a snake, an allusion to the sign the Aztecs hoped to find in the promised land.



MAZATLÁN'S FIESTAS

Mazatlán has Mexico's most flamboyant Carnaval celebrations, complete with epic fireworks displays. For the week leading up to Ash Wednesday, the town goes on a nonstop partying spree.

The city also celebrates El Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (December 12, dedicated to Mexico's patron saint) with considerable gusto at the cathedral, with processions including colorfully attired children.

For a fiesta that doesn't have a religious angle, check out the Festival Cultural Mazatlán, with assorted theatrical and musical performances taking place in and around the Teatro Ángela Peralta between October and December.



WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN MEXCALTITÁN

Hotel La Gran Tenochtitlán

The nicer of the village's two basic hotels, with austere en suite rooms and air-con. \$

La Alberca

Combine lagoon views with shrimp *empanadas*, ceviche and shrimp *albóndigas* (meatballs) in a moreish shrimp broth. \$

La Camichina

Outstanding *pescado zarandeado* (fish grilled over mangrove wood) and shrimp in shrimp broth stand out. \$



GETTING OUT TO MEXCALTITÁN

Some Mazatlán–Tepic buses stop at Santiago Ixcuintla, 7km west of Hwy 15 and 52km northwest of Tepic. From Santiago, take a *colectivo* (45 minutes, four daily) or taxi (M\$200) to the La Batanga wharf 32km away, from where *lanchas* (motorboats) depart for Mexcaltitán. The boat journey takes 15 minutes and costs M\$150 for up to five people; M\$300 will buy you a tour of the lagoon.

If you're coming from the south with your own wheels, it's a beautiful drive from San Blas to La Batanga, taking you through sugarcane fields, orchards, coconut palm plantations and green valleys. Ask about road conditions, particularly during the July to October rainy season, as the road through the wetlands to La Batanga is prone to flooding during heavy rains.



MEDIONAJES/PHOTOS.COM/GETTY IMAGES ©

Parroquia de San Sebastián, Concordia

Learn about the pre-Hispanic civilizations that once inhabited the region at the small **museum** (no set hours) on the plaza, and peruse the modest collection of ceramics and petroglyphs, plus the reproduction of a fascinating long scroll (the Códice Boturini) telling the story of the Aztecs' travels.

Sierra Madre's Colonial Gems

APPEALING HISTORIC TOWNS

Several small, picturesque towns with striking baroque architecture in the Sierra Madre foothills make pleasant day trips from Mazatlán.

Concordia, founded in 1565, has an 18th-century church with a baroque facade and elaborately decorated columns and is known for manufacturing high-quality pottery.

Some 76km southeast of Mazatlán on Hwy 15, **El Rosario** is a mining town. Founded in 1655, its most famous feature is the towering gold-leaf altar in its church, the Nuestra Señora del Rosario. You can also visit the home of beloved singer Lola Beltrán, whose long recording career made *ranchera* (Mexico's urban 'country music') popular in the mid-20th century.

A particularly appealing mining village in the mountains north of Mazatlán, **Cosalá** dates from 1550. Its draws include an 18th-century church, a mining museum on the plaza and the lovely hacienda-style Hotel Quinta Minera.



GETTING AROUND

Daily buses to the villages of Cosalá, Concordia and El Rosario depart from a small station behind Mazatlán's main bus terminal.

For Las Labradas you need a car, or else join a guided tour from Mazatlán.
For Mexcaltitán, see sidebar above.

PUERTO VALLARTA

Puerto Vallarta

Mexico City

THE GUIDE

CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

Wandering street musicians ply their trade along the *malecón*, vacationers swim in the warm ocean off the white-sand beaches or hurtle along the water on banana boats, or else sit in flowering courtyards of myriad restaurants that dot the cobbled streets of Puerto Vallarta's heart. Come sundown, the bars of the Zona Romántica pulsate with a relentless beat, as revelers hit the dance floors and gentlemen's clubs of the gay capital of Mexico.

Puerto Vallarta has certainly changed since the formerly quiet fishing village was discovered by Hollywood in the 1960s. Today, this friendly, sprawling city that stretches along the sparkling blue Bahía de Banderas against the backdrop of the jungle-clad Sierra Madre is one of Mexico's most popular coastal destinations. And no wonder, when you enjoy art galleries, exciting dining, water sports or a lazing spell on the beach, returning to your digs sun-drunk and salty-skinned.

TOP TIP

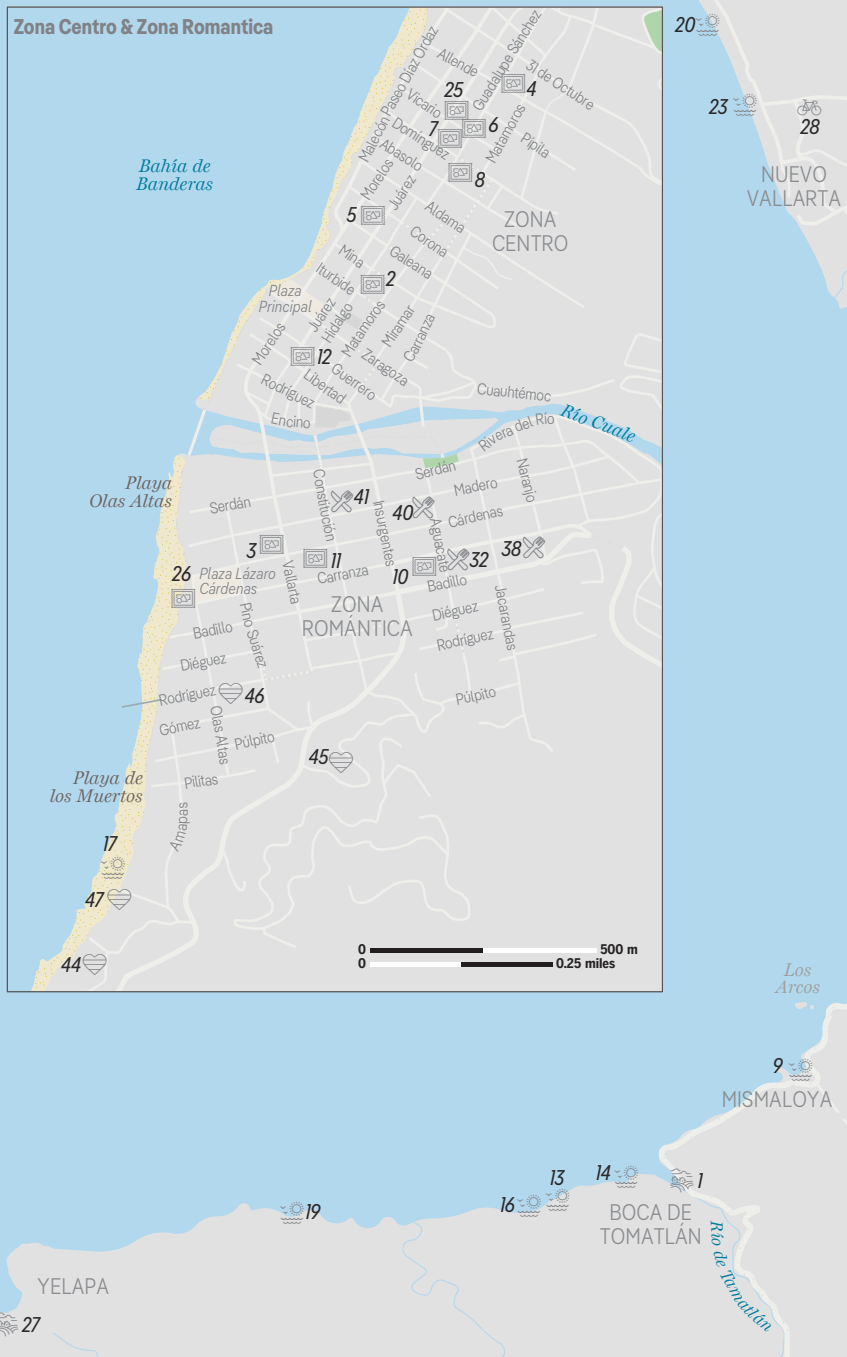
The best time of year for whale-watching is from December to March.

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Playa de Los Muertos (p423)

Zona Centro & Zona Romantica



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CENTRO WALKING TOUR

This scenic walking tour of Centro (Old Town) starts on tree-shaded Isla Cuale, in the river separating Centro from the Zona Romántica. At the **1 Museo del Cuale** peruse a well-presented collection of pre-Hispanic ceramics by the Chupícuaro culture (400 BCE–200 CE) and the Aztatlán people (900–1200 CE), plus shaft tombs typical of the region.

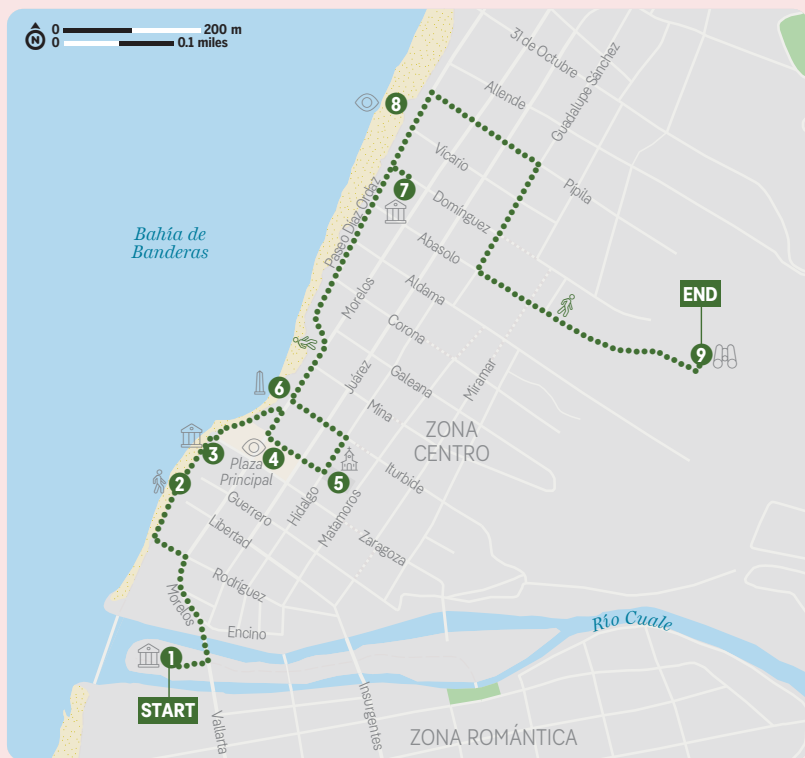
Cross the bridge and take Calle Rodríguez to the **2 malecón**, Vallarta's beautiful sea-front promenade with local murals and sculpture. Three blocks north, the interactive **3 Museo Naval** delves into Mexico's maritime history, from the importance of waterways to the Maya and the Siege of Tenochtitlán to the country's trade with the Philippines under the Spanish and ample model boats.

Duck inland to the **4 Plaza Principal** – the heart of Centro – where live bands play in the gazebo in the evenings. One block east

is the **5 Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe**, the town's central cathedral, whose hand-rung bells resound through Centro's streets, and which is the focal point of the Guadalupe processions in December.

Rejoin the malecón and walk past the **6 Caballito del Mar**, a 1960 statue of a boy on a seahorse, which has been recovered twice after being swept to sea by storms. Six blocks north, the engaging **7 Choco Museum** introduces chocolate devotees to the bean-to-bar journey, while another block north, the **8 Voladores de Papantla** put on their daring flying shows, whereby four costumed flyers climb the 30m pole and 'fly' down, attached by one foot to a rope – an ancient spectacle that originated in Papantla, Veracruz.

Finish up by scaling the steep Calle Abasolo to the **9 Mirador del Cerro de la Cruz** for 360-degree views of the city.





Mirador del Cerro de la Cruz

Vallarta's Street Eats

PUERTO VALLARTA'S BEST TACO STALLS

Tacos are Vallarta's essential staple, as they are in other Mexican cities. Some fillings are eaten only in the mornings, some are fuel for night owls, and some fill the gap in between. Discover the best taco stands in the neighborhood by seeing which stands are doing the brisker trade, or join one of the **Vallarta Food Tours** (vallartafoodtours.com), ranging from the original, taco-heavy 'Downtown' walking tour to more active 'Bikes and Bites' and the specialized tequila and mezcal tastings. Some of the best taco stands across the city include the following:

Tacos de Birria Chanfay (Carranza 373; 10am to 4pm) This humble taco stand has been serving just four things since 1972: tacos, either *blanditos* (soft) or *dorados* (crunchy), and filled with *birria* (goat), spicy shredded beef, pork or – for connoisseurs – *chafayna* (a mix of heart, liver and lungs). Spoon one of three punchy salsas over the top and knock back a cup of rich, spicy broth.

Carnitas Lalo (corner Carranza and Aguacate; 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm Saturday) Turn up early at this taco stand because it closes as soon as they sell out, and



TEQUILA: IT MAKES YOU HAPPY

If you don't have time to visit the town of Tequila, birthplace of everyone's favorite Mexican firewater, there are several tequila distilleries in Vallarta that'll slake your thirst, plus experts to initiate tequila virgins.

Centrally located on Isla Cuale, **Oscar's Tequila Distillery** is primarily a restaurant, but the small distillery on-site does tours and tastings.

A 20-minute drive north of the airport, off Hwy 200, **Tequila Mama Lucia** (tel 329-296 5024) is a family-run distillery with tours by appointment.

Vallarta Tequila Tastings (vallarta-tequilatastings.com) arranges a variety of libations and teaches you to discern craft labels from mass-produced varieties.

Vallarta Food Tours (vallarta-foodtours.com) runs a 'Mex-ology' tour that samples tequila, mezcal and *raicilla* (a tequila-like distillation of wild agave).



WHERE TO STAY IF GAY IN VALLARTA

Casa Cupola

Sophisticated, individually styled rooms for gays and lesbians, with private Jacuzzis, three pools, a gym and a bar. \$\$\$

Almar Resort

Puerto Vallarta's only luxury LGBTIQ+ resort; perks include spa, rooftop bar, bluff-top location and infinity pool. \$\$\$

Piñata PV Gay Hotel

Intimate, men-only hotel with eight pop-art style rooms; enter via a smoothie shop. \$\$



VALLARTA ON TWO WHEELS

While dedicated cycle lanes are still largely a dream in Vallarta, one such lane exists on the pedestrianized *malecón*, stretching for 16 blocks along the Bahía de Banderas. Six blocks north of the *malecón* you can hire bicycles from **Xiutla Riders** (xriderspv.com), which also offers engaging two-hour cycling tours that focus on historical landmarks and include lunch.

If you're after something more adventurous and strenuous, and wish to trade cityscapes for the tropical countryside, **Ecoride** (ecoridemex.com) offers mountain biking and e-biking tours in the foothills of the Sierra Madre, ranging from 2½ to 5½ hours and catering both to novices and expert riders. Visit a waterfall, paddle through tranquil villages or tackle one of the most exhilarating technical downhill in Jalisco.



ELENA BERDO/SHUTTERSTOCK

Puerto Vallarta

they sell out of *mejilla de cerdo* (pork cheek) first of all. If you miss out, just ask them to pile your tacos with their flavorful mix of shredded pork meat and crispy pork skin, and pile on the *pico de gallo* salsa.

Taquería El Moreno (Madero 343; 9am to 12.30am Friday to Wednesday) Maybe you've never tasted tripe before, or maybe you didn't like it until you've rocked up at this *taquería* and they presented you with a *taco de tripa*, the meat chewy and smoky and full of flavor, pillowed against beans and livened up with a kick of salsa. Quesadillas filled with *birria* and *carne asada* also delight.

Marisma Fish Taco (Naranjo 320; 10am to 6pm) Delicious tacos with shrimp, smoked marlin or fried fish are served at this super-popular streetside *taquería*. Pull up a stool and watch as the cooks press fresh tortillas and fry up tasty treats from a simple, deeply satisfying menu, coupled with an assortment of fresh salsas.

El Carboncito (Honduras 127; 7pm to 3.30am Tuesday to Sunday) It's nighttime and the chefs are doing a brisk business at this unmarked taco stand, deftly slicing chunks of red-tinted, spit-grilled, marinated pork and dishing out what locals say are the best *tacos al pastor* in town. Their secret? Mesquite charcoal and special salsa, its recipe jealously guarded.

Tacos de Cabeza El Chulo (Aguacate 263; 5.30pm to 1am Thursday to Tuesday) In the evenings a line gathers as the chefs deftly chop up all the goodness salvaged from steamed cow's heads (beef cheek, eyeballs, lips, brains) and serve it with aplomb with a spicy tomatillo salsa.



WHERE TO EAT IN THE ZONA HOTELERA AND MARINA VALLARTA

El Coleguita Mariscos

Wash down fish tacos, fish mignon, ceviche and lobster with cocktails at Marina's seafood temple. \$\$\$

La Leche

Seasonal ingredients shape the sophisticated mains and seven-course *degustación* menu within an Insta-worthy interior. \$\$\$

Sonora Grill Prime

Excellent cuts of meat (porterhouse, rib eye) are expertly grilled here, satisfying discerning carnivores. \$\$\$

Vallarta's Art Walk

PUERTO VALLARTA'S BEST ART GALLERIES

You can't spell 'Vallarta' without 'art.' Appropriate, really, since the city is very rich in it, especially Mexican folk, if you know where to look. From late October to mid-May, 16 participating downtown Vallarta galleries take part in the Thursday evening ArtWalk (puertovallartaartwalk.com), when they stay open later than usual and offer beverages, with their owners happy to chat. Some are part of the Vallarta Art District, with a particularly dense cluster of galleries along Calles Vicario, Sánchez, Juárez and Domínguez in the *centro histórico*, while others are independent. Pick up Vallarta ArtWalk and Art District brochures at tourist info kiosks around town to assist you in your artistic quest.

If you only visit one art store in Vallarta, make it **Galería Colectika** (peyotepeople.com). The Huichol beadwork pieces here are mostly one of a kind, and there are some fine Huichol yarn art pieces, metalwork from Chiapas, and ceramics from Oaxaca and Chihuahua. Owner Kevin has a 20-plus year relationship with many of the artists, and pieces come with authenticity stamps. Huichol beadwork classes are offered on request.

Another good outlet for high-quality Huichol beadwork pieces is the nearby **Tierra Huichol Olas Altas**, though it tends to lean more towards commercial rather than one-of-a-kind. Spot some intricate large pieces – toucans, parrots, jaguars, as well as skeletal figures from Michoacán. There's another branch in Zona Romántica.

Near Galería Colectika, **Galería Omar Alonso** – Vallarta's first contemporary art gallery – has branched out into photography and abstract art.

Around the corner, the rather niche **Posters International** is the world's biggest private collection of vintage Polish posters, spanning film, theatre, music, politics and more. The proprietor is fascinating to talk to; look out for the rare photo of Elizabeth Taylor.

Across the street, **Galerie des Artistes** is home to an eclectic collection of art, running the gamut from bronze sculpture by Mexican masters to abstract pieces by emerging artists. Nearby, **Mannmade Mexico** champions modern design and showcases works by artists who approach traditional folk art with modern techniques.

If you don't have time to travel all the way to the village of Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, don't miss a visit to **Galería de Ollas**, which showcases exquisite, delicate, one-of-a-kind ceramic vases produced by more than 300 artisans. Each piece is decorated with a remarkable design, the colors obtained from natural dyes.



WHALE-WATCHING IN VALLARTA

Imagine...you're gazing at the ocean from the boat, trying to discern whether that ripple might be a hint of giant fin. Then suddenly, a huge dark shape vaults out of the waves in a whirlwind of spray, twisting in the air and giving you a terrific glimpse of its torso and fins before crashing back down with an almighty splash. Between December and March, Vallarta is squarely on the annual migration route of humpback whales, who come to the Bahía de Banderas to breed. **OceanFriendly Tours** (oceanfriendly.com) is the best of the operators, offering three- to five-hour tours, with bilingual marine scientists leading each excursion and an eco-friendly ethic. Occasionally you'll get lucky and spot whales from water taxis bound for southern beaches.



WHERE TO EAT ON VALLARTA'S BEACHES

Los Conos (Playa Los Ánimas)

Dig your toes in the sand and feast on oysters, lobster and snapper grilled whole. \$\$

Los Pescadores (Playa Mismaloya) Camarones

zarandeado (shrimp in punchy red salsa) and other seafood specials shine at this laidback *palapa*. \$

Tacos Los Abuelos (Yelapa)

Grilled octopus tacos stand out at this seafront spot and all mains come with a Colosseum-sized salad. \$



VALLARTA'S WATER EXPERIENCES

Stand-up paddleboarding aside, which you can practice off various beaches with **Vallarta SUP & Adventure** (vallartasup.com), Puerto Vallarta is one of Mexico's best destinations for scuba diving, with abundant wrecks, caves, reefs and marine life – from clownfish to dolphins, whales and sea turtles – and excellent visibility of up to 30m, best in summer. Highly professional **Vallarta Undersea** (vallartaundersea.com.mx) offers certification courses, plus diving excursions in Los Arcos National Marine Park and off Islas Marietas, among other dive sites. Los Arcos, plus beaches such as Majahuítas and Quimixto are terrific snorkeling destinations. Reach them under your own steam or with the likes of **Vallarta Adventures** ([Vallarta-adventures.com](http://vallarta-adventures.com)).



FRANCISCO J RAMOS GALLEGO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Jardín Botánico de Vallarta

On display at the fantastic **Caballito de Mar** are one-of-a-kind items acquired by owners Savannah and her mother Gloria on their annual summer road trips around Mexico. Works are sourced directly from individual artists in nine Mexican states, including Oaxaca, Michoacán and Chihuahua, in order to promote their work and allow them to keep practicing traditional crafts. Come here for hand-woven table runners and other textiles, hand-painted folk art masks, exceptionally fine black clay ceramics from Oaxaca, silver jewelry and lithographs. Ask to see the mulberry bark paintings.

Under the same ownership as Galería Colectika, **Peyote People** (peyotepeople.com) supports indigenous artisan communities and sells Huichol beadwork and yarn art of excellent quality, as well as wood carvings from the state of Oaxaca.

In the Zona Romántica, **Olinalá** has been selling authentic Mexican dance masks, folk art and rural antiques to genuine collectors since 1978.

For delicate, brightly painted wooden figures of animals and mythical beasts from Oaxaca, fine ceramics from Chihuahua, skeletal figurines, hand-woven table runners and other textiles, Zona Romántica's **Galería Alpacora** is hard to beat.

If functional beauty and whimsy float your boat, step into **Mundo de Azulejos**, a local institution that has been making brightly colored Talavera tiles and ceramics for decades. Here you'll find anything from tiled sinks to whimsical tiles to hang around the house. On the walls you'll find photos of celebrities who've patronized the store, and even letters of thanks from the offices of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Michelle Bachelet and other heads of state. Go upstairs to see artisans hand-paint the wares.



WHERE TO HAVE BREAKFAST IN VALLARTA

A Page in the Sun

Bookstore-cum-cafe and expat hangout. Coffee, smoothies, all-day breakfasts of bagels, *huevos rancheros* and more. \$\$

Puerto Café

Classic rock and a giant world map welcome you to Vallarta's premier caffeine lab. \$

Mi Café

Sepia photos of Vallarta, excellent coffee and ample servings of pancakes, waffles, egg dishes and *chilaquiles*. \$\$

The Jungle Trails of the Jardín Botánico de Vallarta

VALLARTA'S BOTANIC GARDENS

Orchids, bromeliads, agaves and wild palms line the paths of Vallarta's jungly **botanical gardens** (vbgardens.org), located 30km south of the city. Give yourself at least half a day and bring decent walking shoes and bug repellent to explore the eight hiking trails of this hilly 26-hectare property, brimming over with native flora.

Get your bearings at the terrific, centrally located Hacienda de Oro restaurant, where you can watch and feed hummingbirds off the 2nd-floor balcony, and the nearby Orchid Conservatory, then take the mildly strenuous Jaguar trail, followed by steep steps that make up part of the Chachalaca trail down to the Río Los Horcones to swim in the deep emerald-colored pool among the boulders. Rejoin the Jaguar trail and rock-hop along the river until the Río trail deposits you near the gazebo. Nearby a series of short, occasionally steep trails and bridges help reveal the gardens' other surprises: a vanilla plantation, a strangler fig with a tree in its deadly grip, a cactus house and nesting boxes for macaws (the gardens are very active in conservation efforts). Before you know it, it'll be sunset.

Take the 'El Tuito' bus (45 minutes) from the corner of Caranza and Aguacate in Puerto Vallarta; drive south along Route 200; or hop in a taxi (about M\$400).

Paint the Zona Romántica Pink

VALLARTA'S BEST GAY EXPERIENCES

Come on out – the rainbow flag flies proudly over Puerto Vallarta. Many visitors descend on the Zona Romántica neighborhood annually for its formidable selection of gay bars, restaurants, nightclubs and hotels, as well as its busy annual calendar of gay- and lesbian-themed events. The *Gay Guide Vallarta* booklet and website (www.gayguidevallarta.com) have tons of information and a helpful map for finding gay-friendly businesses. Try to visit during the February/March **Mardi Gras** celebrations, complete with a float parade, or else during the nine-day **Vallarta Pride** event in May that celebrates the LGBTIQ+ community with special fervor, with over 10,000 participants and themed parties all over the Zona Romántica.

During the day, hit the beaches. **Playa de Los Muertos'** southern end is particularly popular with gay travelers, with the **Blue Chairs** (bluechairsresort.com) beach club offering day passes for use of their waterfront pool, while the chic **Mantamar**



PUERTO VALLARTA'S BEST GAY CLUBS

Paco's Ranch

Super-popular, venerable disco-cantina staging smashing drag shows at 10pm, with loud music and a friendly ambience.

CC Slaughters

Arrive after midnight to share sweat with attractive strangers on the dance floor to the pulsating beats of house and techno.

Anthropology

It's raining men at this sizzling dance mecca and male stripper venue; expect lots of skimpy underwear and nude dancers.

Kinky Karaoke Bar

Fun lounge catering primarily to the LGBTIQ+ crowd, though anyone with a passion for singing is welcome.



WHERE TO SLEEP CHEAPLY IN VALLARTA

Casa Kraken

A mural-clad chillout area with climbing wall, sea-view terrace and numerous tours await at Vallarta's best hostel. \$

Ten to Ten

Rooftop terrace and Japanese-themed cafe are boons at this friendly hostel with colorful dorms and doubles. \$

Los Muertos Hostel

Comfy dorms with blackout curtains, plus cushion-strewn Netflix room, half a block from the beach. \$

CENTRO'S BEST STAYS & EATS

Hotel Rosita

Nab a sea-view room overlooking the *malecón* at Puerto Vallarta's oldest hotel (dating to 1848). \$\$

Hacienda San Ángel

Characterful hacienda with four-poster beds, *azulejo*-tiled arches and hand-woven rugs. Superb restaurant. \$\$\$

Hotel Catedral

Four boldly painted rooms overlook the Templo de Guadalupe. Superb location near the waterfront. \$

Café des Artistes

Lamb with pistachios and other French-Mexican dishes in candlelit garden or subtly lit dining room. Reserve ahead. \$\$\$

El Banquito

Pint-sized taco joint specializing in *taco de birria dorado* (hard-shell taco with roasted goat). \$

La Capella

Feast on pasta *fresca* and pork *ossobuco* on an elegant Italian terrace. Legendary Sunday brunch. \$\$\$

Gaby's

Munch on stuffed peppers, tamales and tequila-flamed *enchiladas* at this old favorite, or join a cooking class. \$\$

Beach Club (mantamarvallarta.com) gives you access to its gym and hosts DJ-fueled dance parties aimed at gay men.

Alternatively, head out to sea with **Diana's Gay Vallarta Day Cruise** (dianastours.com) for snorkeling accompanied by an open bar, or join the **Wet & Wild Gay Cruise** (pvsunsetpartycruise.com; Wed & Sat) for snorkeling at Los Arcos National Marine Park and go-go dancer talent aboard.

Afternoon pool parties await: the clothing-optional Saturday bash at **Casa Cupola**, and Beers, Boys & Burgers at **Hotel Mercurio** (hotel-mercurio.com) on Sunday.

Book online for a **Gay Vallarta Bar-Hopping Tour** (gaybarhopping.com) – a fun introduction to Vallarta's gay nightlife and a good way of making new friends. Choose between a three-course dinner, followed by drinks at five different bars, such as Garbo, Bar Frida and La Noche, or just drinks.

Versalles: Vallarta's Gastronomigator Hot Spot

FOODIE NEIGHBORHOOD

At first glance, Versalles looks like a pleasant yet nondescript neighborhood, its houses and apartment buildings fringed with bougainvillea. Yet in recent years, this largely residential, wedge-shaped place between downtown and Marina Vallarta has been Vallarta's most up-and-coming 'hood, thanks to its ever-evolving, diverse dining scene.

Those of us whose travels are often food-focused can spend days eating here and still not discover everything Versalles has to offer. **El Puerco de Oro** (Calle España) – a superb breakfast *taquería* – is the place to start. Of the five items on the menu, the best is the flagship pork belly tacos on heirloom blue corn tortillas with salsa verde.

Around the corner **Cha'** (Calle Hamburgo) is a hip brunch spot with arty takes on French toast, *chilaquiles*, pancakes and more.

Next door **Mama Chula's** Caribbean flavors draw a lively crowd with authentic dishes such as jerk chicken, curry goat and oxtail and beans. 'Jamaica?' 'No, she came of her own accord.'

Kittycorner from Mama Chula, open-air **Abulón Antojería del Mar** does tremendous things with ocean bounty. It's hard to go wrong with the grilled octopus, fish or shrimp tacos, and *pescado zarandeado* (charcoal-broiled fish stuffed with onion, tomatoes, peppers and spices).

Back on Calle España, **Barrio Bistro's** chef, Memo Wulff, has been making waves with his experimentation with local, seasonal produce. The menu changes weekly, and the on-site mixologists create marvelous, original *raicilla* (p438) cocktails. Book ahead.



WHERE TO STAY IN THE ZONA HOTELERA AND MARINA VALLARTA

Casa Velas

Traditional Mexican decor meets contemporary sculpture and award-winning restaurant. One of Vallarta's best adults-only retreats. \$\$\$

Hotel Puerto de Luna

Pastel rooms and suites with kitchenettes are pet-friendly and offer discounts for longer stays. \$\$

Fiesta Inn Puerto Vallarta Isla

Classic resort near the beach, with cream-and-charcoal rooms; perks include hot tubs, pool and gym. \$\$



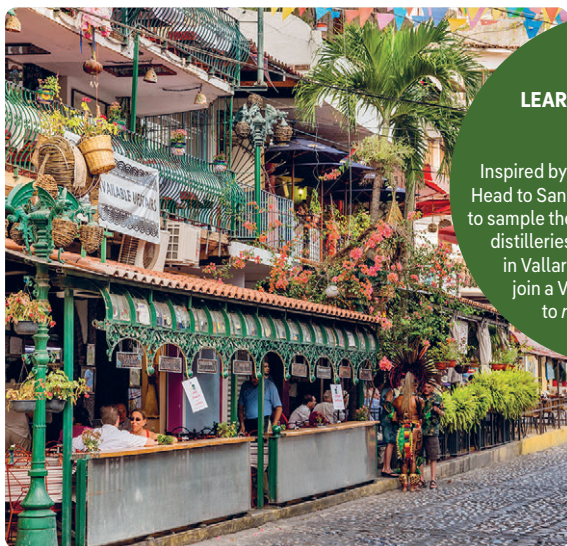
LEARN ABOUT RAICILLA

Inspired by your visit to Barrio Bistrot? Head to San Sebastián del Oeste (p439) to sample the *raicilla* firewater at several distilleries, attend a *raicilla* festival in Vallarta or Mascota (p439) or join a Vallarta tour dedicated to *raicilla*, tequila and mezcal (p419).

WHY I LOVE
PUERTO VALLARTA

Anna Kaminski,
writer

There is no other Mexican city quite like it. Ever since I first landed here as a 20-something backpacker and found myself in the thick of the Día de Muertos action on the *malecón*, my face painted to look like a *calavera* (skull), I've associated Vallarta with new thrills. There's something exciting to discover with every visit: the best *tacos de cabeza* (cows' head tacos) from a street cart, exceptional Huichol artwork by new artists at my favorite gallery, a hidden waterfall behind a beachside village, a speakeasy cocktail bar I hadn't noticed before...



Zona Romántica

A block south, **OPA Greek Bistro** (Calle Francia) is painted in the classic white-and-sea-blue of the Cyclades and its flame-grilled *saganaki* (cheese), Aegean-style octopus, dolmades (stuffed vine leaves) and Cretan-style shrimp do not disappoint.

Also on España, **Hola Arepas PV** sates your cravings for genuine Venezuelan food with freshly prepared arepas stuffed to bursting, huge *cachapas* (corn-dough pancakes) and homemade salsas.

Around the corner, on Calle Havre, **Espresso 45** is the specialty coffee shop in the 'hood, with the best espressos, funnily enough.

Finally, where there's good food, there's usually craft beer. **Cervecería Los Cuentos**, four blocks south, has an inviting taproom where you may sample their tropical IPA, chocolate stout and crisp lager.

Exploring Vallarta's Northern Reaches

VALLARTA'S UPSCALE BEACH 'HOODS

Connecting Centro with the marina, the long, narrow Zona Hotelera comprises a trio of beaches (**Playa de Oro**, **Playa Flamingos** and **Playa Los Tules**) backed by Vallarta's more affordable, often family-friendly beach resorts. A focal point



WHERE TO STAY IN THE ZONA ROMÁNTICA

Rivera del Río

Gay-friendly hotel with eight strikingly different rooms; decor ranges from Italianate frescoes to 1920s glam. \$\$\$

Hotel Yasmin

Friendly cheapie near the beach, with simple rooms around a pool enlivened by Mexican art. \$

Casa Nicole

Spacious, minimalist rooms with beamed ceilings, blond-wood furnishings and rain showers. Excellent breakfasts. \$\$\$



BEST RESTAURANTS IN THE ZONA ROMÁNTICA

Tintoque

Chef Joel Ornelas dazzles with creative reimaginings of classic flavors; seasonal tasting menus are meals to remember. Reservations essential. \$\$\$

Icú

Choose produce-driven tasting menus or a la carte dishes such as *chile ancho* stuffed with roasted-garlic salsa. Book ahead. \$\$\$

Maria Baja

Seven freshly-made salsas, huge juices and the best fish tacos in town. Fish *pastor* will blow your mind. \$

Bonito Kitchen

Dumplings filled with short rib, Shanxi-style pork ribs with Sichuan peppercorns and custom-made ramen noodles await you here. \$\$

here is the fountain-studded **La Isla** shopping mall, complete with an upscale movie theater, Cinépolis VIP, that screens blockbusters in Spanish and English.

Further north, **Marina Vallarta** is a popular yacht marina, surrounded by a clutch of good restaurants. Some whale-watching cruises depart from here, and the boardwalk hosts a Thursday evening market between November and April, with food stalls vying for your attention alongside artisan crafts.

North of the airport, Nuevo Vallarta is a purpose-built neighborhood for vacationers. Vallarta's highest concentration of upscale (largely all-inclusive) beach resorts sits between the appealing stretch of 13km-long **Playa Nuevo Vallarta** and the city's best golf courses. Beach conditions make it ideal for paddleboarding, kayaking and bodyboarding, while **Playa Flamingos**, just north of Nuevo Vallarta, is a prime kitesurfing and windsurfing spot (rent gear at Tron, tron.com.mx). Nuevo Vallarta is also well-g geared towards cyclists; rent a bike from **B Tempo** and pedal all the way to the fishing village of Bucerías (9km).

Beach-hopping from Vallarta

PUERTO VALLARTA'S BEST BEACHES

A string of beautiful coves and beaches graces the bay south of central Vallarta, easily accessed by bus.

Around 3km south of downtown is the beautiful condo enclave of **Playa Conchas Chinas**. The bay here is divided into small white-sand coves with calm waters, favored by families for the shallow and sheltered pools created by the reef further out (that's where the snorkelers have fun). There are a couple of beachside restaurants and lifeguards on duty.

About 6km south of Zona Centro, **Playa Palmares** – named not for the nonexistent palms but for the condo complex of the same name – is an ample stretch of Blue Flag-certified white sand. These picturesque turquoise shallows are favored by locals for swimming as the beach is far from rivers, which means clear water year-round.

Further south lies **Playa Las Gemelas** ('The Twins'), comprising two white-sand bays with gentle waves and little in the way of services, so pack a picnic. Weekends aside, you'll have it mostly to yourself.

Mismaloya, the location of the 1964 film *The Night of the Iguana*, is about 12km south of Puerto Vallarta: you can still see the dilapidated Iguana sign by the roadside. The tiny scenic cove is dominated by a gargantuan resort and has several *palapa* restaurants serving seafood. Mismaloya is also the jumping-off point for snorkeling and diving trips to the



WHERE TO PARTY IN VALLARTA

Los Muertos Brewing

This microbrewery draws old-timers and visitors with their 'Revenge' IPA and malty 'Hop On!'.

Los Otros Blondies

Sip a Brassy, Spicy, Classy or Platinum Blondie (tequila-fueled slushie) at this gay-friendly bar.

Nacho Daddy

Watch the game on the big screen at this raucous, friendly bar while downing huge margaritas.



Playa de las Ánimas

group of offshore islands known as Los Arcos, where you can swim among the reef fish; boat trips out here cost around M\$500 per person.

Boca de Tomatlán is a bustling seaside village 16km southwest of Puerto Vallarta, with dirt streets and typical seafood dishes at *palapa* restaurants on the beach. The pier is a hive of activity whenever water taxis arrive from Yelapa (p428) or Vallarta. Boca is also the starting point for the superb scenic hike to Las Ánimas and Quimixto beaches. The hilly, jungly trail (3km) is well-signposted and offers terrific views of the coast en route. It passes by the sugar-colored cove of **Playa Colomitos** and the white-sand **Playa Caballo** before arriving at Las Ánimas.

The spectacularly located **Playa de las Ánimas** is a long, sandy beach, lapped at by teal waters and overlooked by a small fishing village with some *palapa* restaurants. It's also a great place for water sports, from parasailing to banana-boat rides. You can take the less-trodden coastal trail to Playa de Quimixto from here (allow two hours one way).

Palm-fringed **Playa de Quimixto** is backed by a small fishing village, and there's good snorkeling at the rocky outcrops that bookend the beach. A 1.5km-long trail runs into the jungle-covered valley from Los Cocos restaurant, ending in a waterfall with an inviting dipping pool beneath. It's a half-hour hike, or an even shorter horseback ride; hire a horse (M\$400 per hour) on the beach.

Buses marked 'Boca' stop at both Mismaloya and Boca de Tomatlán (M\$10); the 'Mismaloya' bus only goes as far as Mismaloya. Any of these buses work for Playa Conchas Chinas and Playa Palmares.



BUMMING AROUND BUCERÍAS

Just north of Nuevo Vallarta, the once-sleepy fishing village of Bucerías draws visitors from Vallarta (you can cycle there) with its 8km-long golden beach, cobblestoned Mexican village heart, fresh seafood, and the weekly **Art Walk** (7pm to 9pm on Thursdays, November to April), which takes you through the dozen galleries of the Bucerías Art District, found near the 'kissing bridge' over the river. Don't miss the elaborate hand-blown creations at **Splash of Glass** or the artwork and handcrafted home adornments at **Soñé**. Bucerías means 'place of divers' and every morning you can sample the wares of oyster-harvesting divers at **Mariscos El Payo** on the main plaza or the handful of seafood stands around town.

Roxy Rock House

An enthusiastic, mixed crowd rocks out nightly to cover bands - from Rammstein to Depeche Mode.

Bar Morelos Mezcalería

Let staff talk you through the extensive mezcal selection amidst mirrors, bling and chrome.

Elixir Mixology

Intimately lit, conversation-friendly bar serving original cocktails expertly mixed from quality ingredients.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET!

Every Sunday between November and April, the soporific fishing village of La Cruz de Huanacastle, northwest of Puerto Vallarta, comes to life with the clamor, smells and sounds of the La Cruz farmers' market – one of the largest along the Bahía de Banderas. More than 200 vendors compete for your custom with varied wares that run the gamut from organic produce, artisan breads and freshly made cheese to crafts of superb quality, involving metalwork, wood and ceramics. Mariachi music and local rock bands provide entertainment in the plaza, and if all the shopping along the Marina Riviera Nayarit results in hunger pangs, food and drink stalls around the fringes of the market are waiting to nourish you.

Day Tripping to Yelapa

FISHING VILLAGE WITH SPECTACULAR WATERFALL

Off the grid till 2001, the cliff-framed, tranquil fishing village of **Yelapa** makes a popular day trip from Puerto Vallarta. Besides the hilly, cobbled main street, lined with mural-adorned houses, and a time-capsule vibe that once drew limelight-shunning celebrities such as Bob Dylan and Jack Nicholson, the main draw here is the golden, crescent-shaped beach with its handful of waterside restaurants. On the beach you're likely to spot local personality Chelly Rodríguez, aka the Yelapa Pie Lady, who sells her homemade pies (lemon, chocolate, cheese and coconut) recreated from decades-old recipes.

A day in Yelapa is not complete without **waterfall hikes**. There are two: a 15-minute stroll to modestly proportioned cascades from the 'town pier,' followed by a dip in the pool beneath, or a proper 6km roundtrip jungle walk (an hour and a half each way) to larger falls, following the river into the valley. Follow the signposts, fording the shallow river in two places. There's some scrambling involved to get to the falls themselves, with a deep swimming hole to cool off in.

Water taxis from Puerto Vallarta's Los Muertos pier (M\$450; 45 minutes) and from Boca de Tomatlán (M\$250; 25 minutes) drop passengers at Yelapa's 'beach pier' and 'town pier.' Last boat to Vallarta/Boca is at 5pm/6pm.



GETTING AROUND

Downtown Vallarta is very walkable. To get between more spread-out neighborhoods, hail a cab. Taxis are unmetered and fares around town are based on zones, so determine the price of the ride before you get in.

Alternatively, at the blue bus stop signs, hop on one of the frequent buses (M\$10) marked with the neighborhood they service (Aeropuerto, Hotelera, Mojoneras and Juntas heading north; Centro heading south. The Mojoneras bus also stops at Puerto Vallarta's

long-distance bus terminal). Some of the south-bound buses go via *tunnel* – a tunnel that bypasses Centro.

White-and-orange 'Boca de Tomatlán' buses (M\$10) run from the corner of Badillo and Constitución along the coastal highway through Mismaloya to Boca de Tomatlán.

Water taxis depart from Los Muertos pier in the Zona Romántica, heading to Boca de Tomatlán, Yelapa and other beach destinations several times daily.



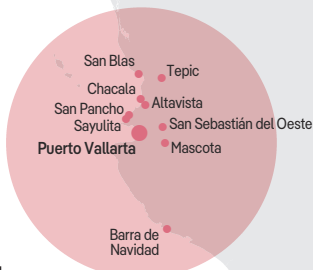
Beyond Puerto Vallarta

Explore the surf breaks and beaches along the coast north and south of Puerto Vallarta and the cobbled age-old towns of the Sierra Madre.

North of Puerto Vallarta the Riviera Nayarit beckons with surf breaks at boho-chic Sayulita, birdwatching in San Blas and the beaches and destination restaurants of Punta de Mita.

To the south you can road trip along the Costalegre (the Happy Coast) with its mix of low-key fishing villages, exclusive resorts and buzzy beach towns, such as Barra de Navidad, stopping at Vallarta's remarkable botanical gardens and pausing to hike in the foothills of the Sierra Madre on the way.

Inland the 500-year-old *pueblos mágicos* of San Sebastián del Oeste, Mascota and Talpa de Allende await, with their vestiges of colonial history, millennia of indigenous culture and treks to remote peaks and petroglyphs.



TOP TIP

Bring layers when heading into the Sierra Madre; its *pueblos mágicos* sit at altitude amidst cloud forest and temperatures drop at night.

AMADO HERNANDEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



San Sebastián del Oeste (p439)



SAYULITA'S BEST BOUTIQUE HOTELS

Siete Lunas

Perched on jungly slopes, with phenomenal coastal views, intimate bungalows feature floor-to-ceiling windows, comfortable beds and private decks. \$\$

Avela

A contemporary Mexican aesthetic infuses 15 rooms around a pool at this design-forward hotel. \$\$\$

Distrito 88

Adults-only retreat, with eight airy, sun-filled suites overlooking the kidney-shaped pool, ocean and/or lush gardens. \$\$\$

Hotel Playa Escondida

Organic meals, yoga, massages and beachfront infinity pool with waterfall replenish your spirit at this refuge surrounded by jungle. \$\$



GEOFFREY CHANDLER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Surfing, Sayulita

Surf's Up Around Sayulita

BEST SURFING SPOTS AROUND SAYULITA

Before tiny Sayulita was 'gentrified' with vacation villas, boutique hotels and fair-trade boutiques (and overrun by golf carts) it was a surfing spot for wave-riders in the know, who'd travel down from California, hitting other Pacific surfing breaks along the way. The beach break at Playa Sayulita's south end, and its long, mellow waves, provide excellent learning conditions for rookie surfers, while more challenging breaks nearby attract experienced surfers. Sayulita also hosts surfing contests, including the migrating Mexi Log Fest (mexilogfest.com).

Some of the original surfers have set up shop here, and there's no shortage of surfing instructors. Recommended outfitters include Patricia's Surf School (sayulitalife.com/patricia) on Calle Las Gaviotas, WildMex Surf School (wildmex.com) on Calle Pelicanos and Lunazul Surfing (lunazulsurfing.com) on Calle Marlin. Board hire is typically US\$10 per hour and lessons cost around US\$75 per hour, with one or two students per instructor.

You'll often find stand-up paddleboarders bobbing on the surf of Playa Sayulita first thing in the morning when conditions in the bay are calmest; hire a board at Lunazul for US\$20 per hour.



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN SEBASTIÁN DEL OESTE

Hotel Mansion Real

Sky-high ceilings, huge beds and dark-wood furnishings await inside this super-central, atmospheric 1750 hotel. \$\$

Hotel Los Arcos de Sol

Off the main plaza, hacienda-style rooms fan out around an inner courtyard with a flowering garden. \$

Hotel del Puente

Linger by the courtyard fountain at this beautiful 200-year-old hacienda with stylish adobe rooms. \$



SAYULITA'S BEST RESTAURANTS

Don Pedro's

Choose between seafood, pastas, pizzas and veggie dishes at this beachside local institution. Monday's salsa night. **\$\$**

La Rústica

Come to this trendy bistro for that holiest of combinations: wood-fired pizza paired with craft beer. Aww yeah. **\$\$**

Barracuda

Nab a prime people-watching spot and chow down on *tostadas* piled high with fresh tuna, shrimp, octopus and other fishy delights. **\$\$**

La Katrina

Flitting easily between ribeye steaks, *chiles rellenos* and Buffalo wings, this crowd-pleaser gets packed in the evenings. **\$\$**

Sayulita's main beach aside, this stretch of the Pacific coast is renowned among surfers. There are at least a dozen spots around Sayulita, neighboring San Francisco (San Pancho), and Punta de Mita, though you'll need a boat transfer to reach some of them, organized via the surfing outfits in Sayulita and elsewhere. Here are some of the best:

San Pancho Powerful, fast left-hander river mouth break off the main beach in San Francisco. Higher waves in summer; intermediates and pros only.

Playa Sayulita Right- and left-hander point break on the main beach, ideal for beginners and stand-up paddleboard (SUP) riders. When the swell is high, good fun for intermediate and advanced surfers, particularly at the faster break towards the north end of the beach.

Playa Litibu Gentle beach break on an empty, wild beach with good car access. Good for beginners riding the foam.

Caleta/The Cove You need a boat from El Anclote to reach this reef break; mostly right-handers, good for shortboarders. Intermediates and pros only; best early in the morning.

El Faro Powerful right-hander point break by the Punta de Mita lighthouse. Long rides, intermediate and pro surfers only. Boat transfer or 20-minute hike from El Anclote.

El Anclote Longest right-hander point break in the area, just south of Punta de Mita. Slow and mellow, lots of longboarders, beginner surfers and SUP riders.

Stinky's Near El Anclote, another right-hander point break favored by beginners. Needs big swells, so summertime only.

Palmitas Mid- to high tide, powerful beach break for shortboards only. Five-minute hike from La Lancha.

La Lancha South of Punta de Mita, this right- and left-hander point break is long and perfect for beginners and intermediate surfers. There's a 10-minute walk through jungle to reach it.

Burros Southeast along the coast from Punta de Mita, this is a long and mellow right-hander point break; occasional lefts. A bit rough for beginners.

Paredon Right-hand reef-point break with long rides, better at high tide.

Veneros Fast left- and right-hander beach breaks; shortboards only. Mid- to high tide ideal.



WHERE TO EAT IN SAN SEBASTIÁN DEL OESTE

Comedor La Lupita

Cavernous, colorful, family-run restaurant serving epic portions of *chilaquiles*, other breakfast dishes and great chicken *mole*. **\$**

El Fortín de San Sebastián

Excellent Mexican-Italian restaurant/cafe overlooking the plaza; attached shop sells its own coffee and homemade sauces. **\$\$**

Las Catrinas de los Arrayanes

Fresh juices, ample *enchilada* portions and delicious chicken *mole* await at this colorful spot. **\$**



SAYULITA'S LAND-BASED THRILLS

One of the most rewarding walking trails near Sayulita is the moderately strenuous 6km return hike to the summit of **Cerro de Mono** (Monkey Mountain). You won't see any simian life, but you will get terrific 360-degree views of the coast and jungle from the tip of this extinct volcano. The trailhead is halfway along the road to Playa Pátzcuaro, 2km south of Sayulita along the Punta de Mita road.

Closer to town, whizz through the jungle canopy at 30mph along the 13 zip-lines and traverse suspension bridges at family-friendly **Rancho MiChaparrita** (michaparrita.com); ATV rides in the jungle and horseback riding along the beach are also on offer. Finish the day by sweating it out in a temascal (shamanic sweat lodge) at **Villas Sayulita** (villassayulita.com).

Beach-Hopping in Sayulita

SAYULITA'S BEST BEACHES

Wherever you happen to stay in **Sayulita**, you're never far from a beach. Flanking central Sayulita is its long namesake beach, its south end particularly popular and bustling with vendors selling snacks, salsa tunes blaring from nearby restaurants and beach chairs for hire. The north end of the beach, beyond the river mouth, is quieter and more pebbly, with stronger waves and some undertow.

From the south end of Playa Sayulita, follow the coastal road past the Villa Amor hotel, then turn left and head uphill through the cemetery – its mausoleums and graves particularly colorful during and after the November 2 Día de Muertos celebrations – and then downhill and to the right to reach **Playa de los Muertos** 10 minutes later. It's a smallish, quiet cove with white sand, beach chairs, a roped-off swimming area and vendors selling snacks.

A 20-minute walk from central Sayulita, the gorgeous, white-sand cove of **Playa las Cuevas** is reachable via an occasionally precipitous walk from the north end of Playa Sayulita. A clearly defined path leads up the cliff, with some scrambling required, before flattening out and leading north through some woodlands. Be mindful of the tides, since high tide may cut off the path from Playa las Cuevas. At low tide, you can make your way to the **Playa Malpasos** around the rocky point; otherwise, take the footpath. Playa Malpasos is a 2km-long, often deserted, wild white-sand beach; it faces the open ocean, and powerful undertows make it unsuitable for swimming, but it makes for an excellent hike.

Sayulita's Bodacious Boutiques

BEST SHOPPING IN SAYULITA

True to its bohemian roots, Sayulita is home to numerous boutiques specializing in handcrafted, artisan and fair-trade products from all over Mexico, including designer clothing, hand-painted ceramics from the Sonora, silver and gold jewelry, delicate Huichol beadwork and artisanal spirits. If you're looking for something less refined, peruse the T-shirt, hammock and painting stalls along Manuel Rodríguez Sanchez, Playa Azul, Pelicanos and Avenida de Palmar, east of central Sayulita.

Standout boutiques include:

Tierra Huichol (terrahuichol.com) This co-op shop gives an excellent introduction to the Huicholes' colorful beadwork sculptures, sold at fair prices. There are some spectacularly intricate animal creations here, and you can often see an



WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN MASCOTA

Santa Elena Hotel Boutique

Characterful rooms await at this 200-year-old hacienda, two blocks from the plaza; excellent on-site restaurant. \$\$\$

Santa Lucía Hotel Boutique

Six rooms fan out around a garden and pool at this intimate hotel. English spoken. \$\$

Café Napoles

Excellent restaurant serving specialty coffee, tasty burritos and other Mexican standards, plus Italian dishes. \$



DETOUR TO TEPEC

Founded around 1530, Tepec – the busy capital of Nayarit state – boasts an ornate cathedral overlooking Plaza Principal, but the prime attraction is the excellent **Museo Regional de Nayarit**. It features Huichol and other pre-Hispanic ceramics mostly sourced from burials from around 200 BCE to 600 CE, as well as those from the Aztátlan culture (800 CE to 1350 CE). Figures depict pregnant women, houses, warriors, ball players and musicians. Anthropomorphic burial urns from the local Mololoa culture (late 1st millennium CE) with startled faces and the contents of a recreated shaft tomb also feature.

North of downtown, swing by **Artesanias Bertha Chia** for high-quality Huichol beadwork art, from small souvenirs to larger items: jaguars, coyotes, iguanas and skulls in full Technicolor.



Sayulita

artist at work. Fair-trade crafts sold here contribute to the livelihood of artisans in Huichol communities.

Pinche México Te Amo Specializes in silk-screened T-shirts and hipster beach bags – how about the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata holding a bouquet of flowers/surfboard/skateboard? It also has offbeat jewelry and quirky decorative art pieces, including outstanding papier-mâché skeletons.

Sayulita Wine Shop (sayulitawineshop.mx) These guys sell exclusively Mexican wines, with a particular focus on tipples from the Valle de Guadalupe, as well as artisanal tequilas, mezcals and the lesser-renowned *raicilla* and sotol firewaters.

Manyana (manyana.co) This Sayulita-born concept store sells contemporary ceramics, stylish linen wear, funky glasses, copper lamps, Mollusk hemp T-shirts, surfer wear by Quality People and more.

Pachamama (pachamamasayulita.com.mx) Tahitian black pearl necklaces, dream catchers and beautiful hand-embroidered clothing sold by the locally famous Mignot sisters.

Nakawé Trading (nakawetrading.com) Fair-trade jewelry, fashion items, hand-woven rugs, pillowcases, delicate vases and other handmade items by artisans from around Mexico.



WHERE TO TRY RAICILLA IN SAN SEBASTIÁN DEL OESTE

Hacienda Don Lalin

Pair a *raicilla reposado* (aged in barrels) with your lunch at this tranquil rural spot.

Tesoro del Oeste

Head for this distillery on the eastern fringe of town to sample organic *raicilla*, distilled from the maximiliana agave.

Jardín Nebulosa

Taste Nimfa – the intensely herbal *raicilla* produced in-house – or buy a bottle to take home.



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN SAN PANCHO

Bistro Orgánico

Imaginative sea- and farm-to-table fish and vegetarian dishes, served in a plant-filled courtyard. Great for leisurely breakfasts. \$\$

Taquería Los Arbolitos

Grab a table in the street and chow down on adobo, chorizo, cheese and *nopal* (cactus) tacos. \$

Maria's

San Pancho's premier breakfast spot slings *huevos divorciados* and pancakes; salads and fish tacos served later. \$\$

La Perla

Burgers, fish sandwiches, tostadas piled with ceviche, grilled fish and lobster shine at this beachside *palapa*. \$\$



GREG VAUGHN/LAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

San Pancho

A Perfect Day in San Pancho

SURFING, BOTANIC GARDENS AND EATING

The sun has barely begun to rise, but you're already bobbing on the waves on the board you rented from **Nativa Surf Shop**, ready to ride the wickedly fast San Pancho left-hander.

After a couple of hours in the ocean, you pad along the beach to the **San Pan cafe** overlooking the water for a coffee and some freshly made pancakes and people-watch as San Francisco comes alive.

San Francisco, aka San Pancho, is a fishing pueblo that turned vacation spot back in the 1970s, with a driftwood-strewn white-sand beach, an arty vibe and a less obvious gringo footprint than you'll find in neighboring Sayulita.

By the time you're done with breakfast, artisans, artists and visiting vendors have set up their stalls at the **Plaza del Sol market** (Tuesday only), a block away, and you idly peruse their wares before heading out of town for a few hours to the **Lo de Perla Jardín de Selva** (lodeperla.org), having called ahead the previous day. Accessible only via prior reservation, this jungly botanic garden is home to a staggering 300 types of butterflies, abundant birdlife and equally abundant insect life (you're glad you brought some repellent). Having been met at Las Lomas, halfway between San Francisco and Lo de Marcos, 4km north of San Pancho, you opt for the free guided tour. Your guide provides some background on indigenous history while you wander amid the ferns, cacti and bromeliads, and gasp in awe at the huge collection of endemic orchids (you have a weakness for orchids).



BEST SURF DIGS ON THE RIVIERA NAYARIT

Casa Buena Onda (Sayulita)

Choose between two colorful rooms or an airy thatch-roofed bungalow at this surfer haunt. \$

Punta Mita Surf Lodge

Boutique apartments (two-/three-bedroom) overlook a saltwater pool. Massages, lessons and board rental available. \$\$\$

ONDA Surf Hotel (Punta de Mita)

Homey rooms in repurposed shipping containers; boons include board and bike rentals and cute on-site cafe. \$

Back in San Pancho, you grab some tasty protein in the form of *camarón adobado* (shrimp in a punchy red salsa) and ceviche at **Ikan Cocina Marina**, and then allow yourself to be persuaded to go horseback riding along the beach by a local gaucho.

In the evening, you peruse the boutiques along Avenida Tercer Mundo, the main drag, before gravitating towards **El Pocos** for some *tacos al pastor*. You end the night listening to live music and sipping on an IPA at the **Cevecería Artesanal**.

Chillin' in Chacala

CHACALA'S BEACHES AND WATER SPORTS

Despite its ramshackle charm and the beauty of its surrounds, the tiny fishing village of **Chacala** (population 300) has managed to retain its authenticity and not be overrun by visitors, unlike some of its neighbors. Located 96km north of Puerto Vallarta and 10km west of Las Varas on Hwy 200, it comprises just one main, sandy thoroughfare and a few cobbled side streets, spread along a fine sandy beach backed by verdant green slopes and bookended by rugged black-rock formations.

The sea provides most of the action here. Swimming in the calm waters off **Playa Chacala** is safe most of the year and makes for excellent paddleboarding (Xplore Chacala rents out surfboards and paddleboards near the north end of the beach). Nearby, at Marina Chacala, you can hire a *panga* (boat). Local boat owners run **whale-watching** and **fish-ing trips** and can whisk you off to less accessible beaches, such as the idyllic **Playa Chacalilla**, north of the promontory, or **Playa La Caleta**, 3.5km north of Chacala (and also accessed via 4WD-accessible jungle track), where there's a wicked left-breaking point break. Snorkelers will want to visit **Las Cuevas** (volcanic caves south of Chacala), accessible only by boat; bring your own gear.

Chacala's big land-based attraction is the Alta-vista petroglyphs (p435), which you can visit on your own or with **Xplore Chacala** (xplorechacala.wixsite.com).

Mysteries from the Past

STUNNING PETROGLYPH SITE

Altavista – the largest and best-preserved petroglyph site in Nayarit – is found at the base of some volcanic formations, reachable via a well-marked, beautiful jungle trail (three hours roundtrip). The striking rock formations and overgrown river banks at the end of the trail are covered

BEST PLACES TO EAT & DRINK IN CHACALA

Mauna Kea

Watch whales over morning coffee, pecan pancakes, waffles and eggs at this seasonal rooftop eatery. Excellent B&B attached. \$\$

Restaurante Acela

Grilled octopus, ceviche and shrimp cooked in myriad different ways shine at this casual beachside *palapa*. \$\$

Antojitos Mexicanos Jade

The next best thing to dining with a local family. Home-cooked Mexican fare served on freshly made tortillas. \$

Onda Brewing

Weekend-only seasonal microbrewery/village hot spot serves five brews (Ahorita IPA and Tormenta stout stand out) and clever nibbles.



MORE PETROGLYPHS?

For more ancient etchings, head for Las Labradas (p413) north of Mazatlán and lofty Palma Sola (p460) – an important place of pilgrimage millennia ago – high above Acapulco.



WHERE TO CAMP AND GLAMP ON THE RIVIERA NAYARIT

Aldea Bamboo Village (San Pancho) Discerning castaways will love these cabins suspended above the jungle floor, complete with alfresco showers. \$\$\$

Sayulita Trailer Park & Bungalows Pitch your tent, park your RV or nab a spartan beachfront room at this handy campground. \$

Tailwind Jungle Lodge (San Pancho) Ocean views from hammocks on private decks, breezy *palapa* suites and glamping bungalows. \$\$



LA TOVARA BOAT TOURS

One of San Blas' most popular activities is a boat trip to the freshwater swimming hole of **La Tovará National Park**, where you can spot crocodiles. The three-hour trips depart frequently between 9.30am and 2.30pm and go up the San Cristóbal estero (estuary) to the spring, passing through mangrove-fringed wetlands where you can see iguanas, terrapins and wading birds. Go early in the morning to maximize wildlife sightings and bring bug repellent. The swimming hole is enclosed, so you needn't fear becoming a croc's meal.

Boats leave when full from the *embarcadero* at San Blas' eastern edge, and more frequently from the main dock 4.5km further east on the Matanchén road, reachable via San Blas-Tepic combis.

with dozens of carvings, estimated to be at least 2000 years old – the work of the Tecoxquines peoples who once inhabited the area. Some depict spiral-like vortexes, while others are human figures. The Maize Man – a human figure with an ear of corn for a head, the personification of corn – and the large stone face with two horizontal slits believed to be the weeping visage of Tlaloc, god of rain, suggest that this site was particularly important in connecting with deities that controlled the seasons and the harvest, and were thus instrumental to the Tecoxquines's survival. Beneath the carvings are some wonderfully refreshing spring-fed dipping pools, as well as shrines tended by the local Huichol people, for whom this site is sacred.

If coming from the south along Hwy 200, follow the sign towards the town of Alta Vista after passing the Lima de Abajo sign. Follow the paved road for 1km, follow the dirt road to the left to a gate, then take a right along a cobbled road to the parking lot (entry by donation).

A Stroll Around San Blas

CENTURIES-OLD TOWN; NOTABLE LANDMARKS

You wouldn't guess it now, but the fishing village of **San Blas** was an important Spanish port from the late 16th century to the 19th century. While on either side of the main drag San Blas is just another soporific cobblestoned backwater, the uniform whitewashed facades on Avenida Juárez itself lend a dreamy revival quality that is immediately endearing. That said, with the new highway from Guadalajara to the coast, San Blas is now greatly benefiting from an influx of weekenders and there's a buzz to the place.

Start your perambulations at the east end of town at the remains of **La Contaduría fort**, built to protect Spain's trading galleons from British and French pirates. The hill where the 18th-century ruins are located – from where plundered riches were once shipped off to Mexico City or the Philippines – offers wonderful views of the town. Stop by the ruins of a striking vaulted church, **Templo de la Virgen del Rosario**, built in 1768, on your way down. Proceed along Avenida Juárez to the attractive plaza and the remodeled **Casa de La Cultura** a couple of blocks west; it hosts engaging temporary exhibitions (art, indigenous culture) and is adjoined to some characterful ruins out back. Another block west, the San Blas **pier** boasts a sculpture trail and a striking port building constructed in anticipation of the popularity of newly inaugurated two-night boat trips to the **Islas Marías** – a biosphere reserve comprising four islands.



WHERE TO GO DRINKING IN SAYULITA

YamBak

Hipster magnet that brews its own IPA, with DJ sets most nights – from funk to drum'n'bass.

Sayulita Public House

Sayulita's original craft beer spot with a hopping bar area, great burgers and cornhole games upstairs.

Bar Don Pato

Play foosball in between live music or DJ sets or join in on Open Mic Tuesdays.

VOYAGE TO ISLAS MARIAS

As of December 2022 package trips to the Islas Marias archipelago run from San Blas (p436) and Mazatlán. Of the marine reserve's four islands, María Madre was part of Mexico's prison system from 1905 to 2019. Some of the highlights of overnight stays on the island (in basic but comfortable rooms) include 2.5km hikes to the replica Christ the Redeemer statue overlooking the port of Balleto, guided tours of an auditorium with murals by prisoners, and visits by car to the salt extraction and shrimp processing plants that were much feared by inmates due to the harshness of forced labor. Two-day trips from the mainland cost M\$2500 and include buffet meals, accommodations and boat crossing.



San Blas pier

San Blas' Creatures, Feathered & Fanged

BIRDWATCHING AND A CROCODILE SANCTUARY

The seven different ecosystems surrounding San Blas make it one of the most biologically diverse places in Latin America, not to mention one of the world's best **birding** locations, home to a staggering 250 endemic species including Inca doves, yellow-winged caciques and bronzed cowbirds. If you're a twitcher, the best time to visit is from late October to late March, when local birdlife is supplemented by numerous migratory species. Birders have been flocking to the **San Blas Christmas Bird Count** – an Audubon Society event – since 1973, and the week-long **International Migratory Bird Festival** in late January/early February involves tours with English-speaking ornithologists, seminars and nightly entertainment in the plaza. **Westwings** (westwings.com) and **Nayarit Adventures** (nayaritadventures.com) organize birding tours.

On the river, **Cocodrilarío Kiekari** (8am to 6pm) – a crocodile nursery – rears toothy reptiles that are later released into the wild as part of a repopulation program. There are also some non-release crocs, felines (jaguars and lynx) and other rescued injured creatures. It's accessible by road (10.5km from San Blas) and is easily paired with a La Tovara boat tour (p436) if your starting point is La Aguada boat launch.



WHERE TO EAT TACOS IN SAYULITA

Naty's Kitchen

Tortillas stuffed with *poblano* peppers, smoked marlin, chicken with *mole*, or pork and *nopal*. \$

Tacos Al Pastor Talivan

Great spot to grab tacos topped with marinated grilled pork, cilantro, onion and pineapple. \$

Mary's

Fish tacos and grilled shrimp on handmade tortillas are stars. Save room for stuffed *poblano chiles*. \$



BEST RESTAURANTS AROUND SAN BLAS

La Isla

This fishing-net-bedecked, kitschy seafood joint has been around for decades. Standouts include *camarones a la diablo*. Cash only. \$\$

Ofro's

Family-run spot serving delicious home-cooked cuisine: solid breakfasts, plus fish and chicken with vegetables, rice and guacamole. \$

Caballito del Mar

One of the best seafood *enramadas* (open-air restaurants) on Playa Borrego. Can't go wrong with *pescado zarandeado* (grilled whole fish). \$\$

El Choya (Aticama)

Oyster shooters, wallet-friendly grilled lobster, giant clams and *aguachile* await on Aticama's 'oyster row'. \$



REINAR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

San Sebastián del Oeste

Life's a Beach in San Blas

SAN BLAS' BEST BEACHES

Wildlife aside, San Blas excels at the timeless pastime of lazing on inviting strands of sand. A five-minute walk from the town center is **Playa El Borrego**, a long sweep of gray sand with decent waves for surfers, backed by a string of casual bar-restaurants. The best beaches are southeast of town around Bahía de Matanchén, starting with **Playa Las Islitas**, 7km from San Blas – a handful of sheltered coves and a long white-sand stretch with some beachfront restaurants and the odd surfer. Adjoining Las Islitas, **Playa Matanchén** is a long and wide beach with a pier halfway along, several resorts and a couple of *palapa* restaurants. The attractive *malecón* along the narrow **Playa Aticama** links the south end of Playa Matanchén with the Aticama fishing village, a superb place to feast on lobster, giant clams and oysters.

From the main road toward Tepic a paved road goes south to Matanchén, where a dirt road leads east to Playa Las Islitas.

Raicilla – Jalisco's Favorite Firewater

JALISCO'S ANSWER TO MEZCAL

Agave spirits like tequila and mezcal have been high-profile for some time, but until very recently *raicilla* was seen as their country bumpkin cousin. *Raicilla*, like mezcal, is distilled from the roasted heart of the agave plant (rather than steamed like tequila), and the production of *raicilla* goes back centuries. Long a humble firewater consumed by agricultural



WHERE TO SLEEP CHEAPLY IN SAYULITA

La Redonda Sayulita

Chilled-out thatch-roofed, sociable hostel a block from the beach with comfy dorms and good breakfast. \$

Selina Sayulita

Snug bunks with privacy curtains and handsome cattle-skull-adorned rooms await at this fantastic catch-all place. \$\$

Hotel Sayulita Central

Super-central cheapie a stone's throw from the sand, with can't-throw-a-cat rooms, friendly staff and guest kitchen. \$

laborers, it was prohibited and heavily taxed after the Spanish conquest, and its production moved underground.

While mezcals are traditionally double-distilled, *raicilla* is typically single-distilled. Distillation either uses copper vessels (introduced to coastal Jalisco by Filipino immigrants who used them to distill coconuts) or surface ovens.

Raicilla is particularly prevalent in the state of Jalisco (you still see some local producers selling it by the side of the road in unmarked containers), which has the greatest biodiversity of agave plants outside of the state of Oaxaca, but Jalisco is not one of the states where mezcal may be produced according to Mexico's Denomination of Origin system that classifies locally produced spirits.

In 2019 *raicilla* was finally recognized as an intangible part of Jalisco culture and granted a designation of origin status. It is now found on menus, both on its own and as part of elaborate cocktails, in high-profile restaurants around Jalisco, from Puerto Vallarta's Barrio Bistro (p424) to Jardín Nebulosa (p440) in San Sebastián del Oeste. Like mezcal, *raicilla* has a smoky aftertaste, but can also have spicy, herbal or even citrusy tasting notes. If you sip it neat at a distillery, know that *raicilla de punta* (made from the first liter produced by the distillation process) is particularly smooth. The brand La Venenosa is one you're most likely to come across if looking to buy.

A Spin around San Sebastián del Oeste

CHARMING HISTORIC TOWN

For a dramatic change of scenery from Puerto Vallarta, head for the cool climes of **San Sebastián del Oeste**, a former silver mining town founded in 1605 that sits amid cloud forest in the Sierra Madre mountains at 1483m above sea level (pack a sweater).

Formerly a bustling place of 20,000 people, today this soporific *pueblo mágico* is home to just 600 or so inhabitants, and its main charm lies in exploring the cobbled streets lined with whitewashed, red-roofed adobe houses, dallying in the rose garden in the Plaza Principal, admiring the neoclassical 17th-century church that overlooks the square and sipping a cup of locally produced coffee.

To check out the abandoned **Santa Gertrudis silver mine**, head east out of town along the Paseo del Norte for 1km, taking the left fork. Bring a flashlight to explore the 60m section of the shaft accessible to the public.



JALISCO'S BEST RAICILLA FESTIVALS

During a weekend in mid-May, Puerto Vallarta hosts the **Damajuana Festival de Raicilla** at the Centro Cultural Cuale on Isla Cuale. Numerous producers from all over Jalisco attend the events and there are numerous *raicilla* tastings, lectures, live music and food. *Raicilla* also makes an appearance at the **Festival de Raicilla, Mezcal y Cerveza Artesanal**, hosted at Puerto Vallarta's marina over the first weekend in March. Alternatively, head up to Mascota (p440) in November for the **Festival de Raicilla**, with local producers opening up their distilleries to visitors and gathering on the main plaza for tastings, mixology contests and food and *raicilla* pairings.



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN PANCHE

Hotel Cielo Rojo

Characterful hotel with four individually styled rooms, decked out with objets d'art. Bicycles and beach gear available. \$\$\$

Hostal Shaka Surf House

Friendly, surf-themed hostel a block from the beach, with three dorms, kitchen and complimentary breakfast. \$

Agua de Luna

Minimalist, intimate all-suite hotel with rooftop lounge, saltwater pool and Jacuzzi. Adults-only. \$\$\$



JARDÍN NEBULOSA: A GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Jardín Nebulosa (jardinnebulosa.com) takes locavore cuisine to new heights, thanks to a team of biologists and stellar chef Nicolás Cano. With its own brewpub and *raicilla* distillery, it showcases the best of ingredients found in the Sierra Madre – some grown in local orchards, others foraged in the forest. Take your seat in the lush garden and order an art-as-food tasting menu of small, seasonal plates: river trout ceviche, lamb slow-cooked with *hoja santa* herb, and insect tacos filled with *chapulines* (grasshoppers) and agave worms might be some of the offerings. Wash it down with a Gran Jaguar IPA or an elaborate *raicilla* cocktail, produced by the restaurant's talented mixologists. Reservations essential.

Ascent of La Bufa

SIERRA MADRE'S HIGHEST PEAK

The highest vantage point in the region, **Cerro de la Bufa** (2650m) towers above San Sebastián del Oeste and affords a spectacular vista of the Sierra Madre, extending all the way to the Vallarta coast when weather permits. A 9km road – partly ancient cobbles, partly dirt and gravel – leads to the summit from the east side of San Sebastián, switchbacking steeply through pine forest. It's possible to hike it (allow six or seven hours return) but (particularly on weekends) you'll be breathing in dust from passing ATVs and pickup trucks carrying groups of sightseers to the top. Rent an ATV on the main square (M\$500 for two hours) or opt for a two-hour ATV tour (M\$1500 per person) with a local operator (next door to Jardín Nebulosa, by the town entrance). The guiding is minimal, but you're assisted up the hairpin bends and tours stop by the tiny hamlet of **Real Alto** on the way back for a peek inside its 17th-century church.

Mascota's Relics of the Past

PETROGLYPHS AND BURIAL SITES

An hour's drive south from San Sebastián del Oeste along the scenic, winding Route 70 towards Guadalajara, the 16th-century *pueblo mágico* of **Mascota** sits in a volcano-fringed valley. Its cobbled streets, lined with brightly painted adobe houses, lead to the attractive, shaded main plaza. The area was originally settled some 3000 years ago by indigenous Teco people, and over 12,000 well-preserved petroglyphs have been found at multiple sites in Mascota's environs – El Refugio, Mesa Colorada, El Ocotillo, El Platano, Santa Rita and others – mainly depicting symbols relating to fertility, the sun and rain.

Stop by Mascota's **Museo Arqueológico** (closed Monday), a block east of the plaza, for a thorough introduction to archaeological finds from El Platano, plus some of the other 160 burial sites found around Mascota. Peruse mummified remains, jewelry, pottery and tools excavated by renowned archaeologist Joseph B Mountjoy. To visit Mascota's main petroglyph sites, talk to the museum's caretaker. The **El Refugio** site is the easiest to visit on your own, since the way is signposted: take Calle Periférico Mariano Escobedo south towards the Corinchis Reservoir. The petroglyphs and some ancient metates for grinding corn are a five-minute walk away, through a field.



WHERE TO STAY IN CHACALA

Casa Norma

Three tidy rooms – two with partial ocean views and kitchens – run by a *my amable* family. \$

Hotel Casa Chacala

Simple tiled rooms look seaward; perks include a plunge pool, hammocks and complimentary breakfast. \$\$

Mar de Jade

Jungle-surrounded, beachside yoga retreat curls around two sinuous pools, Jacuzzi and spa. Vegetarian-friendly buffet. \$\$\$



Barra de Navidad

Twixt Lagoon & Ocean: Barra de Navidad

WATER SPORTS AND BEACHES

Sitting on a narrow isthmus between the Pacific and the town's namesake lagoon, **Barra de Navidad** greets you with a mellow charm that's been winning visitors over for many years. Barra first came to prominence in 1564 when its shipyards produced the galleons used by conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi and Father André de Urdaneta to deliver the Philippines to King Felipe of Spain. By 1600, however, most of the conquests were being conducted from Acapulco, and Barra slipped into sleepy obscurity before being rejuvenated by seasonal visitors, primarily from the US and Canada. Unsurprisingly, its biggest attractions are watery ones.

While the narrow pebbly beach flanking Barra's ocean side is being eroded, you can either drive to (by getting back out on Hwy 200 and heading east) or take a boat taxi (M\$250) to the remote **Playa Secreta** with its rock formations and pristine white sand, located on the far side of the misnamed Isla Navidad (a peninsula rather than an island). Alternatively, hop on a boat taxi to the Grand Isla Navidad Resort (M\$25) and meander to the beach past the small La Culebra village (4km). Playa Secreta is at the far end of the 14km-long **Playa Los Cocos**, a largely undeveloped, wave-battered, imminently strollable beach.

Taking an SUP out onto the lagoon is a fantastic way to appreciate Barra. Rent a board from **Northswell** on Calle Yucatán (M\$350 for two hours), bounce on the gentle swells

BEST PLACES TO STAY & TO EAT IN BARRA DE NAVIDAD

Hotel Delfin

Homey, central hotel with fan/air-con rooms, a rooftop deck and grassy pool area. Barra's best-value digs. \$\$

Hotel Barra de Navidad

Nab a sea-facing room and laze by the kidney-shaped pool. \$\$

Tacos de Cabeza

The pick of Barra's lively *taqueria* scene, this cart has been serving cow head tacos with punchy salsa since 1982. \$

El Manglito

Chow down on local oysters and *aguachile* while peering out over the lagoon at this *palapa* restaurant. \$\$

Bananas

Mexican and North American breakfast favorites, from trademark banana pancakes and eggs every which way to *chilaquiles*. \$\$

La Bruja

Informal expat hub serving excellent Oaxacan coffee and a frequently changing array of cakes. \$

El Horno Francés

Croque monsieurs, excellent French pastries and great coffee. \$



WHERE TO EAT AND SLEEP IN TEPEC

Hotel Real de Don Juan

Beautiful hacienda overlooking Plaza Constituyentes, with king beds, marble-accented bathrooms and a good restaurant. \$\$

Emiliano

Superb breakfasts and Nayarit's regional dishes paired with wine at Tepec's best restaurant. \$\$

Loma 42

Trendy parkside bistro specializing in fresh-made pastas, wood-fired pizza, plus decent steak and grilled octopus. \$\$

DRIVING TOUR

Best of Costalegre

Stretching for some 230km south of Puerto Vallarta to the seaside haunt of Barra Navidad, the Costalegre (Happy Coast) comprises some of Jalisco's most beautiful (and uncrowded) beaches, all-encompassing ocean vistas and lush green hillsides dotted with coconut trees. This driving tour weaves together some of the most appealing beach haunts en route, along with a 500-year-old historical town. Take two days or a week.

1 Puerto Vallarta

Begin in Puerto Vallarta (p415), Jalisco's irrepressible beach capital with a lively Mexican art scene, buzzy (gay) nightlife and superb dining.

The Drive: Follow Hwy 200 south for 52km as it shadows the coast, turning inland after Boca de Tomatlán. The 'Palms to Pines Highway' then switchbacks through pine and oak woodlands.

2 El Tuito

This charming 500-year-old town is all narrow streets lined with colorful adobe buildings, radiating from the main plaza.

Two blocks from the plaza, Galería Cope-lia (11am to 4pm) is the former home of Mexican artist Manuel Lepe and now an exhibition space for local artists. Ask owner Maria Santander to introduce you to El Tuito's cottage industries: making blue corn tortillas, *raicilla* and fresh panela cheese.

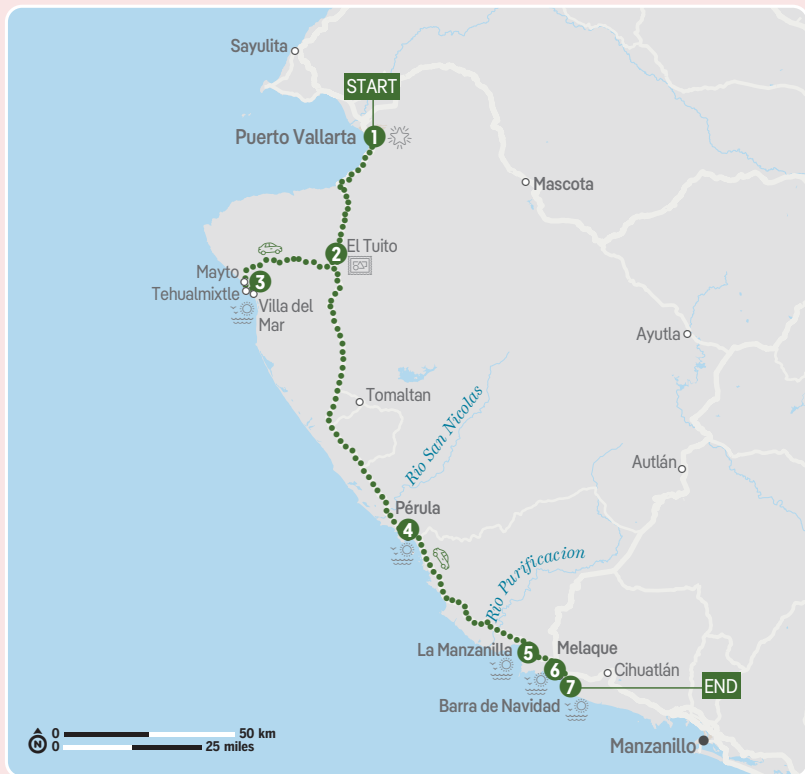
The Drive: Turn into Calle Iturbide and follow the signs to Mayto, west along the paved 39km-long road to the coast.

3 Mayto, Tehuamixtle & Villa del Mar

These three tiny fishing villages have superb oceanfront locations. Mayto boasts



JOSHUA JAY KOPPELMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



a gorgeous, 19km-long beach pounded by heavy surf, perfect for strolling, and a turtle sanctuary. Several kilometres south of Mayto, Tehua's oysters can be sampled at two beachside restaurants. There's a wreck dive site, too (Vallarta's diving outfits run trips here). Across the bay, Villa del Mar offers great kayaking in an estuary.

The Drive: Retrace your steps to Hwy 200, then proceed south for 90km, taking a right into town.

4 Pérula

This formerly secluded beach town, bookended by a promontory and a lagoon, has become increasingly popular with US and Canadian winter vacationers. A dozen boutique and beach hotels sit a stone's throw from the wide, sandy beach – excellent for swimming. The Bahía de Chamela's handful of islands makes for exciting exploration by kayak.

The Drive: Proceed south along Hwy 200 for 67km.

5 La Manzanilla

This popular fishing village has a dozen excellent restaurants, a lively weekly market, a crocodile sanctuary and a trio of terrific beaches: the white-sand town beach; Playa Boca de Iguanas (accessed by car or boat); and Playa Tentacita, a short drive north.

The Drive: A 17km-long drive south along Hwy 200 gets you to Melaque.

6 Melaque

A working town on the northern end of the Bahía de Navidad, Melaque (pictured) is the access point for the superb Playa Cuastecomates, Jalisco's first fully accessible beach with excellent restaurants and shallow, calm waters, ideal for families.

The Drive: Turn south off Hwy 200 for the last 5km stretch.

7 Barra de Navidad

The end of the road, this laidback beachside community (p441) is ideal for beach-hopping and water sports.



HIKES AROUND MASCOTA

Excellent hikes within easy reach of Mascota include an ascent of a long-extinct volcano, and an easy walk to view an extremely rare geological phenomenon. From the south side of town, cross the river to Parque 10 de Abril, then take an unmarked trailhead from the far side of the park uphill for 30 minutes. You arrive at Las Piedrotas – almost perfectly cylindrical lava balls, the likes of which are also found elsewhere in Mexico and Costa Rica. Alternatively, ascend Volcán Molcajete for terrific views of the town and valley. From the base of the volcano, 3.5km northeast of Mascota along Calle Aldama, either follow the fencing line or make your own trail up (45 minutes one way).



Playa Secreta (Hidden Beach)

FERRANT/RAITE/GETTY IMAGES ©

from passing motorboats, observe local fishers pulling in their catch and the vibrant life of kingfishers, egrets, crocodiles, ibis and iguanas in the mangroves of the island in the middle of the lagoon. Moor your board on the west side of the island for a spot of seafood lunch at the **La Isla** or **El Bajito** restaurants.

Nights at Barra Galería de Arte

ART, LIVE MUSIC AND TEQUILA

As evening falls on Barra de Navidad, strains of blues or Latino music waft from the courtyard garden, atwinkle with fairy lights, where secluded tables peek from behind a riot of greenery like coquettish ingenues. **Barra Galería de Arte** (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 5.30pm to 10.30pm) is Barra's most original nightspot, restaurant and community hub. It's the brainchild of photographer Robert, whose striking black-and-white portraits and landscapes adorn the two adjoining galleries, and his wife Rosy, who cooks up family recipes (pork with salsa verde, chiles stuffed with shrimp, marlin fajitas...), for which old-timers make reservations weeks in advance.

Deep inside the garden is the **Tequila Lounge** – the best on the Pacific coast – where you can indulge in a flight of rare spirits (book ahead for tastings) while discussing their respective merits with Robert, a tequila aficionado. Or simply turn up to sample Robert's collection of firewaters that includes mezcal, *raicilla*, sotol and *bacanora* (the Sonoran version of tequila).

Cash only. Reservations essential.



WHERE TO SLEEP IN SAN BLAS

Quinta Alberto Boutique Hotel

Family-friendly place with multiple pools, tiled rooms in neutral shades and a handy central location. **\$\$**

Hotel Hacienda Flamingos

Atmospheric 1880s hacienda with spacious, high-ceilinged rooms around a greenery-filled courtyard. Great restaurant. **\$\$\$**

Bungalows Conny

Overseen by knowledgeable owners, these cozy bungalows and four modern rooms fan around the pool. **\$**

Punta de Mita's Watery Attractions

BEACHES AND WATER SPORTS

A fishing village till the 1990s, the bustling beach town of **Punta de Mita** (42km northwest of Puerto Vallarta) sits at the northernmost point of Bahía de Banderas. These days, it mostly caters to the exclusive gated community occupying the western tip of the peninsula, where celebrities come to play. But it's also a water-sports hub, with paddleboards for hire and surfing outfits offering trips to local hot spots (see p431), and a jumping-off spot for Islas Marietas and some of the region's loveliest beaches (with exclusive beach resorts). The 5km-long Playa Distiladeras draws families with its sugar-white sands and calm waters, while Playa el Anclote is a haven for paddleboarders and beginner surfers.

Escape to Islas Marietas

VOLCANIC ISLAND; HIDDEN BEACH

Sitting some 10km offshore from Punta de Mita, two uninhabited volcanic islands – **Islas Marietas** – make up a protected marine park that teems with reef fish, manta rays and sea turtles, and sees the seasonal migration of humpback whales. Islas Marietas are particularly renowned for the **Playa Secreta** (Hidden Beach) on the eastern island. Since it's inside a volcanic crater, you have to swim or snorkel your way through the 200m-long old lava tube to reach it; entry is limited to 116 people per day and you may visit the beach if you're aged between 10 and 65 and a strong swimmer (Wednesday to Sunday only). On the western island, the gorgeous white-sand **Playa La Nopalera** is less of an adventure to reach.

Carillo Tours – one of many operators along Punta de Mita's Avenida de Anclote – offers tours of Islas Marietas that include snorkeling stops and access to the Hidden Beach. To commune with underwater life, book a full-day scuba diving trip with **Vallarta Undersea** (vallartaundersea.com); some dive sites around the islands are suitable for newly qualified PADI divers, while others require greater experience.



BEST RESTAURANTS IN PUNTA DE MITA

Tuna Blanca

Exquisite surf-and-turf offerings and the five-course tasting menu draw foodies to this oceanfront restaurant. Book ahead. \$\$\$

Norma's Tacos

Norma cooks up a storm of *asada*, *adobada* (meat in a tomato, cumin and achiote sauce), tripe and chorizo tacos at this neighborhood favorite. \$

ParrotFish

Imaginative sushi rolls and macaroni cheese with lobster dazzle at this minimalist fish and seafood temple. \$\$

Teresa's Tacos

Partake of tacos, quesadillas, burritos and enchiladas filled with *asada*, chicken, *deshebrada* (shredded beef) and veggies. \$




GETTING AROUND

Frequent buses connect Puerto Vallarta to Sayulita, Punta de Mita, San Blas and other destinations north of the city; catch a bus by the Walmart off Hwy 200 near Marina Vallarta. Combis and *colectivos* ply the same routes; wave one down.

Long-distance Primera Plus buses from Vallarta's Terminal de Autobuses connect Vallarta with Melaque (with some continuing to Barra de Navidad), but it's handy to have your own wheels for visiting small villages on the Costalegre. Vallarta's main bus station also serves destinations such as Mazatlán and Mexico City.

TRONCONES



Mexico City
Troncones

A world-class, year-round surfing destination (best for beginners from November to March), Troncones has managed to stay relatively low-key and avoid unbridled development, though the long beachfront road that connects the village proper with the traditional fishing community of La Majahua is lined with boutique hotels, fusion restaurants, expat homes and places offering sunrise yoga. Since 2020 saw much of the world locked down, Troncones has been ‘discovered’ by well-off Mexicans from the big cities as well.

The attractions are obvious: pristine beaches, including La Majahua’s long, sandy sweep, a laid-back atmosphere and surfing to suit all abilities. If you’re looking to do more than “hang ten” or just kick back, there’s good mountain biking in the hills, kayaking in the coastal mangroves and river estuaries, visits to petroglyphs in a nearby cave, plus soaks in local hot springs. Tropical storms and hurricanes are common from July to late October, when some Troncones businesses close.

TOP TIP

Troncones is pretty spread out, so rent a bicycle, come with your own wheels or be prepared for lots of walking.



DAVID PANIAGUA GUERRA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Horseback riding, Troncones

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Boca de Lagunillas
2 Cueva de Majahua

**ACTIVITIES,
COURSES & TOURS**

- 3 Capitan Mantaraya
4 Costa Nativa

- 5 Prime Surfboards
6 Troncones Point
7 Tsunami Surf

Surf's Up in Troncones

TRONCONES' BEST WAVES

Troncones' superb **year-round surf** means you don't have to go far to find that perfect wave. The miles-long, crowd-free beach between the village of Troncones and Troncones Point is punctuated by sandbars that create several consistent left- and right-hander beach breaks (including one right in front of Casa Oasis), ideal for short, intense rides for intermediate and expert surfers, particularly shortboarders (get the scoop from local surfers about rocky areas and watch out for rocks in summer).

You may hear local and visiting longboarders rave about **Troncones Point**, one of the finest left-hander point breaks in Mexico. When it's small, the takeoff is right over the rocks (complete with sea urchins), and it offers a steep drop and fast wall over a shallow reef. When it's big, it's beautiful and beefy and rolls halfway across the bay, with occasional barrels. Access is closest from the Inn at Manzanillo Bay.



WHERE TO STAY IN TRONCONES

Lo Sereno

Intimate adults-only retreat with sea-view rooms, alfresco rain showers, infinity pool and gourmet restaurant. \$\$\$

Casa Oasis

Three fully-equipped surfside apartments with beachfront plunge pool; ideal for longer surfing stays. \$\$

Troncones Point Hostel

Imaginatively designed hostel with snug dorms, 'luxury' tents, breezy *palapa* guest kitchen/bar and friendly owners. \$

TRONCONES' TOP RESTAURANTS

La Mexicana

Fairy-light-lit, breezy spot, with live music Thursdays and creative fusion dishes (mahi mahi with quinoa, veggie *chile en nogada*). \$\$

Chencho's

Family-run restaurant specializing in fine homestyle Mexican cooking; expect shrimp enchiladas *con salsa verde* and *chiles rellenos* (chili stuffed with meat or cheese). \$\$

Toro del Mar/Johny's

Watch pelicans dive-bomb over Playa Majahua while dining on grilled snapper or coconut shrimp with fried plantain. \$\$

Brisas Mexicanas

Surfside *marisquería* (seafood restaurant) serving catch of the day (*al ajillo* or breaded) and *aguachile*. \$



SURF NAYARIT & THE MICHOACÁN COAST

Looking for other surf hot spots? Head to Sayulita (p430) or Punta de Mita (p445), or else Nexpa (p450) or La Ticla (p451) along the Michoacán coast.

WE LIVE HERE: OUR FAVOURITE PLACES TO EAT OUT



Tom Donne and Lizzett Blanco, owners of Troncones Point Hostel

Indigo

Classy place to take a date. Argentinian steaks, great pizza, nice ambience. One of Troncones' upmarket places.

Cenaduria Rufi

Excellent, inexpensive home-style cooking in the village of Troncones itself. Several other *cenadurias* nearby.

Café Pacifico

Ample Mexican breakfasts, plus great coffee and fish tacos.

Amor Tropical

The best ambience, very good cocktails, good music and good food. They have a nice setup in front of the oceans with the *pangas* in front of the bar.

If you haven't surfed before, or if you have and are looking for a local expert to show you the best local hot spots, team up with Mike Linn of **Tsunami Surf** (tsunamisurfrtroncones.com), Troncones' original surfing instructor with over 20 years' experience. Swing by the office on the main street in the village to rent a surfboard or SUP, or to sign up for surfing lessons and boat trips to the best breaks. Another popular local surfing instructor is **Capitan Mantaraya** (tronconestours.com; some English spoken), who offers group and private surf lessons, as well as other outings on the ocean including snorkeling, sailing and paddleboarding.

For custom-made surfboards, board repair and tips on local swells, stop by **Prime Surfboards**, on the land side of the beach road just north of the bridge in the village, and chat to expert surfer Bruce Grimes.

Morning Kayaking on the Estuary

PADDLING AND WILDLIFE

Imagine rising before sunrise, then sedately paddling a kayak along the **Boca de Lagunillas estuary** just as the rising sun lights up the mangroves. The morning silence is broken only by occasional birdsong and the quiet splash of the paddles. Every now and then, local guide Alejandro, of **Costa Nativa** (costanativa.com.mx), makes a motion for you to stop paddling and silently points out the wildlife around you: egrets and ibis fishing in the shallows, an iguana sunning itself on a low-hanging branch, terrapins catching some rays on a rock, or even the partially submerged head of an estuary crocodile.

Trek in the Sierra Madre & Explore the La Majahua Cave

CAVES, ROCK CARVINGS AND WATERFALLS

A moderately strenuous half-day jungle trek to the **Cueva de Majahua** is a fine break from ocean pursuits. **Costa Nativa** (costanativa.com.mx) is one of several local operators who run small-group outings to this cave near the top of one of the nearby Sierra Madre mountains. The beautifully preserved, millennia-old rock carvings inside suggest that the cave once served as a ceremonial center for the area's original inhabitants, and as an astronomical observatory to predict rain and drought cycles. The flowing, multi-tiered stalactite formations in the main chamber of the limestone cavern are particularly impressive.

A less demanding half-day hike from Troncones takes you along the **Boca de Lagunillas estuary**, followed by a bracing swim in the deep dipping pool below the **El Salto waterfall** and a traditional lunch with a local family at the tiny village of **Boca**.



GETTING AROUND

Vans shuttle into Troncones from the Hwy 200 turnoff, from where you can catch buses east to Zihuatanejo and west to

Lázaro Cárdenas (for onward travel up the Michoacán coast).



Beyond Troncones

The wild Michoacán coast north of Troncones offers great surfing and off-the-beaten-track exploration. Slow down to take in the scenery.

A short drive south of Troncones is Ixtapa – a classic beach resort with a built-up waterfront. Made famous by *The Shawshank Redemption* neighboring Zihuatanejo is considerably more characterful, stretching around a beautiful bay and retaining much of its historic charm. Further south lies Xihuacon – an ancient city in the process of being excavated, as well as Laguna de Potosí, an important birding habitat and attendant village.

Few travelers besides surfers head north of Troncones along the unspoiled, sparsely populated Michoacán coast; its sketchy reputation precedes it. But if you do venture here, the rewards are ample: it is here that the Sierra de Coalcomán mountains plunge into the ocean and the spectacular, undeveloped coastline is punctuated by pristine beaches.

TOP TIP

It's best to drive the Michoacán coast earlier in the day to avoid surprise roadblocks. Never drive at night.

STAC/MARTURBOG/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Playa Madera (p452)



BEST LODGINGS ALONG THE MICOACÁN COAST

Cabañas Alba (Nexpa)

Rustic two-story cabins with kitchens and ocean-view balconies. On-site seasonal restaurant and temascal. \$

Parador Turístico de Ticla

Thatch-roofed digs overlooking the break. Spartan yet comfy bungalows and good restaurant. \$\$

Enramada Quirino García (Playa Maruata)

Maruata's nicest campground, with tents for hire, clean bathrooms and restaurant serving home-cooked meals. \$

Cabañas y Enramada Mauricia (Faro de Bucerías)

Snug *cabañas* at the north end of the beach, with great seafood prepared just feet away. \$

Roadtripping the Michoacán Coast

WILD COASTLINE; GREAT SURFING

Highway 200 hugs the shoreline most of the way along the 250km coastline of **Michoacán**, one of Mexico's most beautiful states. This is one of the nation's most memorable drives: the serpentine road passes dozens of untouched beaches, some with wide expanses of golden sand, some tucked into rocky coves and some at river mouths where quiet estuaries harbor multitudes of birds. Many beaches are uninhabited; others are home to largely indigenous communities. Mango, coconut and banana plantations line the highway; the green peaks of the Sierra Madre del Sur form a lush backdrop inland. Few travelers get to see all this beauty because of the area's reputation (see p451), and because it's a lonely and isolated drive – there's hardly any phone signal, and in some villages, the only way to contact the outside world is to buy a passcode for the world's slowest wi-fi connection. But those who venture here reap tremendous rewards.

At Km55.6, just north of Puente Nexpa bridge and 1km from Hwy 200 down a cobbled road, lies the small, unpaved, laid-back community of **Nexpa**, a hamlet misty with sea spray. It's long been a haven for surfers attracted to the sandbar and long left-hand break at the river mouth, which can rise to double overhead. Rides can go 500m or more here.

With clear turquoise waters and golden sandy beaches, **Playa Maruata** (Km150) is arguably the most beautiful beach in Michoacán. The Nahua fishing village has a bit of a hippie reputation, attracting beach bums from all over. It's a tranquil, friendly place to go camping with your sweetie or a large stack of paperbacks. It's also a prime nesting site for green turtles (nightly from July to December). Of its three beaches, the 3km-long eastern one is a pristine crescent with calm waves perfect for swimming. The middle beach, sheltered by a rocky headland riddled with caves, tunnels and blowholes, and marked by the unusual *Dedo de Dios* (God's Finger) formation rising from the sea, is for strong swimmers only. Dangerous currents and ferocious waves define the western Playa de los Muertos, good for walking and discreet nude sunbathing in a secluded cove. Just don't get caught out by the tide.

Faro de Bucerías (Km173) is a wave-battered beach with golden sand that slopes steeply down to the water. At the south end the water is calm enough to splash around in. The local Nahua community operates a scattering of *palapa* seafood restaurants, as well as beachside campgrounds where you can hire a tent beneath a *palapa* awning and live out the barefoot beach hobo life.



WHERE TO EAT ALONG THE MICOACÁN COAST

La Casa del Taco (La Ticla)

Superb fish tacos aside, this family-run spot by the plaza slings decent pizzas and breakfast dishes. \$

Mariscos El Gran Márquez (Faro de Bucerías)

Dine on shrimp cooked a dozen different ways at this friendly beachside *enramada*. \$

El Parador (San Juan de Alima)

Humdrum appearance; superb seafood, especially the *camarones zarandeados* (shrimp in a tangy sauce). Great pit stop. \$\$



Faro de Bucерías

Another renowned surfing destination, **La Tiela** (Km187) is about 2.5km off the main highway. It's a compact, dusty, down-at-heel village, but it's famous for its brilliant, long, left-point break. The long beach is divided by a swimmable freshwater river. On the beachfront, several *palapa* restaurants serve fresh seafood.

'Hanging 10' in La Saladita

LEGENDARY SURF BREAK

If you went to Malibu in the '60s, you may feel like you're in a bit of a time warp in **La Saladita**. When you stand on the beach and watch longboarding guys and gals paddle out to the Wave Machine (aka Ubliam, or reverse Malibu) – the beautiful, slow-breaking, left-hand point break – then gracefully tiptoe along their boards to 'hang 10' during the seemingly endless, mellow rides, you can almost hear the Beach Boys crooning 'Surfin' USA' in the background. It's a terrific spot for beginners as well, with gentler waves just south of the main point break giving you plenty of room to practice.

La Saladita is a 25-minute drive north from Troncones towards Los Llanos along Hwy 200, but if you have a high clearance vehicle, you can cut across the picturesque countryside in 20 minutes, crossing two shallow rivers.



WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN SALADITA

Saladita Beachside Inn

Three handsome rooms overlooking the break. Guest kitchen, hammocks, surfboards and excellent coffee. **\$\$**

La Casita

Emerge from the waves, chill at this home-away-from-home casita, and cook dinner in the alfresco kitchen. **\$\$**

Lourdes Bar & Grill

Oceanfront surfer favorite, thanks to its wood-fired pizzas, fish tacos, fajitas, smoothies and beer. **\$\$**



SAFE TRAVELS IN MICHOACÁN

The 150km stretch of the Michoacán coast between Las Brisas and Caleta de Campos has traditionally been cartel-controlled. Following cartel wars and government operations, these organizations have broken down, though their main business line certainly hasn't. Vigilante 'self-defense groups' operate here as well, from villagers trying to defend themselves from cartels to locals protesting a range of issues. There are no police or military bases, though you'll see temporary military checkpoints from time to time.

The situation shifts continuously

Cartel activity does not target tourists. Never drive at night, though, and be prepared for a lack of phone signal and occasional roadblocks that may delay you for hours (or days). Inquire locally about any 'hot spots.'



BEST RESTAURANTS IN ZIHUATANEJO

Restaurante

Mexicanos Any

Folkloric decor meets traditional Guerrero cuisine, from egg dishes with *nopal* to *pozole* (soup or thin stew). \$\$

Angustina

Pair superb ceviche and other fish dishes with signature mezcal cocktails (*mezcaltinis*, *mazcalinas*, mezcal mojitos...). \$\$

El Suspiro

Beautiful seared tuna, risottos, pastas and other Mediterranean dishes, enhanced by exquisite sunsets at a lofty hillside restaurant. \$\$\$

Bistro del Mar

Just meters from the waves this candlelit bistro blends Latin, European and Asian flavors with local fish and seafood. \$\$



WIRESTOCK CREATORS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Playa La Ropa

Above & Below Zihuatanejo's Waves

BEACHES AND WATER SPORTS

Zihuatanejo, or Zihua as it's affectionately called, is a traditional fishing village that grew into a busy yet appealing town in the 1970s. Zihua stretches around a beautiful bay, and has retained much of its historic charm. Fishers still meet every morning on the beach by **Paseo del Pescador** (Fisherman's Passage) to sell their catch of the day. At night, locals stroll along the waterfront sidewalk. The narrow cobblestone streets of downtown hide some excellent *taquerías*, local restaurants, bars, boutiques and artisan studios, while the more exclusive boutique accommodations sit on the verdant slopes above the white-sand beaches further to the south. No wonder Andy and Red chose to live out their post-prison days here in *The Shawshank Redemption* (though that scene was shot in the Virgin Islands, in case you were wondering).

Beaches are a big part of Zihua's draw. **Playa Municipal**, in the center of town, is convenient if you're staying in the neighborhood, but you can definitely find much cleaner waters elsewhere on the bay. A five-minute stroll heading east along a boardwalk leads to **Playa Madera**, known for its shallow, swimmable beach.

Over a steep hill from Playa Madera is **Playa La Ropa**, about a 20-minute walk along a scenic highway with spectacular ocean views along the way. Some of the best hotels and restaurants in town are clustered in Playa La Ropa, and its long stretch of white sand provides fine swimming and waterskiing conditions. You can rent SUPs at **Badfish** (+52 755 136 13 74; Calle Galeana 5) and have them delivered to Playa La Ropa, where



WHERE TO SLEEP CHEAPLY IN ZIHUATANEJO

Hotel del Pescador

Colorful, centrally located hotel with spacious, tiled, fan-cooled rooms overlooking the *malecón*. \$

Hotel Adelita

Friendly staff oversee sizable doubles, triples and family rooms a block from the waterfront. \$

Hotel JB

Brightly decorated rooms and hammocks by the pool await at this congenial cheapie near Playa La Ropa. \$

the calm waters (particularly in the mornings) are ideal for doubleboarding, and watch revelers whiz by on banana boats.

Across the bay, protected **Playa Las Gatas** gets very crowded during the Mexican holiday season in July and August and the winter vacation period, but when the crowds thin out it makes a good snorkeling spot. Boats to Las Gatas (round-trip fare M\$80) depart from Zihuatanejo's main pier, where you can also arrange all-day deep-sea fishing excursions (around M\$4500 for up to four passengers). Catch sailfish (year-round), blue or black marlin (March to May), roosterfish (September and October), wahoo (October), mahi-mahi (November and December) and Spanish mackerel (December).

For big-wave surfing and horseback riding, hit **Playa Larga**, about 12km south of the city center. Catch a 'Coacoyul' combi from the corner of Juárez and Gonzalez to the Playa Larga turnoff, then take another combi to the beach.

Near Playa Larga, **Playa Manzanillo** is considered one of the best snorkeling spots in the area and it draws fewer visitors than the highly popular Playa Las Gatas. Marine life is abundant here due to a convergence of currents, and the visibility can be great – up to 35m in dry months. The secluded beach is reachable by boat.

A Glimpse into Zihua's Past

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

While strolling along the *malecón* in central Zihuatanejo, stop by the compact yet engaging **Museo Arqueológico de la Costa Grande** for an excellent insight into the history, archaeology and pre-Hispanic cultures of the Guerrero coast, from the earliest-known human habitation to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Fanning out around the central courtyard the six rooms display jewelry, stone tools, rock carvings and ceramics with Olmec, Teotihuacán, Tarascan and Mexica elements from key archaeological sites such as Tierras Prietas and Cerro de la Madera. Bone up on your Spanish to read the labeling.

Devils, Coffee & Hand-woven Rugs

ZIHUATANEJO'S BEST SHOPPING

Several streets in downtown Zihua – particularly those closest to the waterfront – are dotted with boutiques, selling everything from quality surfing gear and silver jewelry to organic coffee. Even at the large **craft market** that stretches along Calle 5 de Mayo and sells mostly mass-produced tat (T-shirts emblazoned with 'Eat My Burrito', etc) you can also find some quality crafts, such as ironwood animal carvings from the Sonora and bags woven out of recyclable materials. But several outlets stand out.



WHERE TO DRINK IN ZIHUATANEJO

Tasting Room por Capricho del Rey

Snug little bar welcomes you with Zihua's four original brews plus guest Guerrero beers.

Barracuda Bar

Mingle with locals while watching the game on the big screen and downing giant margaritas.

Bar La Playa

A convivial atmosphere, cold beer and super-sized American cheeseburgers reign at this family-run bar.



ZIHUATANEJO'S BEST STREET FOOD FOR NIGHT OWLS

La Flechita Roja

Popular 24-hour stall epitomizing Mexican nose-to-tail dining, with eyeballs, tongue and more served atop fresh tortillas. \$

Tacos Mi Barrio

Sit-down *taquería* serving superlative *tacos de suadero*, *lengua* (tongue) and *barbacoa*, plus multitopping *tacos especiales*. \$

La Papa Loca

Baked potatoes are blanketed with melted cheese and topped with *pastor* (marinated pork), cream and more. \$

Taquería Mi Ranchito

Choose between *tacos* and *quesadillas*, piled high/stuffed with chorizo, *pastor*, *bistec* or *tripa*. Closed Wednesday. \$



BEST BOUTIQUE HOTELS IN ZIHUATANEJO

Hotel Tentaciones

Adults-only retreat comprising marble, thatch, water features and light-filled, understated rooms. Superb restaurant. \$\$\$

Solana

Boutique B&B

Toast the sunset from the infinity pool high above the bay, then retreat to your individually designed studio amidst lush gardens. \$\$\$

La Casa Que Canta

Cliff-top, thatch-roofed, adults-only hotel with exquisitely decorated sea-view suites, some with private terraces and plunge pools. \$\$\$

Amuleto

Design hotel with five individually styled stone-, ceramic- and wood-clad suites.

The fusion restaurant is a destination in itself. \$\$\$

Devils, angels, jaguars and other fantastic creatures peer down at you from the walls of **El Jumil** on Paseo del Pescador. Masks are well-known traditional handicrafts of Guerrero state, mostly used in regional fiestas, though there are also some decorative pieces carved from cattle skulls, contemporary masks that border on steampunk and antique wood carvings from Jaliaca de Campo depicting the seven deadly sins.

If you're interested in handwoven anything – *sarapes* (blankets with an opening for the head), rugs or hammocks (it has some great ones) – look for **La Zapoteca**, near the fishers' marina. The weaving is all from Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, a village renowned for its high-quality textiles.

The **Café Caracol** shop on Calle Álvarez sells three different types of delicious organic coffee from the village of Atoyac de Álvarez in Guerrero state, as well as vanilla and honey. You can also sample the brew here.

Ixtapa's Beachfront Delights

BEACH-RESORT TOWN

Zihuatanejo's neighbor, **Ixtapa**, was transformed from a coconut plantation into a Cancún-like resort in the '70s. The result is a long string of high-rise hotels sitting cheek by jowl along the lovely, blond-sand stretch of **Playa El Palmar**, dotted with parasailing concessions, but little local community. Ixtapa remains pretty low-key, its appeal best appreciated by those seeking a hassle-free beach getaway. From the gray-sand Playa Linda, just north of Ixtapa, frequent boats depart for the popular **Isla Ixtapa**, with its crystal-clear turquoise waters off the main Playa Varadero, good for snorkeling. Playa Corales, on the far side of the island, is the quietest, with soft white sand but more waves. Thatch-covered, open-air *enramada* restaurants make for lazy seafood lunches.

Birding & Snorkeling in Barra de Potosí

FEATHERED AND FINNED LIFE

The laidback fishing village of **Barra de Potosí** is about 26km southeast of Zihuatanejo. It's located at the far tip of Playa Larga, a seemingly endless palm-fringed, white-sand beach, and at the mouth of the brackish **Laguna de Potosí**, a salt-water lagoon about 6.5km long, fringed with mangroves and home to at least 212 species of birds including herons, kingfishers, cormorants and pelicans.

Just inland from the beachfront, around 3.5km north of town, the 7-hectare **El Refugio de Potosí** (elrefugiodepotosi.com; weekends only) rehabilitates injured wildlife such as armadillos, wild cats, coatis and otters; breeds butterflies



WHERE TO STAY IN IXTAPA

Villas Victoria

Family-run guesthouse near Mirador Ixtapa, with cozy rooms overlooking the pool. Not near the beach. \$

Barceló Ixtapa

All-inclusive beachside five-star hotel with spa, multiple restaurants, bars and pools. Villas allow extra privacy. \$\$\$

Posada Real Ixtapa

Multiple pools, proximity to Ixtapa's golf course and family-friendly facilities beckon at this beachfront hotel. \$\$\$



Ixtapa coastline

and parrots; and contributes to environmental education in the area. The grounds are home to macaws, iguanas and an impressive 18m sperm-whale skeleton exhibit. While it's only open to the general public on weekends, you may visit with a local guide any day of the week.

Based at Restaurante Rosita, English-speaking guide **Araceli 'Cheli' Oregón** (cell phone 755-1306829) runs two-hour boat tours of the lagoon to spy a variety of birds and crocs. She also offers four-hour and six-hour snorkeling and fishing trips. You can combine your passions for feathered and finned life on trips to the **Morros de Potosí**, a cluster of massive guano-covered rocks about 20 minutes' offshore. Boats circle the Morros, affording views of the many seabirds that nest out here, before heading to nearby Playa Manzanillo (p453), with its wealth of reef fish and generally excellent visibility.

Place of the Turquoise Holders

ANCIENT CITY TO RIVAL TEOTIHUACÁN

Known locally as 'La Chole,' the hamlet of Soledad de Maciel sits atop the largest, most important archaeological site in Guerrero state: **Xihuacan**. Since excavations began in earnest in 2007, archaeologists have discovered a plaza, a ball court and three pyramids – one crowned by five temples – all left behind by pre-Hispanic cultures including Tepoztecos, Cuitlatecos and Tomiles. Visitors may access the ball court, some 500m south of the Museo de Sitio Xihuacan, as well as the recently unearthed Montículo B pyramid, 300m beyond the ball court.

In Nahuatl, 'Xihuacan' (she-wha-cahn) means 'place of the people who control eternity,' with 'turquoise' being a synonym for



BEST PLACES TO EAT & DRINK IN IXTAPA

Lili Cipriani

Isla Ixtapa's best restaurant, serving grilled fish with handmade tortillas and a spicy habanero and *chile de arbol* salsa. \$\$

El Tiburón de la Costa

Wash down heaped seafood platters, grilled fish and shrimp dishes with margaritas the size of your head. \$\$

Ruben's Hamburgers

Chow down on burgers with melted cheese, grilled onions, bacon with baked *chayote* (prickly pear) on the side. \$

Generals Sports Bar

Visitors and locals rub shoulders while watching the game on the big screen and downing ice-cold Pacificos. \$



WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN BARRA DE POTOSÍ

La Casa del Encanto

Maze of brilliantly colored open-air rooms, hammocks, fountains and candlelit stairways, run by knowledgeable Laura. \$\$

Bungalows Solecito

Fan-cooled suites and stylish, fully equipped bungalows with ocean views surround a pool in a tropical garden. \$\$

Enramada Rosita

Dig into *aguachile*, ceviche and grilled fish at this family-run favorite, toes firmly in sand. \$



SEA TURTLE RELEASE

The stretch of Guerrero coast that encompasses Troncones, Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo is a vital nesting habitat for the endangered leatherback and olive ridley sea turtles.

Each year between June and November, they come ashore to nest and lay eggs, with hatching usually taking place in August, September, October and early November. Given the predators on land and sea, as well as poachers stealing eggs, a baby turtle's odds of reaching adulthood are around 1 in 1000. Turtle conservation camps along the coast, including Ayotlcalli Turtle Camp near Zihuatanejo and Troncones' Campamento de Tortugas Majahua, do their best to maximise the hatchlings' chances of survival. Visitors may assist with releases between August and March.



Guerrero coast

GLASS AND NATURE / SHUTTERSTOCK ©

'time.' Dating as far back as 800 BCE, the ancient settlement of Xihuacan was at the height of its influence and power between 200 CE and 800 CE, and the largest population center between Acapulco and Zacatula at the time. During its existence it was an important ceremonial center, used for the worship of different gods by pre-Hispanic peoples such as the Cuitlatecos, Tarascans, Mixtecas, Aztecs, Zapotecas and Totonacas. Stone carvings found at the site suggest Olmec influence, going back even further in time, while a circular stone and deposits of human remains suggest that human sacrifice was practiced here.

The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia claims that Xihuacan ruins rival Teotihuacán or Chichén Itzá in importance, spanning the pre-Classic to post-Classic periods in Mesoamerican chronology. Finds recovered from the site suggest that Xihuacan had a long-standing trade relationship with Teotihuacán.

Xihuacan was abandoned around 850 CE after catastrophic marine flooding; its palace, pyramids and the 55m-long ball court – the second-largest in Mexico after Chichén Itzá's – were buried under tons of sand, consistent with tsunami damage.

Near Xihuacan, the **Museo de Sitio Xihuacan** (www.inah.gob.mx) displays artefacts recovered from the site, including two granite ball hoops from the ball court. Highlights include a stone carved with a glyph of the name of the town in the late pre-Hispanic era, and a round stone slab carved with an image of Tlaltecuhli, a deity that devoured gods and men at the end of their life cycle.



GETTING AROUND

There are frequent buses along Hwy 200 between Zihuatanejo and the hub town of Lázaro Cárdenas via the resort of Ixtapa, and between Zihuatanejo and Acapulco to the south. For Xihuacan and Barra de Potosí, it helps to have a car, though Petatlán- and Acapulco-bound buses can drop you off at the turnoffs to both. Xihuacan is also reachable by guided tour.

North of Troncones, you really need your own wheels. When there are no roadblocks along the Michoacán coast, a daily bus connects Lázaro Cárdenas with the fishing port of Manzanillo, but driving is the only way to reach the surfing spots and villages off Hwy 200.

ACAPULCO



Unless you've lived as a hermit in some cave or been shipwrecked on an uninhabited island for the past 70 years, you will have heard of Acapulco. From the 1950s onwards, Mexico's original party town was dubbed the 'Pearl of the Pacific' – particularly during its heyday as a playground for the rich and famous, when everyone who was anyone (Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Elizabeth Taylor) came to stay here. Though Acapulco's reputation among international visitors has long waned, and it hasn't been frequented by Hollywood greats in some time, to the rich and famous of Mexico City it still remains the place to see and be seen.

Besides the daredevil cliff divers – the city's most celebrated spectacle – the city's topography is an additional lure: Acapulco sprawls around a gorgeous golden-sand bay, with luxury villas and intimate boutique hotels hiding amidst jungle greenery on cliffs south of the city.

TOP TIP

Acapulco's two high seasons are December to April and the hurricane season of July and August. Avoid pricey, crowded Christmas and Semana Santa vacation times. Despite frightening drug war statistics, the city's violence is largely confined to cartel disputes that don't target tourists. Take official taxis only and avoid flashing bling.



SIGHTS

- 1 Isla La Roqueta
- 2 La Quebrada
- 3 Playa Condesa
- 4 Playa El Morro
- 5 Playa Hornitos
- 6 Playa Hornos
- 7 Playa Icacos
- 8 Playa Tamarindo



Acapulco coastline

CYCLING TOUR

The Centro Histórico

This cycling tour combines the varied attractions of Acapulco's historical heart, including its oldest plaza; a couple of excellent museums; a superlative spot for viewing sunsets and daredevil divers; winding coastal streets and the final home of muralist Diego Rivera. Rent a bicycle from ACA Bike (acaenbici.com) on Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán and give yourself at least four hours to complete the tour. Start early and bring plenty of water.

1 Zócalo

This leafy, fountain-studded plaza sits at the western end of Acapulco Bay. Languid by day, in the evening it comes alive with street performers and mariachis. The square is dominated by the 1930-built Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, unusual for its blue-domed, neo-Byzantine architecture.

The Ride: Follow Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán westwards past Playa de Tlacopanocha – the departure point for boat tours – and then south along the Las Playas peninsula.

2 Playas Caleta & Caletilla

Exuding a family fiesta vibe, these two small beaches, separated by a rocky outcrop, are hugely popular with local families. Take a water taxi to the Isla La Roqueta (p461).

The Ride: Take Avenida Adolfo López Mateos along the peninsula's west coast, and keep left as you pass Playa Langosta.

3 Sinfonía del Mar

Pause to admire the coastal views at this stepped plaza, its clifftop viewing platform high above the ocean. It occasionally



CLAUDINE VAN MASSENHOVE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Fuerte de San Diego



hosts concerts, but mainly serves as a sunset-viewing spot.

The Ride: Continue along Avenida Adolfo López Mateos past the Quebrada plaza. Time it to catch the *1pm clavadista* (p460) performance, then follow Inalámbrica south.

4 La Casa de los Vientos

This villa is where Diego Rivera spent his final two years (1955–1957) with his muse and lover, Mexican art collector Dolores ‘Lola’ Olmedo. By the villa entrance, admire the two spectacular tile-and-shell murals depicting Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent, and Tláloc, the Aztec god of rain.

The Ride: Descend to the coast along Inalámbrica, take Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán, then Calle Hornitos.

5 Museo de la Máscara

Unable to visit the epic mask museum in Zacatecas? Swing by this gallery, home to (mostly) Guerrero-made visages of devils, conquistadors and jaguars. Peruse

the horsehair and goat’s-horn ceremonial masks and the human-animal hybrids from Mexican legends, which dictate that each person has a guardian animal.

The Ride: Proceed west along Calle Hornitos for 150m.

6 Fuerte de San Diego

This 1616-built pentagonal fort once protected the Spanish *naos* (galleons) from Dutch and English buccaneers. Inside, the superb Museo Histórico de Acapulco traces the region’s history, from its settlement by Yopes and Tepozteco peoples to Acapulco’s key role in the Mexico–Philippines trade routes, responsible for Asian influence on Mexican arts. Check out the cross-section of a galleon, spot a Japanese katana in an exquisitely carved ivory sheath and learn of the life of warrior-priest José María Morelos, instrumental in taking this fort from the Spanish during the War of Independence.



WORSHIP THE AZTEC GOD OF RAIN

One of Acapulco's best (and least-known) attractions is Palma Sola, a ceremonial site dating back to 450 BCE to 650 CE, located high above the city on La Cuesta hill. There are wonderfully well-preserved rock paintings, petroglyphs and a bird's-eye view of Acapulco. Steep footpaths wind up between granite boulders inscribed with human figures – some dancing or wearing ritual masks – and human-anchor hybrids.

The site is located at the confluence of two creeks, suggesting its importance in the worship of Tláloc, the god of rain, who is associated with running water. Don't miss the cave carved with petroglyphs depicting the creation myth, or the museum (closed Monday). Taxis from central Acapulco cost around M\$350, including waiting time.



La Quebrada

Daredevils of La Quebrada

INTREPID CLIFF DIVERS

The cliff divers of **La Quebrada** – Acapulco's most famous tourist attraction – have been performing daredevil dives off the La Quebrada cliffs since the 1920s, though it wasn't until 1934 that the *clavadistas* (clavadistaslaquebrada.com) became an organized spectacle. It's an impressive one, and it's even been immortalized in the 1963 movie *Fun in Acapulco*, starring Elvis Presley as a clavavista himself. (Spoiler alert: Presley's dives were performed by a stunt double.)

As an audience gathers on the viewing platform below the cliff (get here early to secure a good viewing spot), a team of seven lithe young divers leaps down into the churning waves before scaling the vertical cliff opposite. In the evenings, torches are lit at the clifftop shrine to the Virgin, asking her for protection, before the show takes place. Most dive from the lower (25m) platform – first a solo diver, then a pair simultaneously, then three divers leaping gracefully in sync. The final diver dives from the very top (35m).

The trick is the timing: they have to get it right and meet the incoming wave, otherwise there is not enough water in the churning cove to cushion their fall, and you find the au-



WHERE TO EAT TACOS IN ACAPULCO

Taquería El Cheff

Specializes in tacos and *panuchos* (tortillas stuffed with beans) filled with *cochinita pibil* (Yucatan-style pork). \$

Tacos El Guamuchil

Near the Mercado Central, this morning taco stall does wonderful things with boiled cow's head. \$

Tacos Tumbas

Long-time Zona Dorada favorite with night owls, serving *tacos al pastor* and *tacos de bistec*. \$

dience holding their collective breaths as they watch the divers make their way out of the roiling sea without getting dashed against the rocks. The spectacle lasts for around 20 minutes. Show times are 1pm, 7pm, 8pm, 9pm and 10pm. The last show features the final diver holding two flaming torches as he dives into the darkness (they turn off the floodlights for that one).

Escape to Isla La Roqueta

FORESTED ISLAND WITH UNDERWATER STATUE

Departing from the entrance to Mágico Mundo Marino between Playas Caleta and Caletilla (p458), water taxis make the eight-minute trip across the channel to the jungle-clad, hilly **Isla La Roqueta**. You land at the namesake beach, which is compact but clean (and crowded on weekends), and where there's decent swimming. Alternatively, you can take a short, moderately steep trail to the small lighthouse at the island's highest point for excellent city vistas, or rent snorkeling gear from the couple of *palapa* restaurants serving seafood, and amble to the opposite side of the island where there's a good snorkeling spot. In the harbor near the island there's a submerged bronze statue of the Virgen de los Mares. It's easiest to spot it from a **Yates Fondo de Cristal** (yatesacapulco.com.mx) glass-bottomed boat; the boats run 45-minute trips from the beach near the *zócalo* to the island, Mexican celebrity homes are pointed out en route.

Beach-Hopping in the Zona Dorada

ACAPULCO'S BEVY OF BEACHES

Acapulco's beaches top the list of must-dos for most visitors. The beaches heading east around the bay from the *zócalo* – **Playas Tamarindo, Hornos, Hornitos, El Morro, Condesa** and **Icacos** – are the most popular, though the west end of Hornos sometimes smells of fish from the morning catch. Together, the beaches flank what's known as the Zona Dorada, stretching from the big Mexican flag near *centro histórico* to the headland, beyond which lies exclusive Diamante. Playa Tamarindo has several good seafood *palapas*, popular with locals, while the Hornitos, El Morro, Condesa and Icacos beaches are fronted by high-rise beach hotels, with a particularly lively *malecón* stretch between the Diana Glorietta monument inside a traffic circle and Hotel Fiesta Americana, with numerous seafront restaurants, blaring salsa beats and Paradise Bungy action. Stop by one of the kiosks dotted along the Zona Dorada's four main beaches if you want



BEST RESTAURANTS IN ZONA DORADA

La Casa de Tere

Come for *pozole verde* on Thursday and *barbacoa de carnero* (slow-cooked lamb) on Sunday. \$\$

Chile, Maíz y Frijol

Thimble-sized family restaurant serving egg and *chilaquile* breakfasts, enchiladas, quesadillas and seafood with homemade salsas. \$\$

El Amigo Miguel

Shrimp *al ajillo* (garlic butter) or a *la diablo*, ceviche, grilled lobster and fish tacos are stars at this Acapulco minichain. \$\$

Suntary Acapulco

Have your teppanyaki dish grilled at your table or opt for imaginative sushi rolls and wines from an Old Testament-thick menu. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN CENTRO AND CALETA

Hotel Mirador Acapulco

This 1930s hotel lets you view the clavadistas from the on-site restaurant and tiered pools. \$\$

Pier D Luna

Intimate Caleta retreat with bay views, saltwater pool, and chef-cooked French-Mexican meals by arrangement. \$\$

Hotel Elcano Acapulco

One of Zona Dorada's best family-friendly beach resorts; overlooking Playa Icacos, with facilities galore. \$\$\$



BEST HOTELS & RESTAURANTS IN DIAMANTE

Banyan Tree Cabo Marqués

This jungly all-inclusive resort with secluded villas, infinity pool, spa and Thai restaurant brings Asia to Acapulco. \$\$\$

Encanto Acapulco
Cliff-top minimalist design-hotel doubling as an art gallery, with open-plan contemporary rooms, award-winning spa and infinity pool. \$\$\$

Zibu

Upscale *palapa* restaurant combining sunset views with seafood-heavy Mexican-Thai fusion. Impressive wine list and mango martinis. \$\$\$

Paititi del Mar

Tropical garden haunt specializing in ceviche *paraiso* (tuna with mango), grilled or *ajillo*-style octopus and other ocean delights. \$\$

to soar high above the sea, attached to a parachute and propelled by a speedboat, or be dragged along the bumpy surf on a banana boat.

Romance Your Sweetie in Exclusive Diamante

LUXE RETREATS AND SECLUDED BEACHES

At the south end of Acapulco Bay the jungle-backed Hwy 200 climbs steadily, with spectacular views of the bay opening up to your right if you're heading south towards the airport and the former fishing village of Barra Vieja. Where the road flattens out, a densely forested headland juts out to sea. Together with Punta Diamante, it frames the deeply indented Puerto Marqués Bay, south of which lies the long sandy stretch of Playa Revolcadero, pounded by the heavy swell and backed by five-star beach resorts. Together they make up **Diamante**, Acapulco's wealthiest suburb, and with the roofs of luxury villas and Acapulco's most exclusive hotels peeking out of the riotous greenery high above the ocean, it appears aptly named. Besides lounging around on the white sand of Playa Marqués and the adjacent Playa Palmita Sola and Playa Majahua coves, and swimming in the bay's calm waters, the main draws here are the luxurious seclusion and opulent facilities of exclusive hotels, as well as sampling some of Acapulco's most imaginative dining.

Lazin' on the Lagoon

TRANQUIL BEACH TOWN; ENORMOUS LAGOON

Just 10km north of Acapulco lies the serene beach settlement of **Pie de la Cuesta**, where the beach seems to go on forever, and where you can canter on horseback (book directly from the gauchos or via your hotel) past the rolling surf and *palapa*-roofed toes-in-the-sand seafood restaurants. But it's the odd combination of dramatic sunset views from the long beach and bloody sunrises over the lagoon that have made Pie de la Cuesta famous, for the town sits on a narrow strip of land framed by the Pacific Ocean and the **Laguna de Coyuca** (where part of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was filmed). Pie de la Cuesta's serenity and closeness to nature appeals to weekenders from Acapulco, so on Friday and Saturday nights, the town is as buzzy as it gets. The vast palm-fringed freshwater lagoon dwarfs Acapulco Bay and its wealth of bird life attracts dedicated twitchers. The lagoon's three islands, excluding Isla Pájaros, a bird sanctuary, can be visited with local operators.



WHERE TO EAT IN CENTRO

Marisquería El Tiburón Costeño

Plastic tables, simple decor, oysters by the dozen and *aguachile de camarón* define this breezy La Quebrada eatery. \$

El Nopalito

Old-school eatery with daily menu, which includes *mole verde* (green chili sauce dish) on Thursday and Sunday. \$

Mariscos Nachos

Compact restaurant serving home-style grilled snapper and shrimp dishes, washed down with ice-cold Corona beers. \$\$



Beach club, Diamante

Several establishments offer boat trips on the lagoon and eager captains await your business along the main road and down by the boat launches at the lagoon's southeast corner. Prices vary depending on the number of people and length of boat tour, but boat outings typically offer lunch stops on Isla Montosa, where there's an *enramada* serving local specialties, and time for swimming.

Waterskiing and wakeboarding on the lagoon are also popular pastimes. There are several waterskiing clubs along the main road, all charging around M\$1000 per hour, including Club de Ski Cadena.



BEST PLACES TO STAY & EAT IN PIE DE LA CUESTA

A&V Hotel Boutique

Intimate hotel with earthy design, quirky art and hammocks inside the rooms. Balconies overlook the pool and restaurant. \$\$

Hotel Baxar

Laidback place exuding barefoot style, with rattan lampshades and mosquito nets in rooms. Kayaks are free. \$\$

Restaurante Ricarda Yopes

Mexican standards for breakfast and catch-of-the-day and Pacific shrimp the rest of the day. \$

La Cabañita

Family-run restaurant near the south end of the lagoon, serving grilled fish and *cabeza de cabrito*. \$



GETTING AROUND

Acapulco's 10km-long principal bayside avenue, Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán ('La Costera') hugs the shoreline all the way around the bay. The easiest way to get around is on the 'Base-Caleta' bus route which connects the *zócalo* and Playa Caleta with the Zona Dorada. For a very local experience, hop aboard one of the *Pimp My Ride*-style former US school buses bound for 'Zócalo' or

'Condesa' that turn into mobile, salsa-blasting raves in the evening. Taxi rates for the white-and-blue VW Beetles vary, depending on your negotiation skills, while the shared white-and-yellow taxis that ply the Costera fall in between the buses and the taxis, price-wise.

'Pie de la Cuesta' buses depart from Avenida Costera, across the street from the post office.

WESTERN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

MEXICO'S CULTURAL ROOTS

This area is home to the origins of mariachi, tequila and Day of the Dead rituals, as well as Mexico's second-biggest city, active volcanoes and millions of monarchs.

West of Mexico City through central Michoacán, Colima and Jalisco to the border with Nayarit resides the origins of many of the traditions we picture when we think of Mexico. Mariachi music began here. As did *charrería* (Mexican cowboys), tequila, *birria* (goat meat in broth) and *carnitas* (pulled pork). In these high-altitude plains where the weather tends to be mild year-round, you'll find Guadalajara, with an alluring restaurant and bar scene, a fascinating historic core and irresistible folk art destined to populate your living room. Beyond Guadalajara are seas of blue agave, 2,300-year-old indigenous ruins, chilled-out towns by Mexico's largest freshwater lake and



horse-ranch country. In Michoacán, see one of Mexico's most impressive architectural cities, hike the youngest volcano in the Americas and revel in some of Mexico's most vibrant Día de Muertos celebra-

tions before shopping for expert crafts in artisan towns. Colima is worth checking out for its snow-capped volcano, *pueblo mágico* ('magical towns'), impeccably preserved tomb dolls and upstart craft booze scene, too. The western central highlands are largely devoid of international tourists, but perhaps not for much longer, so make like the millions of monarch butterflies that migrate to eastern Michoacán every fall and flutter over as soon as you can because this region is too divine to pass up.

RUBI RODRIGUEZ MARTINEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE MAIN AREAS

GUADALAJARA

Young, artistic hub, **p470**

TEQUILA

Distillery tours in a *pueblo mágico*, **p487**

MORELIA

Pink stone city close to monarchs, **p492**

PÁTZCUARO

Artisans and *día de muertos*, **p498**

COLIMA

Ruins and volcanoes, **p504**



JESUS CERANTES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Above: Agave farmer, Tequila; Opposite: Morelia (p492)

Guadalajara, p470

Mexico's second-biggest city has a beautiful old town in the shape of a cross, hip cafes and bars, and enticing folk art.

Tequila, p487

Learn how Mexico's beloved agave liquor is made and do tastings at distilleries in this hectic *pueblo mágico*.



Colima, p504

View 1,000-year-old ruins, summit a volcano to see an active cone that's still smoking, and visit a charming town.



Find Your Way

This region stretches 48km east to west and 224km north to south, and the terrain is mostly flat despite being at high altitude. Look out for magical towns along the way.



CAR

Only drive in Guadalajara if you must – traffic is nuts. A vehicle is helpful elsewhere in this region, especially if you want to hop from *pueblo mágico* to *pueblo hospital* (art town), as coach buses tend to return to hubs rather than between towns. Expect toll roads.



BUS

Guadalajara has an abundant local bus network – use the Moovit app. Travel to towns just beyond the big city from the old bus station and further from the new station Michoacán is combi (van) country, with vans zipping around Morelia and Pátzcuaro for cheap fares.



TRAIN

Sadly Mexico's commuter trains are long gone, but you can hop aboard José Cuervo Express for a bucket list tequila tour and visit to the agave farm. Yes, the trip is all you can drink.

Pátzcuaro, p498

Amazing artisans, an island with a 40m statue of a Mexican hero and arguably the best place to experience Día de Muertos.

Morelia, p492

Wander the streets past pink-stone architecture, try Michoacán cuisine and mezcal before witnessing millions of monarch butterflies.



© Chilpancingo

Plan Your Time

The Western Central Highlands is a place for trying, tasting and learning about local culture. Start with Guadalajara or Morelia and work your way out from there.



ARTURO PEÑA ROMANO/REXNA/GETTY IMAGES ©

Mercado San Juan de Dios (p472)



Seasonal Highlights

Mild weather and plenty of cultural events mean there's no bad time to visit, but October to December are probably the best due to Día de Muertos, monarch season and Christmas.



FEBRUARY

Peak season for witnessing millions of monarch butterflies on fir treetops at **Reserva Mariposa Monarca** in eastern Michoacán.



MARCH

Guadalajara hosts the week-long **Festival Internacional del Cine**, with screenings and parties across the city.



APRIL

Go handicraft shopping at **Tianguis Artesanal de Uruapan** over Semana Santa and **Feria de Morelia** over three weeks in April.

A Full Day in Guadalajara

- Start your day with coffee and sweet bread in **Plaza de Armas**, then embark on a self-guided **walking tour** (p476) of Guadalajara's cross-shaped historic center. Finish with José Clemente Orozco's magnificent murals at **Hospicio Cabañas** (p476) then wade into **Mercado San Juan de Dios** (p472) for lunch.
- Grab a taxi to **Tlaquepaque** (p475) and wander along Independencia to see (and buy) impeccable folk art. Catch a breather with a drink in front of mariachis at **El Parián** (p477), but save room for dinner at **Casa Luna** (p475).
- If you still have energy, taxi to Colonia Americana for cocktails at **El Gallo Altanero** and **PIMP** (p479).

Three Jam-packed Days

● After your full day in **Guadalajara** (p470), take a bus, rent a car or opt for a tour of Tequila. If you drive, stop at **Tequila Cascahuín** (p486) and **Cantaritos La Tequilera** (p485) in El Arenal for a distillery tour, tasty shrimp tacos and, of course, tequila cocktails.

● In **Tequila** (p487), take your tour – **Mundo Cuervo** (p489) and **Hacienda La Cofradía** (p490) are great options – and explore the plaza. Soak up the booze with a meal at **La Taberna del Cofrade** (p490) or **La Antigua Casona** (p489) before heading back to Guadalajara, perhaps with a stop for a dance party at **Cantaritos el Güero** (p485).

Time to Explore Central Michoacán

● Spend your day in **Morelia** (p492), taking in the city's gorgeous stone architecture and trying Michoacán food and mezcal (at **Tata**, p495, for instance) before finishing your day at **Nameless** (p495), a speakeasy behind a *taquería* fridge.

● The next morning, embark on a memorable journey to see millions of butterflies as they overwinter on the eastern edge of the state in **Reserva Mariposa Monarca** (p496; from November to March).

● The next day, take a shared taxi to **Pátzcuaro** (p498) and circumnavigate its beautiful lake on the hunt for amazing artisanal finds. A couple of days later, climb **Volcán Parícutín** (p503), the youngest volcano in the Americas.



JUNE

Experience the second-largest LGBTQI+ march in Mexico and the ninth-biggest in Latin America at **Marcha del Orgullo GDL**.



AUGUST

Listen to thousands of mariachis from across Mexico during **Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi**. *Charrería* (Mexican cowboy) events are also held.



NOVEMBER

See the marigolds and flickering lights in Pátzcuaro and surrounding towns for **Día de Muertos**. Book your stay well ahead.



DECEMBER

Towns around Lago de Pátzcuaro hold traditional dance events around Christmas, and the big city plazas are lit up.

GUADALAJARA

Guadalajara


 Mexico City

Guadalajara (gwa-da-la-ha-ra) might be big (six million people in the metro area), but it sure doesn't feel like it. Well, unless you're stuck in traffic. Conquered in 1531 and named after a Spanish town with an Arabic name, Guadalajara hovers around a mild 70°F (21°C) year-round and it almost never rains from October through June. This city is the cultural birthplace of mariachi music, *charrería* and cuisine found across Mexico. Its gorgeous historic center, shaped like a cross, is studded with 16th- and 17th-century architectural wonders, and Colonia Americana to the west is impossibly hip, with vintage shops and uber-cool cafes, bars and restaurants that rival the capital. Head to the peripheral magic towns of Tlaquepaque and Tonalá to find folk-art heaven. International visitors rarely stick around, using the town as a base for Tequila, but that's their loss. This young city has been underrated for far too long.

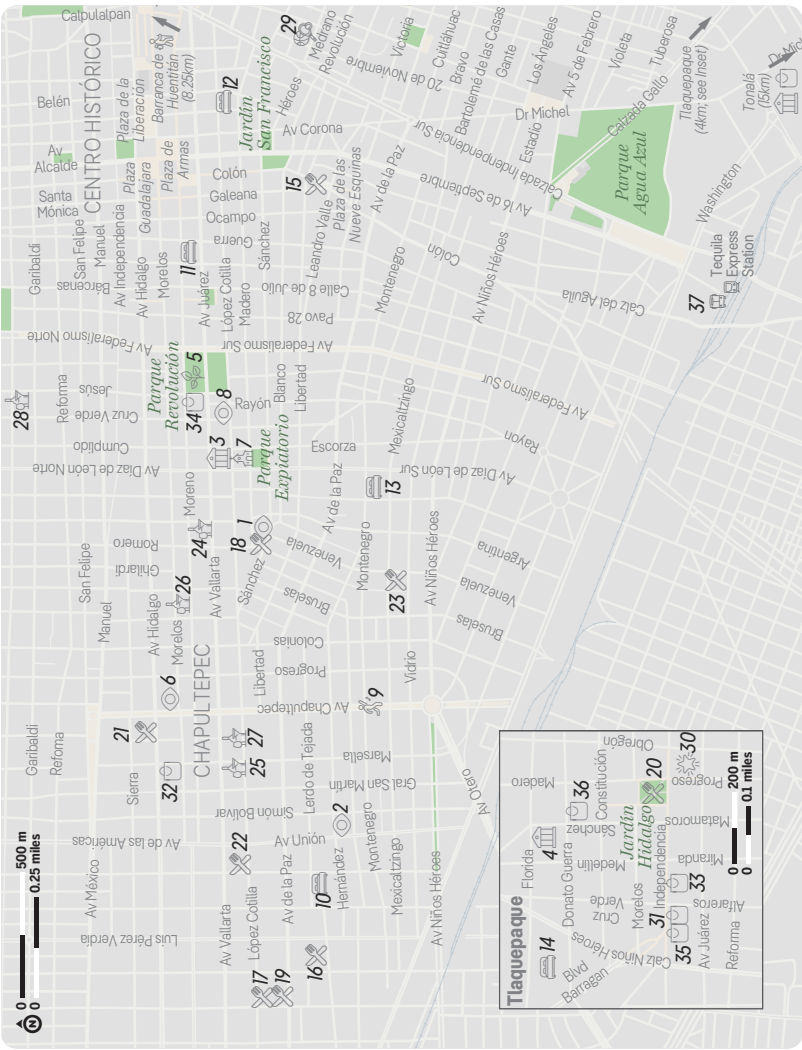
TOP TIP

These are the highlands after all, so keep Guadalajara's 1566m altitude in mind. You may get fatigued easily when walking around, and especially when doing strenuous hikes like Barranca de Huentitán (p480). Fortunately, the city is pretty flat.



LUIS ALVARADO ALVARADO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Tlaquepaque (p475)

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Café Correcto
- 2 Macondo
- 3 MUSA Museo de las Artes
- 4 Museo Pantaleón Panduro
- 5 Parque Revolución (Parque Rojo)
- 6 Selina
- 7 Templo Expiatorio del Santísimo Sacramento
- 8 U-Co GdL/Colliving

- 9 Son, Golpe & Tumbao
- 10 Casa Habita
- 11 Dalí Plaza Hotel
- 12 Hospedarte Centro Histórico
- 13 Hotel Isabel
- 14 La Villa del Ensueno

- 15 Birriería las 9 Esquinas
- 16 Bruna
- 17 Café PalReal

- 18 Cocina Prana
- 19 Jamaica
- 20 Jardín Hidalgo
- 21 La Plaza
- 22 Tecos La Chozza
- 23 Tortas Migue

- 24 De La O Cantina
- 25 El Gallo Altanero
- 26 Patan Ale House
- 27 PIMP
- 28 Tejuino Marcelino

- 29 Arena Coliseo de Guadaleajara
- 30 El Perlán

- 31 Antigua de México
- 32 Chamula
- 33 Del Corazón de la Tierra
- 34 El Baúl
- 35 Preciado Galeras
- 36 Taller Paco Padilla

- 37 José Cuervo Express

WHY I LOVE GUADALAJARA



Joel Balsam, writer

When I first decided to visit Guadalajara, I thought it'd be just another big city. Boy, was I wrong. Despite its size, Guadalajara is surprisingly cozy, with a walkable historic center, and an abundance of funky bars and cafes. I just love all the folk art in **Tlaquepaque** and **Tonalá**, and my apartment is starting to look like a shop from there. I've since been back to Guadalajara three times in the last two years, and while I want to keep this city to myself, it's too special not to share.



FIND FOLK ART

If you're looking for artisanal folk art you will not find it anywhere in Mercado San Juan de Dios. Instead, go to **Tlaquepaque** (p475) or **Tonalá** (p478) on the outskirts of Guadalajara.



WHERE TO STAY IN GUADALAJARA

Hospedarte Centro Histórico

Fun hostel attracting mostly young travelers with locations downtown and in Americana. \$

Hotel Isabel

Pretty motel-style rooms with solar air chairs, heated pool, orchid garden and 1959 restaurant known for *chilaquiles*. \$

Dalí Plaza Hotel

Clean hotel with a great location close to the center. Views are best from eastern rooms. \$\$

Get Lost in the Market

LATIN AMERICA'S LARGEST INDOOR MARKET

West of the historic center, **Mercado San Juan de Dios** (also known as Mercado Libertad) sprawls onto the street in every direction, selling everything from *charro* boots to sports jerseys and tacos. It is Latin America's largest indoor market at over 40,000 sq metres, and it is complete and utter chaos – but it remains a must-visit when in Guadalajara.

The market is loosely organized into sections. The top floor sells shoes, clothing, sports jerseys, video games and folk remedies. The next floor down has a lot of jewelry, purses and sunglasses, as well as some fish restaurants. Next, it's oodles of bags and sports jerseys (sensing a theme?) as well as public bathrooms (M\$5) on the southern edge of the central square. The bottom floor has the best section of *charro* paraphernalia, from hats to leather belts and boots, as well as silly souvenirs and sugary tequila drinks. The bottom floor also has plenty of **food stalls**, which have pictures to help you know what you're ordering. Use this opportunity to try *tapatíos* (Guadalajara locals) favorites like *tortas ahogadas* and *birria*.

Guadalajara Goodies

DELICIOUS FOOD GALORE

Tapatíos are spoiled with some of Mexico's most unique and tasty dishes. Most popular within the city is *tortas ahogadas*, a *birote* (bread roll) smothered in spicy red and/or green chili sauce and filled with *carnitas*. Eat it with a spoon or, if on the go, toss it in a *bolsita* (little plastic bag), mash it up and slurp it straight from the bag. The popularity of *tortas ahogadas* in Guadalajara is why sandwiches, called *tortas* elsewhere in Mexico, are known as *lonches* here. The best place to try *tortas ahogadas* is up for debate, but you can't go wrong at **Tortas Migue** in Colonia Americana, which has a money-back guarantee if you don't like it.

Guadalajara's (technically Jalisco's) most popular dish found across the country has to be *birria*, tender *chivo* (goat meat) boiled in its juices with a touch of jalapeño and served with warm tortillas. Try it at **Birriería las 9 Esquinas**, which has two seating areas across from each other – one in a lovely Mexican-style kitchen and the other in a 200-year-old bank building.

Not to be confused with *birria*, *carne en su jugo* is marinated beef steak that's grilled and then smothered in a spicy bean broth. Try it at **Karne Garibaldi Santa Tere**,



JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO

Long before Banksy and the rebirth of politically charged street art, Mexican muralists were making bold statements in giant public murals that expressed revolutionary ideals. Jalisco's contribution to the genre was substantial, thanks to José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) from nearby Ciudad Guzmán. Together with Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Orozco is considered one of the 'Big Three' of Mexican mural art. His brushstrokes depict fiery, dark and dramatic scenes, usually in shades of black and red. Orozco's work decorates stairways, ceilings and, impressively, domes, found from New York to Mexico City, but his most personal work can be found in Guadalajara. Find some of Orozco's finest murals at Hospicio Cabañas (p476), Palacio de Gobierno (p476) and MUSA Museo de las Artes (p474).



Torta ahogada

which once set a Guinness World Record for the fastest dish served at 13.5 seconds.

Pre-Columbian beverage of choice, *tejuino* is another popular drink across Jalisco and up into Chihuahua. Formerly known as *texuino*, it's a thick fermented drink made from corn masa. Try it at **Tejuino Marcelino**, which mixes *tejuino* with lime, sea salt and *nieve* (ice). Some Guadalajara bars, including **De la O Cantina**, have ushered *tejuino* into the 21st century by adding it to cocktails.

Hip Cafes & Nightlife

WORTH THE HYPE

For better or worse, Guadalajara's **Colonia Americana** has been labeled one of the world's hippest neighborhoods – and it's easy to see why. Americana is jam-packed with a dizzying number of terrific restaurants, cafes and bars taking local cuisine to the next level. The best burgers, Asian cuisine and other internationally inspired bites and drinks are found here, too. Simply wandering the neighborhood's tree- and flower-lined streets is a day well spent, and there are plenty of vibrant, sometimes revolutionary, **murals** that carry on José Clemente Orozco's legacy.

La Villa del Ensueno

Tranquil, art-filled Tlaquepaque hotel with a pool. Drapes and cushions could use an upgrade. \$\$\$

Villa Ganz Boutique Hotel

Like being transported back to the 1930s, though with updated mattresses. Love the rainbow tile tubs. \$\$\$

Casa Habita

Retro-chic hotel in a 1940s building. Day passes for the rooftop pool are available. \$\$\$

BEST FOR LIVE PERFORMANCES**Teatro Degollado**

Surprisingly affordable theater adorned in gold, showing orchestra, drama and dance performances. Better to book in-person.

1er Piso Jazz Club

Weekend jazz shows under chandeliers with cocktails served. It's Segundo Piso Music on Google.

Cafe Andre Breton

French restaurant, bar and cafe with nightly concerts in a candle-lit vibe.

Teatro Diana

Modern theater for traveling Broadway shows, music concerts and dance performances.

Bar Americas

Dark club with darker techno that attracts top DJs from Germany and elsewhere.

**Dancing on Av Chapultepec**

Av Chapultepec is the center of the action. It's lined with restaurants and bars blasting music into the night (don't be fooled by the lineup for tacos at Tomate; they're not great). Every afternoon and evening the paved median on Chapultepec is lined with stalls selling local crafts. **Son, Golpe & Tumbao** offers dance classes on the median near José G Montenegro (7–9pm, M\$40, or 5 classes for M\$150). Salsa classes are Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, *salsa en línea* is on Wednesday and Sunday, *cumbia* (dance music originating from Colombia) is on Wednesday and *bachata* (a dance from the Dominican Republic) is Thursday and Saturday.

Across from the University of Guadalajara, which gives Colonia Americana its young lifeblood, **MUSA Museo de las Artes** has a theater painted with Orozco's amazing murals and rotating art exhibitions. To the south, don't miss **Templo Expiatorio del Santísimo Sacramento**, a neo-Gothic masterpiece finished in 1972 that took 75 years to build. And if you're looking for thrift, vintage and funky clothing, check out the shops around **Parque Revolución**, especially **El Baúl**. The park itself fills with more than 100 merchants on Saturday from 9am–6pm.

**NOMAD HUBS IN MEXICO**

Remote working in Mexico is, of course, not only popular in Guadalajara. Nomad hubs can be found in other cities in Mexico, including Mexico City (p59).

**WHERE TO EAT IN GUADALAJARA****La Cafetería**

Amazing *chilaquiles*, smothered in parsley almond and *chipotle* squash salsa. Cash only. \$

Tacos La Choza

Humble cart with extraordinary tacos such as rabbit, duck confit and boar, and great salsas. \$\$

Café PalReal

Scrumptious Puebla coffee and brunch. Try its *encacahuatadas* (enchiladas in peanut sauce), *chilaquiles* or pork-belly *lonche*. \$\$

Art Shop in a Pueblo Mágico

GUADALAJARA'S ARTISAN HUB

Just 8km from downtown Guadalajara, but seemingly a world away, **Tlaquepaque** is an absolute must when visiting Guadalajara. Technically its own town, though absorbed into Guadalajara's metropolitan area long ago, the *pueblo mágico* is filled with pastel-colored homes and shops, flowering trees and ivy in bloom. Some of the best shopping in all of Mexico is found here thanks to the town's abundance of artisans.

Many of the finest shops are on Independencia, though side-tracking on adjacent streets can earn you some great finds and visits with artisans in their workshops. The best shops include **Preciado Galerías**, which has a great collection of lamps and chandeliers with a strong Middle Eastern influence; **Antigua de Mexico**, which showcases royal-looking (and priced) furniture with a garden reminiscent of Andalucía in Spain; and **Del Corazón de la Tierra**, which has a truly awesome collection of indigenous art from across Mexico. Up Prisciliano Sánchez, **Taller Paco Padilla** displays the local ceramicist's unique plates and pottery.

Step into the free **Museo Pantaléon Panduro**, a former hospital turned into a folk art museum, to see some of Mexico's most celebrated ceramics and winners of the National Pantaléon Panduro Ceramics Prize, which has been awarded since 1977. Ask for a free tour of the 450-year-old building, where you may be taken underground to see elaborate stone tunnels and to the rooftop for enchanting views over the town.

If you need to refuel, head to **Jardín Hidalgo** for an *elite* (corn with either lime and salt or mayo and powdered cheese topped with spicy sauces). You can also add boiled potatoes or *chayote* (green gourd).

Sing Along with Mariachis

BIRTHPLACE OF THE ICONIC GENRE

Those sombrero-wearing, *vihuela*- (lute), *guitarrón*- (bass guitar) and harp-playing singers synonymous with Mexico, the mariachis, represent a music genre born in Guadalajara and its surrounding regions. Recognized by Unesco in 2011 as an intangible cultural heritage, mariachi had its origins with the arrival of Spanish string instruments. When African slaves, indigenous people and *mestizos* (mixed heritage) got a hold of these instruments, they grouped together in bands and sang folk songs – what we know today as mariachi. As people in rural areas of Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima and



REMOTE WORK HUB

With the rise of digital nomads, remote workers have flocked to Guadalajara, and primarily congregate in Colonia Americana where there are plenty of amenities, though consequently high rents. Americana now has about a dozen coworking spaces, including a **Selina**, and a friendly 10-room coliving space, **U-Co GDL Coliving**. Most cafes in the neighborhood are also welcoming to clientele hunched over their laptops – some options include **Café Correcto** and **Macondo** in the nearby Obrera neighborhood. Just be sure to order something every few hours. If you're looking to meet expats and/or practice your Spanish, join Expats in Guadalajara or Intercambio Guadalajara on Facebook.

La Fonda de la Noche

It's like you're at Durango-born owner Carlos' home. Try the whole menu by ordering half portions. \$\$

Casa Luna

Tlaquepaque's most famous restaurant is stunning with magnificent light fixtures, and scrumptious food to match. \$\$\$

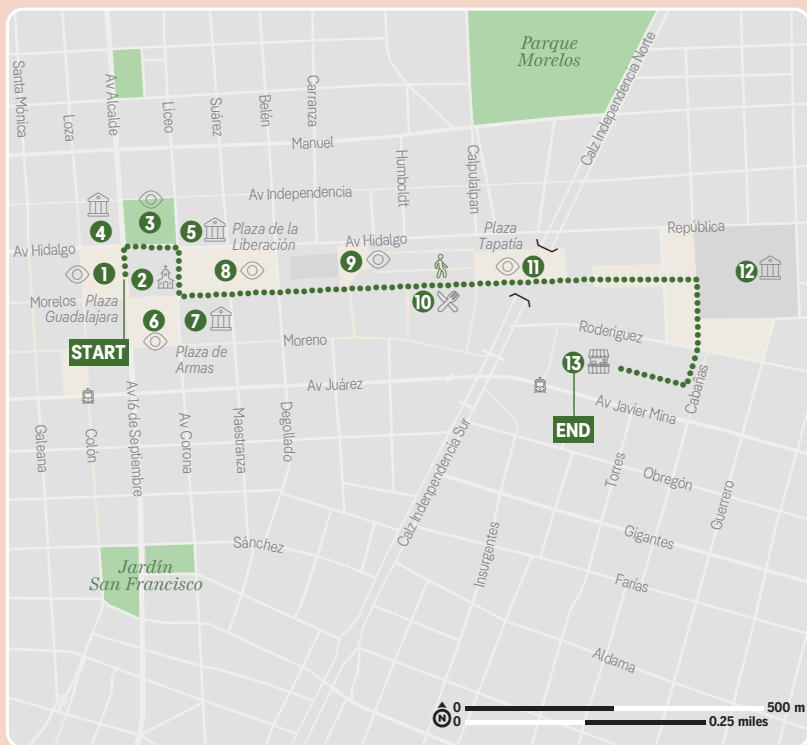
Bruna

Unforgettable setting and art gallery serving Michelin-style contemporary Mexican, such as piglet confit with pink *mole*. \$\$\$

EXPLORING GUADALAJARA WALKING TOUR

This walking tour of Guadalajara's historic center starts at **1 Plaza Guadalajara** in front of **2 Catedral de Guadalajara**, a jaw-dropping wonder that took 47 years to construct before opening in 1618. Inside, check out the crypt where three cardinals are buried. Walk north to the jacaranda tree-lined **3 Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres**, a walk of fame for Guadalajara's most cherished heroes such as engineer Jorge Matute. To the west, **4 Palacio Municipal** was built between 1949 and 1952 but looks much older. To the east, **5 Museo Regional de Guadalajara** houses Huichol artifacts, gloomy religious art and an impressive woolly mammoth skeleton dating back 12,000 years. Walk south to the left arm of the cross, **6 Plaza de Armas**, with its impressive Kiosco gifted from France, which hosts evening pop-up dance, orchestra or jazz concerts every weekend. Spot the bullet hole from revolutionary Pancho Villa's pistol on the

clock at **7 Palacio de Gobierno**, then walk inside to see José Clemente Orozco's 1937 mural which foreshadows WWII's carnage in Europe. In **8 Plaza de la Liberación**, see a monument of Mexican War of Independence hero Miguel Hidalgo breaking the chains of slavery, and consider booking a show at Teatro Degollado. Behind the theater, **9 Plaza Fundadores** depicts the city's founding in 1542. Ponder lining up at **10 Lonches Amparito** for Guadalajara's best sandwich and/or grab a cup of *tejuino* from a cart, then pass the headless snake sculpture at **11 Plaza Tapatía**. The cross finishes at **12 Hospicio Cabañas**, a Unesco-recognized 19th-century orphanage-turned-museum, with a nightmare-inducing Orozco mural on the roof of the main chapel and contemporary art exhibits. Finish your walk with lunch and shopping at **13 Mercado San Juan de Dios**.





Hospicio Cabañas

Michoacán moved to Guadalajara, the genre entranced the city, just as it did in Mexico City's Plaza Garibaldi.

Today you can find mariachis all over Guadalajara, particularly around touristy restaurants, but the most well-known spot to see and hear them is **El Parián** in Tlaquepaque. The circular building is made up of several restaurants serving Mexican fare, and you'll be serenaded by mariachis in the center. The prices here, especially for *cazuelitas* or *cantaritos* (fruity tequila cocktails served in a ceramic bowl), are ludicrous.

You can also find mariachi bands, though to a much lesser extent, downtown at Plaza de los Mariachis, around the mariachi statue at Álvaro Obregón and Lic Primo Verdad y Ramos. Grab a *tostilocos* (a spicy concoction of pork, veggies, peanuts, *queso* (cheese) and jalapeños in a bag of *Tostidos* chips) and sing along.

In late August and early September, mariachis come to Guadalajara from everywhere in Mexico to jam, battle and enjoy the **Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi** festival.

UNDERGROUND TUNNELS

Deep below Guadalajara, underneath historic sites such as the **Catedral de Guadalajara** and **Palacio de Gobierno**, is a network of tunnels shrouded in mystery. Some say the tunnels, which are at times wide enough to fit a horse and carriage, were used as an escape route during the Mexican War of Independence, including by Miguel Hidalgo himself. Or perhaps they were for state officials to secretly hang out and get drunk, or for clergy to move between religious sites. Others say the tunnels were simply a way to transport drinking water to the downtown core. Sadly, those who know the truth are long deceased. Visit an access door to the tunnels, and wonder about their use, in the crypt at the back of Catedral de Guadalajara.



WHERE TO EAT VEGETARIAN IN GUADALAJARA

La Flaca

Vegans can try Guadalajara specialties like *birria* and *tortas ahogadas* at this friendly outdoor spot. \$

Cocina Prana

Lots of veggie and vegan options like vegan tofu and shakshuka with kimchi, and homemade kombucha. \$\$

Jamaica

Reggae-themed lunch and dinner with creative, mostly vegan, creations like *elote* ribs, live music and cocktails. \$\$

I LIVE HERE: BARS LOCALS LOVE



Guadalajara local **Yolanda Hernández** shares her favorite traditional bars.

La Última Lucha

With walls covered in masks, toys and Mexican-style wrestling posters, this *pulque* (pre-Hispanic fermented drink) bar lives up to its name and envelops you in a unique atmosphere. It's my favorite place to go with friends after work.

Cantina La Fuente

An exceptional cantina located in the historic center of the city where you can go alone or with friends. It's perfect to de-stress or to sing about your heartbreak. There is live music and people sing together in unison.

Pulquería La Mestiza

If you want to know more about *pulque*, this place offers different types and the bartenders can explain how it's made.



POSTOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Catedral de Guadalajara

Master Artisan Treasures

ART BARGAINS ABOUND

Dustier and rougher around the edges than Tlaquepaque, **Tonalá**, 16km east of Guadalajara, is another terrific place to stock up on gorgeous folk art. What you'll find in shops here is of the utmost quality, yet much more affordable than in Tlaquepaque, which is what attracts wholesale buyers to Tonalá from all over the world.

At **Galería Bernabé**, fourth-generation potters make delicate ceramics available for purchase. Ask for a tour to see the Bernabé brothers in action. Other spectacular shops include **Mexicanía**, which sells art from 10 regions across the country, and **Casa de Artesanos**, which features well-priced clothes, figurines and kitchenware made by Tonalá artists.

Go to **Museo de los Tastoanes** to learn about Tonalá's rich history of mask-making. At this free museum, you'll see wild and terrifying locally made masks that depict indigenous warriors and Spanish colonizers during 16th-century encounters. The masks are often made with real animal teeth and horse or cow hair. The free **Museo de la Cerámica** is also worth a quick peruse for its two floors of ceramic displays, but the



WHERE TO DRINK IN GUADALAJARA

De La O Cantina

Low-lit cocktail bar with exposed brick walls and a great vibe. Try something with *tejuino*.

Patan Ale House

Beer-lover's bar serving local craft brews by the bottle, pint or flight. Pub grub, too.

Romea

Candle-lit wine bar and tapas with a relaxed vibe, so leave your tie at home.

best part is the building's wild architecture designed by local artisan Jorge Wilmot.

The best time to visit Tonalá is during the **Tonalá Street Market** (Thursday and Sunday). Along Tonaltecas and much of Tonalá's center are thousands of stalls selling everything from T-shirts to candles to gigantic *lonches*. You won't find the best art in the market – stores along the side are much better bets for masks, tiles and more – but it has an authentic, unforgettable atmosphere.

Watch Mexico's Cowboys

AN ICONIC GUADALAJARA TRADITION

Charros (Mexican cowboys) with their flashy and intricately embroidered sombreros, jackets and trousers have been a sight in northern Mexico for centuries. Their origins date back to Spanish arrival and when cattle ranchers dressed up in costume to showcase their ranch's wealth. Later, *charrería* got a rebranding, as Emiliano Zapata, general in the Mexican Revolution and celebrated revolutionary, was often seen wearing a *charro* outfit.

Today, *charrería* is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of Guadalajara and best experienced during a live demonstration similar to an American rodeo. For more than a century, **Campo Charro Jalisco**, a stadium just behind **Parque Agua Azul**, has hosted *charro* shows and continues to do so today every Sunday at noon (M\$100). In the ring surrounded by concrete bleachers, riders (often with a thick mustache) on horseback dazzle the crowd with various skill-testing competitions, including spinning their horse in a circle, sprinting, coming to an abrupt stop, and, perhaps controversially, flipping cattle by their tail. If you're lucky, the show will

feature *escaramuzas* (female riders in elaborate dresses doing synchronized dances). Private lessons on *charro* skills, such as tossing a rope and rolling it up, are available most days and include a tequila tasting (M\$600). Book a private tour at www.entrecharrros.com. *Charro* competitions are also a mainstay at the **Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi** festival in late August and early September.



JALISCO RANCH COUNTRY

Find ranch culture and ride a horse around massive volcanic boulders in **Tapalpa** (p484). While you're there, scale one of Mexico's tallest waterfalls.



LGBTIQ+ GUADALAJARA

Mexico's second-biggest city is also one of its gayest – fiercely Catholic population notwithstanding. In late June, the city hosts one of Latin America's largest, and longest-running, gay pride parades, the **Marcha del Orgullo GDL**, which has been taking over Guadalajara's streets for more than 40 years. And in November 2023, the city will have the honor of hosting the 11th **Gay Games**, the world's largest LGBTIQ+ sporting event.

Guadalajara's so-called 'gay ghetto' radiates out a few blocks from the corner of Ocampo and Sánchez, in the city center, but Av Chapultepec is starting to see establishments aimed at a gay clientele. Find current hot spots and gay-friendly establishments at www.gaymexicomap.com.

El Gallo Altanero

Uber-hip cocktail bar behind a café around a courtyard. Delicious Palomas and soulful music.

PIMP

Slip behind the bookcase above a pizzeria and find velvet furniture, cocktails in vintage glassware and DJs.

California's Bar

Guadalajara's friendliest and most well-known gay bar for nearly two decades. Doesn't get busy till late.



SPORTS-CRAZED CITY

Guadalajara loves its sports, especially its soccer, err, football teams. Club Deportivo Guadalajara, known as Las Chivas (The Goats), has competed for more than 116 years and now fields only Mexican players at its stadium, **Estadio Akron**, in Liga MX. Slightly newer, Atlas FC, plays out of **Estadio Jalisco**. Watch out for a wild party if either team wins a championship, as Atlas did in 2021 after a 70-year drought. Guadalajara also has a baseball team, Charros de Jalisco, who play out of **Estadio Panamericano** in Zapopan, Guadalajara's sister city.

Get Rowdy at Lucha Libre

WARNING: IT GETS WILD

One might think that *lucha libre* (masked wrestlers depicting timeless stories of good and evil duking it out in a ring) might be a little dated at this point. After all, the tradition dates back to 1863. But *lucha libre* is very much alive and well in Guadalajara.

Every Tuesday night at **Arena Coliseo de Guadalajara**, fans go absolutely bonkers to see *luchadores* pummel each other in the ring. The fighting itself is an incredible feat of skill and athleticism. Fighters frequently flip or corkscrew from the top rope, landing dangerously on the chest of one or multiple fighters. Royal Rumble-esque battles of a dozen fighters in the ring look like a recipe for injury, but fighters manage to make it out unscathed.

But the best part about Guadalajara's *lucha libre* has to be the crowd, especially in the cheap seats up top. A band in the back smashes drums and blows instruments as men and women in masks and shirts, chiding fans in seats below, scream chants with fists raised. It sounds scary, but the vibe is infectious and fans of all ages join in. Admittedly, giant beers and *micheladas* (spicy, salty tomato drinks) sold by circulating vendors add to the hype.

Tickets for the cheap seats in the bleachers are M\$200, or M\$300 for ringside seating with actual chairs.

Hike Up an Old Rail Track

2,610M TO THE TOP

After all that *birria* and *tortas ahogadas*, surely you could use a bit of exercise, and in Guadalajara the most popular place to get moving is at **Barranca de Huentitán**. But be warned, this is a very busy and steep trail.

You'll know you're at the trailhead in the northeast of the city immediately, as there are vendors selling smoothies, healthy sandwiches, fish tacos and coconut flesh smothered in spicy *tajín* (chili powder), but you probably will want to save all that for after your hike. The trail starts with steps, then with a trail of fist-sized boulders as you walk downwards. Be careful not to slip, as the rocks have been smoothed out by the thousands who hike here. Soon you'll be greeted by breathtaking views over the canyon and river below.

There are various trails you can take, some as long as 19km, but if you want to tackle the rail track (6.5km, elevation 610m), walk all the way down until you get to the riv-



WHERE TO SHOP IN GUADALAJARA

Chamula

Stylish Americana shop selling handmade ceramic pop art. Check out their Instagram @chamula.hechoamano.

Del Corazón de la Tierra

Wonder-filled Tlaquepaque shop selling vibrant indigenous folk art from masters across Mexico and Guatemala.

Mexicanía

Tonalá shop featuring art from 10 Mexican states in a 1533 building. Will send purchases abroad.



Barranca de Huentitán

er, where some choose to take a dip. Then hang a right until you hit an abandoned ghost town. From there you'll see the abandoned rail tracks that go straight up the mountain. And we mean straight up. Brave climbers can scale the tracks, sometimes on all fours, 610m to the top. Alternatively, skip the tracks and walk back up the trail the way you came. The railway route should take you about 2½ hours with time to rest.



BEST TOURS IN GUADALAJARA

Camina GDL

European-style free walking tours and an array of paid offerings like an architecture and beer tour. Also does trips to Tequila (p487) and Guachimontones (p485).

José Cuervo Express

Bucket list train trips to Tequila with a tour of Mundo Cuervo and to the farm (p489).

Experience Agave

Veteran tour company with bilingual guides offering tequila, mezcal and *raicilla* (a tequila-like distillation of wild agave) tasting trips.



GETTING AROUND

Guadalajara's busy, just-renovated, Aeropuerto Internacional Miguel Hidalgo 19km south of downtown and has direct flights across Mexico, and to the US, Colombia and Spain. Airport (Aeropuerto) buses drop off at Parque Agua Azul, where you can grab another bus, taxi or rideshare. Rideshares like Uber aren't allowed at the airport – pay for an official taxi inside the terminal (about M\$300 to M\$400).

City buses are an affordable and efficient way to get around, especially to Tonalá and Tlaquepaque. Use the Moovit app instead of Google Maps for trip planning.

Guadalajara has two main bus stations – Nueva Central Camionera and Antigua Central Camionera. Nueva serves further destinations like Morelia, Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta, while Antigua is for destinations just beyond Guadalajara, such as Ajijic, Tapalpa and Tequila.

Guadalajara's subway, Siteur, has three lines beneath the city. Mi Tren L3, completed in 2020, runs Zapopan–Tlaquepaque and can be accessed from Plaza Universidad station. You'll need to buy a train card (M\$30) at machines in the station, which includes the first ride. Then each ride is M\$9.50.



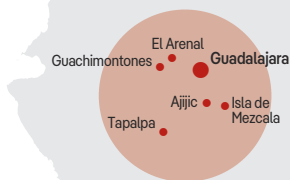
Beyond Guadalajara

Take a road trip to Tequila, relax by the lake, see indigenous ruins and hike to a giant waterfall within two hours of Guadalajara.

Get out of the hustle and bustle of Guadalajara and you'll find that interesting experiences abound. To the west, see some of the most important indigenous ruins in western Mexico as well as a tequila distillery arguably better than those in Tequila. South is Lago de Chapala, Mexico's largest freshwater lake, and home to a pretty *pueblo mágico* with chilled-out retirees and an island where indigenous rebels fought off the Spanish for four years in the 19th century. Southwest in the mountains is horse country, great for hiking and relaxing in a wooden *cabaña* (cabin). All can be done as self-guided day trips or with the help of Guadalajara tour agencies.

TOP TIP

Drivers beware: toll roads can add up. Toll roads are marked with a 'D' after the number, eg. Hwy 54D to Colima.



Lago de Chapala

Wellness Town & Hot Springs

GRANNY'S GOT IT FIGURED OUT

Those that live in **Ajijic** (pronounced ah-hee-heek) say moving here will help you live 10 years longer. Perhaps it's the perfect year-round weather – it rarely goes above or below 70°F to 78°F (21°C to 25°C). Or maybe it's the vistas of **Lago de Chapala**, Mexico's largest lake, the laid-back lifestyle, healthy restaurants or attentive doctors. Whatever it is, Ajijic, one hour south of Guadalajara by car or bus (from Antigua Central Camionera), has been a magnet for American retirees for decades. Come and see happy gringos jogging on the *molecón* (boardwalk) or strolling cobblestone sidewalks. But don't let the abundance of foreigners deter you. Named a *pueblo mágico* in 2020, Ajijic is a stunning village with colorful homes, the area's best selection of restaurants and hotels as well as scenic hikes in the mountains behind the town.

Just under 10km west, heal mind, body and soul at **Spa Terminal Tlalocan**, a hotel and *balneario* (bathing place) with more than a dozen pools and Jacuzzis heated by volcanic springs underneath. Entry is M\$380 for the pools and a naturally heated temascal (pre-Hispanic steam bath) that gets to a scorching 96°F (35.5°C). It's worth the M\$220 for the VIP experience close to the lake. This two-hour circuit involves spending 15 minutes in different pools filled with minerals that have healing properties. Apple cider vinegar is for skin problems and blood circulation. Flower petals are for boosting your mood. Magnesium is an anti-inflammatory for relaxing your muscles. The coffee pool, and mask, will wake you up, while oatmeal is good for your skin. The VIP area also has an ozone room and stones to walk on for reflexology. Massages and facials are available, too.

Visit a Rebel Stronghold

EPIC STORY

About 7km by boat from the town of Mezcala on Lago de Chapala is **Isla de Mezcala**, an island with a truly unbelievable history fit for a movie. In 1812, indigenous groups around the lake, including ancestors of the Cocas that still reside in the town of Mezcala, followed Miguel Hidalgo's lead and resisted Spanish rule during the Mexican War of Independence. For four years, at least 1000 Indigenous rebels fought off Spanish ships with slingshots, obsidian arrows and cannons.

On November 25, 1816, Spanish forces and the rebels decided on an armistice. A treaty guaranteed indigenous freedom in nearby towns, which was rebuilt by the Spanish, and the island itself would be used as a prison for captives from



POOLS NEAR TEQUILA

After tasting Mexico's beloved distilled agave drink in Tequila, check out **Balneario La Toma** (p491), a spa with natural cool-water pools and joyful jungle views.

AJIJIC'S BEST RESTAURANTS

Kenaduría Memo

Mexicans come from Guadalajara and further to eat *pozole* (soup) at this classic spot near the plaza. \$

Vegan Town

Lush garden with fresh vegan and gluten-free options like pizzas, baguette sandwiches, salads and kombucha. \$\$

Kamellos

Food truck owned by a Palestinian-Mexican doing falafel and *kamellos* (shawarma) sandwiches and local sodas. \$\$

Ajijic Tango

A gringo favorite close to the *molecón* with steak, fish, pizza and tasty warm buns. \$\$\$

Teocintle Maiz

Chef Gloria makes creative Mexican dishes and cocktails bursting with flavor. Reservations are ideal. Cash only. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY AROUND GUADALAJARA

Las Margaritas

Pretty, quiet Tapalpa hotel off the main plaza with outdoor spiral staircases and clean rooms. \$

Nueva Posada

Ajijic hotel with a cozy granny vibe. Tasty breakfast, nice pool and lake view. Mattresses are soft. \$\$

Hotel Villa San Francisco

Classy music-themed hotel and pool in the heart of Chapala just off the *molecón*. Breakfast included. \$\$\$



POLLUTED LAKE CHAPALA

Mexico's largest freshwater lake has been pivotal to the region for hundreds of years and remains the primary water source for Guadalajara as well as farms that support the area. Yet it isn't safe to swim in Lago de Chapala and its fish are high in mercury. The reason is attributed to Rio Lerma, a river that feeds Chapala with water polluted by heavy metals and poor wastewater treatment. Fertilizer runoff and lead cages in the lake have added to the problem. But more troubling than not being able to take a dip on a warm day is the fact that the lake has been drying up over decades, with some estimates saying the lake is only a quarter of its historic capacity.

across the Latin American empire. Rebels on the island were also taken to the prison until their deaths.

You can visit Isla de Mezcala by finding a guide at the Mezcala dock (M\$500 for the boat captain plus tips for the guide) or contact local Maria de Los Angeles Hernandez Sanabria (+52 33 1425 0753) in advance. The Coca guide does tours in Spanish, but can connect you with an English speaker with more info (M\$500 extra). On the island, you'll see monuments, a Virgin Mary statue recovered from the lake, the church that prisoners were forced to build and prison cells. You can also arrange a torch-lit night tour where you stay in the prison cells, but be warned: it's said to be haunted.

Ranch Town, Waterfalls & Big Rocks

RETREAT TO HORSE COUNTRY

In the mountains two hours (129km) southwest of Guadalajara, whitewashed and red tile-roofed **Tapalpa** is worthy of its *pueblo mágico* designation. Horses trot along its cobblestone streets as visitors swarm to its picturesque plaza to shop for hand-woven clothing and wooden crafts, or have a steak at a 2nd-floor restaurant such as **Paulino's**.

Nearly 6.5km north of Tapalpa, **Las Piedrotas** is the equivalent of a US roadside peculiarity. Giant boulders stick out from the valley and you can climb almost to the top, hike around the scenic area or ride a horse. Entry is M\$30 and horses cost M\$100 for 20 minutes.

More worthwhile, though much more strenuous, **Cascada el Salto del Nogal** is a jaw-dropping 106m waterfall 30 minutes from Tapalpa along bumpy cobblestone roads. The 3km hike descends a steep trail for 20 or 30 minutes to a sign that'll point you to the right along a stream and to the waterfall. The view of the waterfall is spectacular – it gushes down, smacking into a natural step before hitting the stream in a blur of white. The surrounding mountains in the canyon are also a wonder, with gravity-defying agave poking out from the jagged cliff face. Take time for a breather, as the hike up is a 233m climb for another 30 to 40 minutes.

Green Sierra Tapalpa Tours (+52 341 147 4962) hosts guided trips to Las Piedrotas on weekends (M\$250) and to the waterfall on Friday (M\$450). The tour company also rents 4WDs (M\$500 per hour).

Stretch your stay in Tapalpa into a weekend by staying in a *cabaña*. These log cabins range from wooden hotels to tranquil, romantic cabins with epic views over the mountains. You can find *cabañas* on booking sites such as Airbnb or at various shops in Tapalpa.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK AROUND GUADALAJARA

La Palapa de Don Juan
Waffles, *chilaquiles* and crepes in a modern-looking *palapa* overlooking Lago de Chapala. \$

Paulinos
Affordable restaurant overlooking the Tapalpa plaza known for its *carne asada* and *adobada* beef. \$

Bonanza
Pull up a saddle at this lake-facing Ajiijic bar to meet (mostly gringo) locals and visitors.



INDIGENOUS TOWNS IN THE HIGHLANDS

The *pueblos hospitales* (art towns; p500) in central Michoacán have an indigenous history that predates the Spanish arrival and they are a great place to shop for intricate art.

CANTARITO CRAWL

Along the drive to Tequila, you'll see plenty of places advertising *cantaritos* – alcoholic drinks served in ceramic mugs or bowls called *cazuelas*. *Cantaritos* are cocktails with tequila, citrus fruits, Squirt soda, mineral water and salt.

Just before you enter El Arenal, **Cantaritos La Tequilera** does *cantaritos* well and has the option of using Cascahuín's tequila. It also has stellar food – the *camarón especial* shrimp taco is spicy, crunchy deliciousness.

Closer to Tequila on Hwy 15, **Cantaritos el Güero** is a madhouse of visitors and tour buses getting smashed and dancing. Obviously, make sure you have a designated driver if you plan to do a *cantarito* crawl.



Cantarito

Ancient Round Pyramids

LIKE GIANT CORN COBS

Some of western Mexico's most important ruins are about 90 minutes' drive from Guadalajara, or two hours by bus. Incredibly, before **Guachimontones** was uncovered by Phil Weigand and Celia García de Weigand in the late 1960s, it wasn't believed there were any ceremonial ruins of this size in western Mexico.

Occupied from 350 BCE by the Teuchitlán people, who continue to live in the nearby town of the same name, this wonderful group of 10 concentric circle pyramids is said to have been for spiritual use only – nobody lived here. The largest pyramid, **Gran Guachi**, has a diameter of 125m and is surrounded by 12 rectangular platforms, making it look like a corn cob from above. At the top, a hole is believed to have held a pole that a spiritual leader would be perched atop (without the use of a rope), simulating the flight of a bird. At the same time, thousands danced around shoulder-to-shoulder to pray for rain or fertility. The compound also had two *pelota* ball courts and tombs underground that reached as much as 21m deep.

Guachimontones also has a recently updated **museum**, circular in shape, that provides an excellent overview of the ruins and the people who worshipped here. The museum is interactive at points, with an informative 15-minute documentary



WHERE TO SHOP AROUND GUADALAJARA

Huizache

Walk through a gate and a verdant alley two doors east of Estrellita's to this Ajijic shop with Mexican folk art.

Galeria di Paola

Ajijic shop with Mexican art, the Italian owner's paintings and prints, and espresso.

Tienda de Artesanias

Tapalpa plaza store with attractive handmade crafts like jackets, pillows and flowery shirts.

DARK HISTORY OF HACIENDAS

Haciendas in northern Mexico were pivotal to early Spanish colonization, providing shelter for mining and agricultural laborers while rich landowners lived in nearby towns. Similar to plantations in the US, haciendas were on stolen land and laborers were often African slaves, indigenous people or *mestizo* men who were paid nothing, or very little, for their back-breaking work. Inequality on haciendas was one of the injustices that inspired Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, who was arrested in 1897 for protesting with peasants of his village against the hacienda that stole their land. In the 20th century, the abusive hacienda system was dismantled. Today, some haciendas continue to produce agriculture, while others are used as lavish hotels that often host family gatherings and weddings.



OMAY DARCIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Guachimontones (p485)

and a great collection of jewelry, pottery and obsidian tools, many of which were found in the tombs. Fun fact: Jalisco has the third-largest obsidian deposit in the world.

Entry to the ruins and museum is M\$30 and includes free tours every hour or so.

Taste Artisanal Tequila

ARTISANAL DISTILLERY AND TASTINGS

Many people use Guadalajara as a base to visit Tequila, but under 48km away in the town **El Arenal** you can do a distillery tour that's arguably better, and more authentic, than anything you'll find in the boozy *pueblo mágico*.

Tequila Cascahuín has had *agaveros* in the family since 1904 but has been fermenting and producing tequila since 1955. While not as old as José Cuervo, Cascahuín's production is much more artisanal, resulting in a fraction of bottles per year (around 100,000 liters). Tours of the distillery can be made for just a visit, or including three or five tastings. It's ideal to schedule a tour in advance (Whatsapp +52 33 3225 7659). English guides are available.

On Cascahuín's tour, you'll see huge *piñas* (pineapple-shaped agave hearts), picked after seven to 10 years, and you can walk into the 16-ton ovens. You'll get up close and personal with the vats in the fermentation room where natural yeast from the air causes the smashed juice to bubble, see the distillation tanks to learn how it becomes alcohol and taste 70-proof tequila (if you're brave enough). You can also learn about the aging process with whiskey barrels, see workers labeling and checking the bottles for imperfections, and, of course, the best part: taste tequila!



GETTING AROUND

Destinations beyond Guadalajara are accessible by bus with frequent trips leaving from Guadalajara's Antigua Central Camionera station. Local buses can help you get around

Chapala, Tapalpa and El Arenal, and there are also taxis. If driving, note that Hwys 54D and 15D charge a toll every 30 minutes or so.

TEQUILA

Few drinks are more ubiquitous in a country than tequila is in Mexico, but many don't know that most of the agave beverage is bottled in a town named Tequila, one hour northwest of Guadalajara. Although it's been a *pueblo mágico* and Unesco World Heritage Site since 2006, with colorful houses, cobblestone streets and a pretty 17th-century church, Tequila knows why people visit: for the drink that made it famous and made the fortunes of its two biggest producers, José Cuervo and Sauza. In Tequila you'll see bachelor(ette) parties from the US and Mexico screaming out the side of tequila barrels on wheels and drunkards zigzagging around with a *cantarito* (tequila cocktail) in hand. It's a wild, hectic mess, but it's fun to visit as a day trip from Guadalajara on an overnight stay, especially if you're a tequila fan curious about how it's made.



TOP TIP

Book your tequila tour in advance. The ones offered by vendors in town, while cheap, aren't great, and tours tend to fill up more than a day in advance. See p490 for a list of some of the best tours in Tequila.



Plaza Principal Tequila (p489)

**SIGHTS**

- 1** Centro Cultural Juan Beckman Gallardo
- 2** Museo Los Abuelos
- 3** Museo Nacional del Tequila
- 4** Parroquia Santiago Apóstol
- 5** Plaza Principal Tequila

SLEEPING

- 6** Casa Hotel La Gran Señora
- 7** Solar de las Ánimas

EATING

- 8** Callejon del Hambre
- 9** La Antigua Casona
- 10** Patio Mayahua

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 11** Bar Tequila
- 12** El Palomar
- 13** La Capilla
- 14** Ophe Club Tequilero

Take the Tequila Train

BUCKET LIST CHECK

Commuter trains aren't active around Guadalajara anymore, but you can drink cocktails and stare at a sea of blue agave on the way to the town of Tequila on the **José Cuervo Express**. Train tours with the oldest tequila distiller aren't cheap – tickets start at M\$2590 – but it is a fun way to experience Tequila and something to cross off your bucket list.



WHERE TO STAY IN TEQUILA

Capital O Hotel Posada

Smell blue agave in the air at this humble stone and wood posada (inn) on a hilltop. \$

Casa Hotel La Gran Señora

Family-owned hotel close to the center with a pretty garden. Rooms are dated, but clean. \$\$

Solar de las Ánimas

Classy Cuervo-owned hotel next to the plaza with a gym, sauna, pool and sky bar and an excellent restaurant. \$\$\$

The popular ‘Sunrise’ tour starts at the José Cuervo Express station on Av Circunvalación Agustín Yáñez south of the Guadalajara city center – get there around 8am to register and to enjoy a *café de olla* (cinnamon-tinted coffee) or hot chocolate and a *concha* (pastry). At 9am, it’s all aboard the vintage José Cuervo Express, and the drinking begins 10 minutes later. The trip takes a couple of hours and includes a few cocktails, a tasting (in Spanish) and a sad snack, at least for ‘Express’ passengers.

Once in Tequila, you’ll do another tasting, this time in English, then visit **Centro Cultural Juan Beckmann Gallardo**, a beautiful museum opened in 2018 with exhibits featuring pop art, *charrería* and indigenous pottery. If not on the train, the museum costs \$M135 and includes a guided tour.

Train adventurers will continue with a visit to **La Rojeña Distillery in Mundo Cuervo**, which opened back in 1812 and churns out 50,000 liters of tequila per day. The distillery visit is quick, though impressive in its industrial grandiosity. After that, you’ll get 2½ hours of free time to explore Tequila before taking a bus to the farm where *jimadores* (agave farmers) show you their harvesting process and you can plant your own. Then, it’s a full-on dance party before you’re bused back to Guadalajara. Those who wish to stay in Tequila for the night must pay for their own taxi back to town. ‘Sunset’ tours are the same tour in reverse, with the train taking you back to Guadalajara.

Beyond Booze in Tequila

THERE’S MORE TO TEQUILA THAN DRINKING

If you look past the giant tequila barrels on wheels, wild bachelorette parties and the fact that you’re often treated like a dollar sign rather than a human being, Tequila is a beautiful-looking *pueblo mágico* – **Plaza Principal Tequila** is spacious central and there’s always plenty of action. There are street bars selling *cantaritos*, *jimador*-style sombreros (hats), *chapulines* (roasted grasshoppers), and *volidores de papantla* from Veracruz spinning around a pole. You’ll also see vendors commissioned by the tourism board offering guided walking tours (M\$150) and distillery tours, usually in the aforementioned barrels (starting at M\$250). Beware of the gambling games promising a prize if you hit a certain number – it’s a scam and virtually impossible to win.

Towering over the plaza, 17th-century **Parroquia Santiago Apóstol** has beautiful gold and blue curtains hanging from the ceiling and a rare fully-clothed Jesus in a crown of thorns. This church plaza also has plenty of vendors and a decent cafe, **El Palomar**, which serves breakfast, crepes, baguettes, quesadillas and salads. Cash only.

WHERE TO EAT IN TEQUILA

Callejón del Hambre

Tackle tomorrow’s hangover today with a loaded taco (or four) from these popular stalls. \$

Patio Mayahua

Happening brunch restaurant, known for handmade tortillas, *birria*, *menudo* soup and *chilaquiles*. \$\$

La Antigua Casona

Upscale Cuervo-owned restaurant with Mexican dishes, burgers and salads in a lovely garden. \$\$\$

I LIVE HERE: DAY IN THE LIFE



José Cuervo Jimador Manuel Rivera

explains an average day in the agave fields.

I wake up at 5am, have *café de olla* sweetened with agave honey and bread. At 6am we get to work to avoid the hot sun. Then we harvest, which means shaving leaves off the agave. We cut it with a *coa de jima*, which is like a big round spoon with a sharp edge. At 10am we have a buffet breakfast with food like *chilaquiles* and beans. There are 10 *jimadores* per crew. The agave we cut is sent to the distillery the same day. There, they put the *piñas* in the ovens to cook, then the juice is fermented and distilled.



MEZCAL IN MICHOACÁN

You don’t need to go all the way to Oaxaca for tasty mezcal. **Morelia** (p492) in neighboring Michoacán has a thriving mezcal scene and plenty of great restaurants to go along with it.



TEQUILA HISTORY

Indigenous peoples were drinking agave-based drinks like *pulque* (a syrupy low-alcohol beverage) before the Spanish arrived, but tequila (then called *mezcal*) was created in the mid-16th century using European distillation techniques. Popular in Mexico for centuries, the spirit made its way to the US during Prohibition and grew in popularity worldwide. Worried the spirit might be lost, Mexico gave tequila an appellation of origin in 1974, which decreed the drink must be made from just one of 200 types of agave (*azul*) and strictly produced in specific Mexican states: Jalisco, Nayarit, Michoacán, Tamaulipas and Guanajuato. The rules gave tequila gravitas similar to champagne in France, but pushed *mezcal* into obscurity up until recently.

Tequila has two not-so-great museums that you can pop into for a few minutes. **Museo Nacional del Tequila** has information about the town and the volcano in Spanish and basics about tequila harvesting in English and Spanish. The info is informative if you don't take a distillery tour. **Museo Los Abuelos** (entry includes a guided tour in Spanish) details the history of the Sauza family with portraits, a traditional kitchen, harvesting tools and a quirky collection of owl sculptures.

Taste Tequila & Stay in a Barrel

HACIENDA ON A HILL

Perched on a hill painted blue with agaves, **Hacienda La Cofradía** offers one of the best distillery tours in Tequila, as well as some of the most intriguing accommodations and cuisine. The distillery is relatively new – it started in 1991 on a 1933 hacienda – but it has grown to be one of the largest distillers, producing 3 million liters annually and distributing to 50 countries. A guide will explain the tequila production process and take you to the giant vats, where you'll taste raw agave – and take a shot. Interestingly, the distillery is built on a slope so gravity takes the juices down from the ovens and mill to the fermenting tanks and finally the stills and barrels. The tour finishes with an informative, and plentiful, tasting. Tours include three shots and a margarita, or if you pay extra, you also get three full cups. Guides usually do tours in Spanish, but your best bet for an English tour is at 1:30pm.

After all that booze, no need to return to town as you can stay the night in one of 35 huge tequila barrels on the hacienda. The barrels are fairly recently built and each has its own hand-painted mural.

Cofradía is also home to a cool (literally) cavernous restaurant, **La Taberna del Cofrade**, which features live mariachi music and food from four Mexican states. Dishes include *arrachera* (skirt steak) from Jalisco, tamarind shrimp from Michoacán and enchiladas from Guanajuato.

If you're keen to check out more distilleries, the following are all top-notch options:

Tequila Cascahuín (p486) Artisanal distillery outside Tequila in the town of El Arenal. More personal than tours in Tequila. The *cantari*-to bars on the way (p485) make for an excellent road trip if you have a designated driver.

Mundo Cuervo (p489) José Cuervo distillery in the center. Offers a range of tours, including a train. Book ahead.

Casa Sauza Second-biggest tequila producer. Offers tours to its Tequila factory and farm to plant agave.



WHERE TO DRINK IN TEQUILA

La Capilla

Old Tequila bar with an authentic divey feel. Try a Batanga (tequila and Coke cocktail).

Bar Tequila

Party bar with 35 kinds of tequila and reasonably priced cocktails. It's upstairs on Abasolo.

Ophe Club Tequilero

Neon-lit dance club a few blocks from the plaza.



Hacienda La Cofradía

Casa Orendain Third-oldest active distillery in Tequila. Includes barrel ride, factory tour and small tasting. Spanish only.

Waterfall Hike & Natural Springs

HANGOVER CURES

If you're feeling washed out after all that tequila, there are a couple of activities close to town that'll get you feeling refreshed. Northeast of town, there's a short but difficult hike to a group of waterfalls, **Cascada las Azules**. From the trailhead, walk alongside blue agave fields and stay right until you hit a stone wall. If you find yourself trudging through bushes and covered in burs, or have to dip inside a small canyon, you've made a wrong turn. Along the rock wall, the trail runs downhill along a few switchbacks until it comes to a 'T' crossing. Hang a left and the path winds down to a couple of small pools where you can take a dip. Tubes make this area a tad unsightly, but keep walking along the rock face and you'll soon be looking down at a gorgeous waterfall that drops off the cliff. Turn back around to return to the trailhead, from where it's a short walk back to town.

North of Tequila, **Balneario La Toma** is a much more relaxing adventure. Ten natural spring water pools cascade over red volcanic rocks for ideal vistas of the jungle canyon below. The family-run spa is calm, and usually not too busy, making for a healing respite from the chaos of Tequila. The best way to get here is by taxi or car, but you can also walk from town – it'll take you about one hour.

TEQUILA VS MEZCAL

In short: all tequila is mezcal, but all mezcal isn't tequila. The agave spirit started as mezcal, made by roasting *piñas* (pineapple-shaped agave hearts) in an earthen pit before distillation, giving it that smoky flavor. In 1795 when the José Cuervo family first bottled the drink, it was called 'mezcal de tequila.' But in 1893, mezcal, which had become known as a poor person's drink, was dropped from the name. Thereafter known as tequila, the drink became more industrial and streamlined with the use of blue agave and steaming instead of roasting, which ensured that each bottle tasted similar. Only recently is mezcal, which got its own appellation in 1994, making a resurgence, though it remains relatively rare abroad.



GETTING AROUND

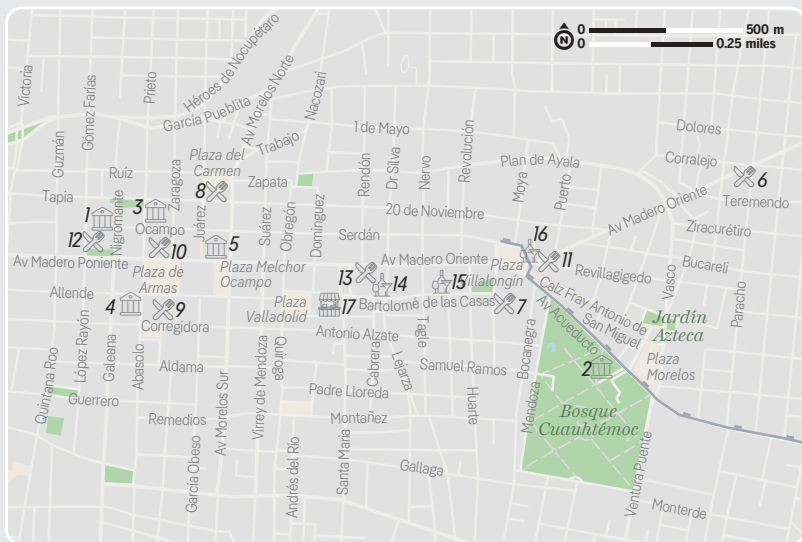
Buses to Tequila leave from Guadalajara's Antigua Central Camionera every 30 minutes (taking one hour and 40 minutes). You can easily get off in El Arenal and get back on. Another option is to take **José Cuervo Express** (p488), which will take you back to

Guadalajara by bus or train, depending on the package you (choo-choo) choose.

There are no buses in Tequila, nor rideshares. To get a taxi, line up on José María Morelos at the corner of Sixto Gorjón.

MORELIA

Many skip through Morelia on their way to Pátzcuaro or Reserva Mariposa Monarca, but it's worth staying a couple of days in the majestic Michoacán capital. Founded in 1541 as Valladolid and renamed Morelia after War of Independence hero José María Morelos y Pavón, the city is an architectural marvel, with pinkish-gray stone buildings in the downtown core. The finest is Catedral de Morelia, which might be the prettiest colonial-style building in Mexico. Morelia punches above its weight with great restaurants and bars, many of which serve Michoacán mezcal that rivals Oaxaca. Several museums and art galleries around town showcase muralist Alfredo Zalce, Michoacán's answer to José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera, and there is great artisanal folk-art shopping. You won't find many international visitors in Morelia, probably because of Michoacán's rep for being dangerous, but that's a shame because this pretty city has a whole lot going for it.



TOP TIP

Michoacán has gained a reputation for being a dangerous state due to crime cartels. At the time of writing, the US government has a Do Not Travel advisory for Michoacán due to crime and kidnapping. However, Morelia itself is exempted. If traveling around the state, avoid Tierra Caliente, in particular.

SIGHTS

- 1 Centro Cultural Clavijero
- 2 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Alfredo Zalce (MACAZ)
- 3 Museo del Estado de Michoacán

EATING

- 4 Museo Regional Michoacano
- 5 Palacio de Gobierno
- 6 Carnitas Don Raúl
- 7 Chango
- 8 Cuish

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 9 Gaspachos La Cerrada (see 9) La Guarecita
- 10 LU Cocina Michoacana
- 11 Mammút
- 12 Mercado de Dulces y Artesanías
- 13 Museo del Dulce

- 14 Escapulario
- (see 11) Nameless
- 15 Tata
- 16 Tatita

SHOPPING

- 17 Casa de las Artesanías



Dorilocos

Eat & Drink in Morelia

BRING YOUR APPETITE

Morelia has a spectacular food and drink scene. For starters, try Michoacán's gluttonous gift to Mexico, *carnitas* in a heaping taco (called a *surtido*) or quesadilla at **Carnitas Don Raúl**. *Uchepos* (sweet corn tamales usually bathed in a chili sauce and cream) are great at **Cuish**, but you can also find them at street carts around the city. If you walk along Hidalgo off Plaza de Armas, you'll probably hear someone yelling 'Gaspacho!' No, this isn't a cold soup as you might find in Spain, but rather a crazy fruit cup concoction that includes pineapple, *jicama* (Mexican turnip) and mango with the option of adding *cotija* (cheese), lime juice, onion, chopped green chili and hot sauce. The person calling out is probably working at **Gaspachos La Cerrada**. If you're still hungry and really feeling wild, head to the corner of Hidalgo and La Corregidora for a *dorilocos* (spicy Doritos chips covered with everything but the kitchen sink).

Morelia is also well-known for its sweets. There are *cocadas* (chewy-crunchy pyramids of caramelized coconut), *frutas cubiertas* (chunks of candied fruits such as squash, fig and pineapple), *glorias cellophane* (wrapped rolls of goat's milk



MORELIA'S BEST RESTAURANTS

La Guarecita

Coffee- and chocolate-roaster with great breakfasts, pizzas and Michoacán specialties. \$

Cuish

Cavernous restaurant to try Oaxacan and Michoacán favorites and flavored *atole* (hot masa beverage). \$\$

LU Cocina

Michoacana

Great plaza restaurant with creative takes on Mexican classics, breakfast and vegetarian options. \$\$

Mammut

Have an airy-crust pizza on a sidewalk table at this pricey-yet-delicious Neapolitano-style restaurant. \$\$\$

Chango

Classy surf-and-turf restaurant and a romantic terrace perfect for watching the sunset. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN MORELIA

Hostal Mich by Rotamundos

Beautiful stone building with clever bunk beds that have shutters for privacy. Could be friendlier. \$

Hotel Mesón de los Remedios

Fifteen-year-old hotel in a 1670 building with clean rooms that fit the city's style. \$\$

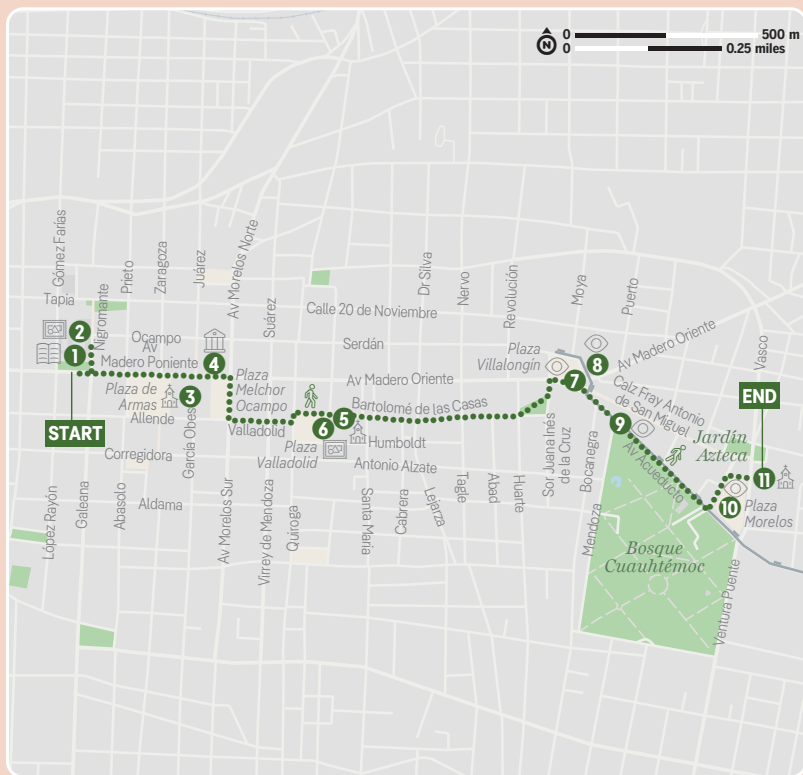
Hotel de la Soledad

Ever stayed in a 300-year-old hotel? Morelia's first hotel continues to be the height of luxury. \$\$\$

MORELIA ARCHITECTURE WALKING TOUR

Explore on foot one of Mexico's most beautiful towns in terms of colonial stone architecture. Get started by poking your head into 17th-century **1 Biblioteca Pública** de la Universidad Michoacana, which has more than 20,000 books and manuscripts. Murals on the walls are from the 1950s and one has a portrait of Albert Einstein under the Jewish prayer 'Shema Yisrael.' Around the corner, **2 Centro Cultural Clavijero** was a Jesuit school that now hosts art exhibitions centered around a pink-stone square and fountain. Walk back to the main drag and gawk at **3 Catedral de Morelia**. Built over a century (1660–1774), the cathedral is a mix of architectural styles inside and out. Watch it light up with a five-minute fireworks show at 9pm every Saturday night. Carry on to Michoacán's **4 Palacio de Gobierno**. Sixteenth-century **5 Templo de San Francisco de**

Asís, a few blocks away, is often lit up with projecting light shows at night. Don't miss **6 Instituto del Artesano Michoacano** next door, which features impressive art from across the region. Wander along Bartolomé de las Casas, home to Morelia's best bars and restaurants, then make a left at the end to see **7 Fuente de las Tarascas**, a statue of three women holding a fruit bowl. Off the busy triangle is **8 Callejón del Romance**, where lovebirds smooch amid flowering vines, and Morelia's 2km **9 Acueducto**, which supplied the city with water from 1788 to 1910. Finish with a visit to **10 Plaza Morelos** to see its majestic statue of the War of Independence hero and the golden **11 Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe**.



caramel studded with pecans), *jamoncillo de leche* (fudge-like milk sweets sold in rectangles or molded into nut shapes), *oblas con cajeta* (gooey caramel sandwiched between two thin round wafers), *ollitas de tamarindo* (tiny clay pots filled with a sweet-salty-tangy tamarind jam-like paste) and *rompope* (a flavored eggnog-like drink made with aguardiente, eggs and milk). Try them at **Museo del Dulce** or **Mercado de Dulces y Artesanías**.

Museums, Art & Shopping

MICHOACÁN'S ART ON DISPLAY

Behind pink stone walls, Morelia has plenty of museums, not all of them great. Still, it's worth doing a museum crawl, especially if you're interested in seeing the magnificent murals by Alfredo Zalce (1908–2003), the Pátzcuaro-born contemporary of Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros. Some of Zalce's best work can be found in the staircase and around the 2nd-floor balcony at **Palacio de Gobierno**, as well as in **Museo Regional Michoacano**, which has Zalce's *pueblos del mundo contra la guerra atómica* (Peoples of the World Against Atomic War) from 1951.

To learn about this state's rich artistic history, visit the free **Museo del Estado de Michoacán**, a well-curated museum showcasing local rugs, black pottery, and best of all, mind-bending masks from across Mexico on the top floor. For contemporary art, check out the free **Centro Cultural Clavijero**, which has several rotating exhibitions surrounding a central fountain and the also free **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Alfredo Zalce (MACAZ)**, which has a mishmash of paintings but strangely nothing from the artist himself.

Now that you've worked up your appetite for Michoacán art, go shopping at **Casa de las Artesanías**. This big store next to a magnificent church is divided by styles, many of which are made in Michoacán's *pueblos hospitaes*. There are *catrinas* (skeleton dolls) from Capula, *alebrijes* (fantasy creatures) from Ocumicho, *esmalta negro* (black pottery) from Santa Fe de la Laguna, *cobre* (copper pottery) from Santa Clara, *chuspata* and *tule* reed work and shirts from Tzintzunzan, masks, furniture, delicate paintings made with feathers and so much more. Staff are happy to help if you have any questions.



VISIT PÁTZCUARO

Go to **Pátzcuaro** (p500) and the *pueblos hospitaes* surrounding its lake to find artisanal work at the source, and to get better prices than in Morelia.

BEST MEZCAL BARS IN MORELIA

Escapulario

Poppin' little bar with plenty of mezcal, buggy snacks and vegetarian options. Live music on weekends.

Tata

Funky neon restaurant as famous for its mezcal as its gastronomy, including rabbit tartar and osso buco.

Tatita

Tata's little sibling dedicated to mezcal tasting and snacks with Mexican erotica comics on the bar.

Nameless

Awesome speakeasy with great cocktails and a disco ball. Enter through the fridge at Taquería El Chiflido.



GETTING AROUND

Morelia has an international airport, **Aeropuerto Internacional General Francisco Mujica**, 26km north of the city with flights to Los Angeles, Denver and major Mexican hubs. Ubers aren't allowed at the airport, so you'll need to take a local taxi. Morelia's bus station, **Terminal de Autobuses de Morelia**, also doesn't allow Ubers, and official taxis can be extortionate. Instead, flag down the

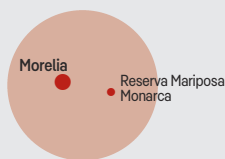
Roja 1 combi (van) from under the pedestrian bridge (M\$10) or call your Uber once outside the station. It's easier to grab the **Roja 1 combi** back to the station from **Francisco I Madero Ote**. Buses and shared taxis (both M\$60) leave for Pátzcuaro from the neighborhood of **Xingari** at the corner of **Hwy 14** and **Cap Mariano Anzures**.



Beyond Morelia

Brace yourself for millions of monarch butterflies, cool mountain air and the mystery of how this marvelous migration occurs every year.

East of Morelia, Reserva Mariposa Monarca is a great wonder of the natural world that everyone should experience at least once. Every November, millions of monarch butterflies fly 4828km from Canada to overwinter at reserves in eastern Michoacán and Mexico state. How a delicate insect weighing less than a paperclip flies the kilogram-for-kilogram equivalent of a human walking 11 times around the earth is mind-blowing (lepidopterists believe monarchs have a 'map sense' and navigate by the azimuth, or horizontal arc, of the sun). Experiencing it is even better. And go soon, as the great migration that has been happening for 20,000 years is in grave danger due to human activity.



TOP TIP

You can easily drive to the reserves, but Morelia tour companies such as **Mich Mex Guide Tours** eliminate the hassle.



PHOTO: SPIRIT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Monarch butterfly

Marvelous Monarch Migration

EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

When the Spanish first came here, they thought it was a plague. Locals say it's the dead returning to Mexico following Día de Muertos. Whatever you believe, **Reserva Mariposa Monarca** is an unparalleled experience. Every fall, millions of orange monarch butterflies make the unfathomable journey from as far north as Canada to overwinter in hilltop fir forests in Michoacán and Mexico state. Butterflies stay from November to February or March, when they finally mate (for up to 16 hours!). Then the males die and females fly north to find milkweed in the southern US and lay eggs. After that, three generations of monarchs travel north on the hunt for milkweed before a fourth or fifth 'super generation' flies the entire trip south.

There are four reserves open to the public: **El Rosario** and **Sierra Chincua** in Michoacán and **Cerro Pelón** and **Piedra Herrada** in Mexico. The simplest, and most popular, is El Rosario, 8km from the former gold-mining town **Anganguero**. Entry is M\$50 per vehicle plus M\$80 at the door, which includes a local guide. As butterflies soar in front of your face, quickly jerking to the side or sometimes smacking into you, you'll travel 3km either by walking on steep stairs or on horseback (M\$150 each way). At the top, watch as butterflies shiver together in the sunlight to recharge like solar panels before flying again in search of nectar and water.

Nearby Sierra Chincua, 9.5km from Anganguero, gets fewer visitors and has a less strenuous hike. Cerro Pelón in Mexico state is more remote, and a tougher climb, but it's worth it. Piedra Herrada, 24km from Valle de Bravo, is closest to Mexico City and has mostly paved paths but fewer monarchs.



TRAVELLING SOULS

Locals say that the butterfly migration is actually the souls of their relatives returning for **Día de Muertos**. Experience the vibrant tradition yourself in Pátzcuaro and its surrounding towns (p499).

POPULATION AT RISK

In 2022, migratory monarchs were downgraded to endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Illegal logging in Mexico, extreme weather due to climate change and agriculture that destroys milkweed (the only plant where monarchs lay their eggs) has made overwintering populations at Reserva Mariposa Monarca erratic. In 2021, monarchs covered an area of 2.85ha – up 35% from 2020 but still well below the target of 6.05ha for a sustained population. Mexicans who advocate for protecting the monarchs are sometimes killed, but there are ways to help. Canadians and Americans can plant milkweed in their garden, advocate to protect places where the plant grows naturally and volunteer to tag butterflies so we can learn more about this marvelous migration – and how to save it.



GETTING AROUND

The two Michoacán reserves are under three hours from Morelia by car. By bus, first go to Zitácuaro (three hours and 15 minutes from Morelia), then to Anganguero, where you can catch a combi up to the reserve. It's simplest and most informative to hire a guide from Morelia. Day tours cost M\$900 and require at least two people. The Mexico state reserve

of Cerro Pelón is also best accessed from Zitácuaro, then by taxi. Combis (labeled Aputzio de Juárez) will only take you as far as the state border, then you'll need a taxi anyway. Piedra Herrada is two hours from Mexico City. Drive, take a tour or bus to Valle de Bravo and taxi from there.

PÁTZCUARO



Few places in Mexico are as rich in indigenous culture, and artisanal mastery, as Pátzcuaro and its lake. For 200 years before the Spanish arrived, Pátzcuaro was a Purépecha town in confederation with Tzintzuntzan and Ihuatzio, other towns on the lake. Together, the partnership thwarted Aztec attacks for years, but with the Spanish they tried a new strategy: welcoming them. Bad idea, as conquistador Nuño de Guzman brutally conquered the area. In 1536, Bishop Vasco de Quiroga encouraged towns around the lake to develop Christian-friendly trades and become *pueblos hospitales*, an idea inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*. Today, artisans in these towns make amazing, and very different, artwork from copper to psychedelic sculptures and guitars, as seen in the Disney movie *Coco*, which was based largely on this area of Michoacán. Pátzcuaro itself is a wonderful *pueblo mágico*, with Mexico's second-largest plaza (after Mexico City's Zócalo), tempting shops and charming accommodations.

TOP TIP

The best time to visit is late October to November 2 for **Día de Muertos**, when Pátzcuaro and towns around the lake host some of Mexico's most vibrant, and popular, festivities. Be sure to book well in advance as accommodations always fill up.



LINAKOFU/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Fishing with butterfly nets, Isla de Janitzio (p501)

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Casa da Mamá Coco
 2 Ex Convento de Santa Ana
 3 Isla de Janitzio
 4 Muelle General (port)
 5 Plaza Principal de Quiroga

- 6 Santa Fe de la Laguna

SLEEPING

- 7 OYO Posada

EATING

- 8 Cenaduría Lulú
 9 La Surtidora

- 10 Restaurante Axolotl

- 11 Restaurante Axolotl
 12 Verde Limone

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 13 Mezcalería San Miguel

SHOPPING

- 14 Tianguis

TRANSPORT

- 15 Central de Autobuses de Pátzcuaro

- 16 Plaza Gertrudis Bocanegra (Plaza Chica)

Land of the Dead

MEXICO'S MOST SOULFUL TRADITION

In Mexico, a dead loved one isn't someone to be pushed to the back of your mind and forgotten, as in many other cultures. Here, the dead are honored with huge celebrations, and one of the biggest and most radiant is in and around Pátzcuaro. In the weeks before Día de Muertos on November 1, villagers decorate graves and build *ofrendas* (altars) with bright *campesúchil* (marigold flowers said to attract souls), *pan de muerto* (sweetbread), candles and cups of mezcal or tequila to entice the soul of their loved ones to return. On October 31, children dressed as *catrinas* (skeletons original-



MUERTOS TRADITIONS

Michoacán's Día de Muertos is rivaled by festivities in Oaxaca, where traditions are slightly different. For instance, the *pan de muerto* (sweetbread) looks different. Learn more on p355.

I LIVE HERE: PUEBLOS HOSPITALES



Guide **Jaime Hernández Balderas** of Patzcuaro Magic Tours explains the impact of *pueblos hospitales*.

Pátzcuaro is a magical region home to the indigenous Purépecha nation and full of history, culture and traditions. The communities in the region around the lake started to be reorganized right after the Spanish conquest back in the 1500s through the creation of social institutions called *pueblos hospitales*, towns with specific industries. This term was created by Spanish Bishop Vasco de Quiroga, who wanted to convert tribes to Christianity and promote their economy. *Pueblos hospitales* remain key for the cultural sustainability of the region and are a great way to experience the fusion of indigenous and Spanish customs.

ly created by Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada) or other costumes wander the streets with small squashes looking for pesos. When *noche de muertos* finally arrives, souls return with the wind (so dress warmly) and locals bring casseroles filled with their relatives' favorite dishes. Watching lit-up boats ride out to Janitzio (p501), an island on **Lago de Pátzcuaro** 4km from town, is a magical experience, as revelers sing traditional songs and mariachis slap away on their *guitarrónes*. Janitzio, as well as the town of Tzintzuntzan near ancient Purépecha ruins, are some of the best places to experience Día de Muertos, but there are festivities such as markets and concerts in Pátzcuaro and in many of the islands around the lake. Día de Muertos in Pátzcuaro can attract some 300,000 people from October 31 to November 1, and accommodations fill up months in advance, so book well ahead.

Shop Hop on the Lake

SOOO MANY ARTISANS

For nearly five centuries, towns circling Lago de Pátzcuaro have become their own little craft empires, with master artisans producing work sought after across Mexico. Known as *pueblos hospitales* (art towns), each is worth visiting as they are all so different.

Sixteen kilometers north of Pátzcuaro, **Tzintzuntzan** is home to expert *chuspata* and *tule* reed baskets and light fixtures as well as wooden furniture. While in town, check out the **ruins** of a Purépecha administrative city that was 30,000 strong when the Spanish arrived and **Ex Convento de Santa Ana**, a monastery with 16th-century frescoes and a display of cool-yet-creepy sculptures and masks by artist Saúl Verona. Fifteen minutes' drive northeast on Hwy 120, **Quiroga** sells products from around the lake but specializes in wood art such as the plates made by 75-year-old Estella Hernandez, who has been doing her craft for half a century. Find Hernandez' work and more in Quiroga's **Tianguis**. Hungry? Walk through **Plaza Principal de Quiroga** and street vendors will shove *carnitas* and *birría* into your mouth. Ten minutes west, **Santa Fe de la Laguna** is the real Santa Cecilia from Disney's *Coco*. Take your photos with the red and white walls as seen in the movie and at the **Casa de Mamá Coco**, whose soul passed on in 2022. Thirty minutes south of Pátzcuaro, **Santa Clara** is known for its copper work and is the best equipped for visitors, with the free **Museo Nacional del Cobre** showcasing work from various artists along a historical timeline. Scan the QR code for a helpful map that creates a walking tour of copper artisans on Google Maps.



WHERE TO STAY IN PÁTZCUARO

Oyo Posada

Quiet, budget hotel with rooms along a little garden. No heat or air-con. \$

Posada Yolihuani

Magical hotel with a breathtaking garden and 10 rooms, all with high ceilings. Breakfast included. \$\$

Hotel Encantada

Big tile rooms, some with a fireplace and kitchen, surround a lush garden. Breakfast included. \$\$\$



Día de los Muertos, Tzintzuntzan

Climb a Mexican Hero

CRISTO VIBES

Take a taxi or combi (blue) to the **Muelle General** port north of Pátzcuaro and hop on a *lancha* (motorboat) to find a *pueblo mágico* in the middle of Lago de Pátzcuaro. **Isla de Janitzio**, seen in *Coco*, is a major destination for Mexican visitors and is a worthwhile stop for other visitors, too. A ferry goes back and forth and you should set aside around three hours to see it.

As you munch on snacks and listen to mariachis serenade you as you cross the bluer-than-blue water in the *lancha*, you'll quickly notice Janitzio's main attraction: a giant 39.5m statue of Mexican Independence War hero José María Morelos Pérez y Pavón. Built in 1934, a few years after Cristo Redentor in Rio de Janeiro, the statue is hollowed out with stairs so you can climb to the top. Along the walls are murals painted by Ramón Alva de la Canal in the 1930s that tell Morelos' story. Unfortunately, many of the panels have faded over time and are hardly legible – sweaty hands from nervous climbers afraid of heights will do that. At the very top is a tiny staircase that leads up Morelos' arm to views over the island and lake. Expect to wait in line.

The island itself is quite touristy, with plenty of restaurants selling fish such as *charalea* (tiny fried lake fish), *micheladas* (tomato beer drink) and low-end souvenirs. But it's fun to walk its streets with views over the lake and the island's tile roofs.



BEST FOOD & DRINK IN PÁTZCUARO

Cenaduría Lulú

Eat like a local at this down-to-earth restaurant off the plaza. Open for dinner Friday to Monday. \$

Restaurante Axolotl

All-day restaurant with great views and the best pastries in the highlands. There's also a cafe in the plaza. \$

La Surtidora

Atmospheric plaza cafe-deli from 1916 serving Mexican favorites for breakfast, lunch and dinner. \$\$

Verde Limone

Chic Italian restaurant outdoors in the center of a *casona* with fresh pastas, wood-fired pizza and desserts. \$\$

Mezcalería San Miguel

Taste small-batch mezcal from the owner's farm. Don't be surprised to see kids at the bar.



GETTING AROUND

Pátzcuaro is one hour from Morelia by car or bus – there are no direct trips from Guadalajara. Shared taxis from Morelia's Xingari neighborhood will take you to a triangular interchange at Monumento A Lázaro Cárdenas. From there, the blue-striped combi heading back north will take you close to the plaza. The same combi goes to and from Muelle General where you can catch a ferry to Isla Janitzio. Buses from Morelia, Uruapan and

elsewhere stop at Central de Autobuses de Pátzcuaro, southeast of the plaza. It's a quick taxi or walk from there. Accessing the towns north is easy enough by hopping on and off combis. Go to Plaza Gertrudis Bocanegra (also known as Plaza Chica) at the corner across from Biblioteca Gertrudis Bocanegra and tell the woman in blue where you want to go. Buses to Tzintzuntzan run every 15 minutes. Buses bound for Santa Clara go from the terminal.



Angahuan
Volcán Paricutín
Pátzcuaro

Beyond Pátzcuaro

Feeling brave? Climb a dormant volcano past jet-black lava rocks. You'll also find many artisan towns around Pátzcuaro.

It's been just 70 years since the ground shook and up popped Volcán Paricutín, a volcano 88.5km west of Pátzcuaro, which remains one of the youngest in the world. Surprisingly, this volcano, which consumed two towns, isn't well known, even for Mexicans, but climbing it is unforgettable. Don't miss the only building left standing from the two towns: a church tower protruding from black lava rocks. Elsewhere beyond Pátzcuaro, you'll find *pueblos hospitales* dedicated to expert artisan crafts. Some excellent towns are **Paracho**, which is dedicated to guitars, and **Capula**, known for its beautiful *ca-trinas* sculptures, but there are many more.

TOP TIP

Buy Uruapan makes for a good base, and has a pretty national park with waterfalls.



Antigua Iglesia de San Juan Parangaricutiro



Volcán Parícutín

Climb the Americas' Youngest Volcano

IT'S STILL STEAMING

On February 20, 1943, Purépecha farmer Dionisio Pulido was plowing his cornfield when the ground began to shake and spit steam, sparks and hot ash. The farmer quickly started to run, and it was a good thing he did as a volcano began to arise from the earth. **Volcán Parícutín**, as it's now called, remains the newest volcano in the Americas. During its nine-year rise, lava swallowed two villages: San Salvador Parícutín and San Juan Parangaricutiro. Fortunately, the more than 5000 people who lived there managed to escape, but all that's left is **Antigua Iglesia de San Juan Parangaricutiro**, a church whose sturdy stone tower continues to stand against all odds.

If you're not turned off by the idea of visiting an active (though dormant) volcano, climbing it is an extraordinary experience that should be near the top of anyone's Mexico travel list. Find a guide in the village of **Angahuan** (they'll likely find you once they see a foreigner in town). Don't climb on your own as there are various unmarked pathways up – a group without a guide recently got lost and wasn't rescued until 3am for a cost of M\$3000. A popular route takes you straight up 808m of elevation over jet-black sand and a sea of lava boulders before a steep, and slippery, scramble up the cone. Hover your hand over pockets of steam, but don't touch: it's hot! Slide down smooth black sand to flat land, before walking through avocado fields to the breathtaking lava-covered church, where there are food stalls, before returning to town. That trip takes about six hours over 21km, so start early.



WHERE TO STAY AND TO EAT

Cabañas Vistas del Parícutín Angahuan

Closest accommodations to the volcano. Has simple cabins, great views and a restaurant. \$

Hotel Mi Solar

Excellent Uruapan hotel in a pretty 19th-century building. Its burger restaurant, Uno, is solid, too. \$

La Pérgola

Trendy Uruapan cafe that encourages laptop use with an attached sushi and ramen restaurant. \$\$

Los Arcos

If in Paracho, guitar town, try the four-course menu of the day. \$\$



CLIMB COLIMA'S VOLCANO

You can also climb **Volcán Nevado de Colima**, an extinct volcano across from the smoke-spewing **Volcán de Fuego de Colima**. Learn more on p506.



GETTING AROUND

Buses to Angahuan leave from La Charanda, a bus stop in Uruapan at the stop light on the corner of Calz Benito Juárez and Juan

Delgado. The trip takes 30 minutes. Take a bus (the last one is at 8pm) or taxi from the same spot in Angahuan.

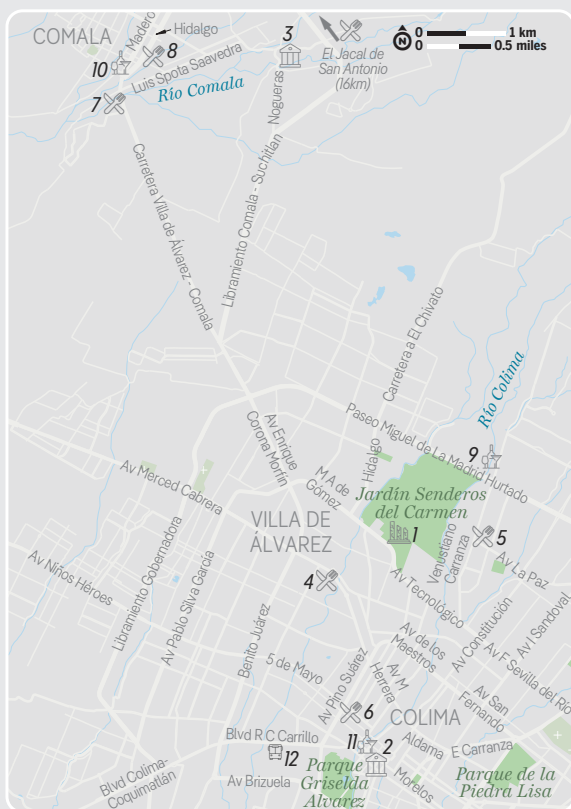
COLIMA


 Colima
 ✦ Mexico City

The eponymous capital of one of Mexico's smallest states, the city of Colima, founded in 1523, is just the third Spanish settlement in Nueva España, though it doesn't have nearly the draw of the two older cities, Mexico City and Veracruz. The young city (in terms of population) has a high number of university students, giving it a handful of cool cafes and craft breweries, especially around its lovely plaza. The climate here is the warmest in the Western Central Highlands, and Colima has two sets of ruins within the city limits that are astonishingly well kept (and rarely visited). Other than that, the city doesn't have much going for it, so make your visit short and use Colima as a base to explore its giant, snow-capped dormant volcano, Volcán de Colima, and to see Colima, one of the most charming *pueblos mágicos* around.

TOP TIP

Catch a bus to Colima from Colima's Central de los Rojos bus station. Buses run every half-hour throughout the day.



SIGHTS

(see 3) Hacienda y Ecomarque Nogueras

- 1 La Campana Archaeological Site
- 2 Museo Regional de Historia de Colima
- 3 Museo Universitario Alejandro Rangel Hidalgo Nogueras

EATING

- 4 Cenaduría Julia
- 5 Chepe
- 6 El Charco de la Higuera
- 7 El Don Comalón
- 8 Okti

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 9 Bravo Café Bar
- 10 Comalala
- 11 DMT

TRANSPORT

- 12 Central de los Rojos

BEST FOOD IN COLIMA & AROUND

Cenaduria Julia

Fourth-generation restaurant (three generations run by women) specializing in *sopitas* (tiny fried tacos). \$

El Charco de la Higuera

Busy restaurant in a quiet little plaza next to the San José church. Service is fast. \$

El Don Comalón

Massive hall outside Comala with live music and *botanas* (snacks) served with every drink. \$\$

Oktli

Swiss-owned Comala restaurant serving international cuisines, sometimes on a volcanic rock to stay warm. \$\$\$

Chepe

Trendy Argentinian steakhouse where everything is cooked on the grill. \$\$\$



La Campana Archaeological Site

Ancient History

PRE-HISPANIC RUINS AND DOLLS

Long before the Spanish arrived, Colima was populated by various indigenous groups who left behind wonderful ruins and dolls found in tombs around the area.

In the **Museo Regional de Historia de Colima** on the Colima plaza, see a terrific collection of dolls and sculptures carved out of volcanic rock. Some are realistic depictions of human couples, while others are *itzcuinli* (dogs) and masks. The well-designed museum in a colonial-era *casona* also has a recreated tomb with a glass floor, where you can see a human skeleton with dog bones curled beside it. Information is in Spanish only.

Ten minutes north of downtown, **La Campana Archaeological Site** dates as far back as 1500 BCE and has a collection of mysterious rectangular pyramids – the fact that the site is so rarely visited adds to the mystery. Some structures were homes, others ceremonial structures, and there's a *tlachtli* (ball game) court. Top tip: wear closed-toe shoes as there are lots of fire ants.

Further north, there's an arguably more breathtaking set of ruins surrounded by a residential neighborhood



GUACHIMONTONES

West of Guadalajara, **Guachimontones** (p485) has a group of circular pyramids that look like corn on the cob. Spiritual leaders would perch atop a pole and imitate the flight of a bird.



WHERE TO STAY IN COLIMA

Hotel Aldama

Charming budget hotel with a pretty courtyard. Disappointingly, some bathrooms have mold. \$

La Casona de Don Jorge

Former mansion turned delightful boutique hotel with a restaurant. Find it across from Jardín Nuñez. \$\$

Hotel Casa Alvarada

Five-room Comala hotel with a boho lounge bed in the garden. Great bathrooms. \$\$



CRIME IN COLIMA

At the time of writing, the US has Colima on its Do Not Travel list due to 'crime and kidnapping,' and prohibits government employees from traveling anywhere but Manzanillo and along toll road Hwy 54D in daylight. While this classification feels extreme – thousands of tourists visit the state every year without a problem – Colima has seen an uptick in violence. In January 2022, a prison fight between members of Colima city cartel Los Mezcales and Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) led to a war between the two groups that continued through the new year.



JONHOOGENTIVES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Colima

– though it isn't easy to find. El Chanal Archaeological Site was at its height between 1100 and 1400 CE and is highlighted by an altar used for human sacrifices. There are no signs directing you to the site from the main roads, and there are no parking spots. Find it on an elbow-shaped side street between Aniceto Castellanos and El Chanal/La Capacha.

Climb a Snow-Capped Volcano

EPIC JOURNEY AND VIEWS

Less than 32km north of Colima, two volcanoes look down menacingly over the city, both having wreaked havoc during their lifespans. **Volcán de Fuego de Colima**, at 3763m, is the most active volcano in North America and continues to have a halo of smoke over its cone. Recent eruptions in 2017 showered ash on Ciudad Guzmán, 22.5km to the northeast, and small eruptions in May 2019 caused several landslides and explosions.

Meanwhile, **Volcán Nevado de Colima's** days of spewing lava are over. You can climb to the 4496m snow-capped summit in about 12 hours – you'll need two days if you don't have a car. A guide is a much easier way to do it. **Admire Mexico** offers tours that start at 5:30am and will get you to



WHERE TO DRINK IN COLIMA

Bravo Café Bar

Hip Colima cafe, restaurant and bar in a jungle setting open morning to night.

Comalala

Taste mezcal and craft beer from across Mexico in Comala with the help of informative staff.

DMT

Gigantic black-lit rock bar with a terrace overlooking Colima's plaza, karaoke and mezcal rooms.

the top and back down before sunset. Views on the way up are spectacular – taking in both Fuego’s plumes of smoke and vistas out to the Pacific Ocean. Admire Mexico’s summit tour includes lunch. The tour agency also offers bird-watching, trekking and kayaking tours, and a combo tour of cacao- and beer-tasting around the national park. Tours must be booked in advance and need a minimum of two people.

If you’re not the climbing type, you can take a car or taxi up to **El Jacal de San Antonio**, a restaurant with decent food and four beautiful vistas – the best being at the very top with views out to Fuego.

Cute Town & Breathtaking Art

LOVABLE WHITE-WALLED VILLAGE

Just 9.5km from Colima, **Comala** is a *pueblo mágico* that you can’t miss if you find yourself in the area. Whitewashed walls and terracotta roofs are reminiscent of Andalucía’s *pueblos blancos*, and the town has some cute shops and restaurants. A great time to visit is in April during **Feria del Ponche, Pan y Café**, which celebrates alcoholic punch, coffee and bread – essentially the best things in life.

On the northeastern edge of town, **Museo Universitario Alejandro Rangel Hidalgo Nogueras** and the **Hacienda y Ecoparque Nogueras** next door are also worth a visit. The university-run museum celebrates work by self-taught Colima-born artist Alejandro Rangel Hidalgo (1923–2000). The museum showcases Hidalgo’s range of styles, including his painted furniture and hyper-realistic canvas paintings. Ask to borrow a magnifying glass and peer at the unbelievable detail in each character or scene. The museum also includes dolls found in nearby tombs that date back to 500 BCE, a traditional Mexican kitchen and some of the projects Hidalgo famously did for Unicef. Ask staff to open up the room next door to see Hidalgo’s studio. Entry fee includes a guide, and English is sometimes available. You can buy prints of some of Hidalgo’s paintings, especially ones with human characters, in the building out across from the main entrance.

In Hidalgo’s **hacienda** next door, see butterflies dance from flower to flower in a splendid garden and educational space. There are different kinds of agaves, banana trees, towering bamboo and cacti along with turtles clustered in ponds.



ZONA MÁGICA

If you’re driving up the volcano from Comala, you’ll see signs indicating the area is a *zona mágica* (magical area). The magic, if you want to call it that, lies in the incline of the road as you drive up the mountain. Just before MagicZone Café, put your car in neutral. Your car will start rolling backward seemingly uphill. Be sure to keep an eye out for oncoming cars as other drivers don’t appear to give a damn about this little science experiment.



MAGICAL VILLAGES

The Western Central Highlands is filled with *pueblos mágicos*, government certified tourist towns. For others, check out **Tlaquepaque** (p475), **Tonalá** (p478), **Tequila** (p487), **Ajijic** (p483), **Tapalpa** (p484), **Pátzcuaro** (p498).



GETTING AROUND

Buses make the 30- to 40-minute trip to/ from Colima’s Central de los Rojos half-hourly throughout the day and will drop you near the

main square. Taxis and Ubers take about 15 minutes and cost around M\$100 each way.



Above: Cascada de Tamul (p538); Opposite: San Miguel de Allende (p521)

THE MAIN AREAS

GUANAJUATO

Gritty, historic silver city. **p514**

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Chic and smart: the 'Aspen' of Mexico. **p521**

SAN LUIS POTOSÍ

Elaborate architecture and surrealist museums. **p530**

LA HUASTECA POTOSINA

Surreal gardens and turquoise water experiences. **p537**

NORTHERN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

COLONIAL RICHES TO NATURAL WONDERS

Semidesert. Silver cities. Colonial legacies. Cloud forest. Rich indigenous cultures. Handicrafts. Experience a broad variety of Mexico's heartland.

Exploring Mexico's center is like time-travelling through the country's time periods. Comprising numerous Mexican states – Guanajuato, Querétaro, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosi and the natural reserve of Sierra Gorda – this massive area

varies enormously. Beyond the lush jungle areas of Sierra Gorda and the turquoise watershed of the Huasteca Potosina lies cactus-strewn semidesert. Far from leaving you 'high and dry', the desert is interspersed with numerous colonial cities and Spain's riches of the time are reflected in the elaborate architecture of churches, mansions and palaces. Known as the Cradle of Independence, these cities contributed in some way towards the fight for autonomy from Spain.

Don't-miss experiences include bathing in the orange glow of gorgeous San Miguel de Allende, plunging under the tepid waterfalls of the Huasteca Potosina, exploring the back alleys in the 'silver cities' of Guanajuato and Zacatecas and meandering through rough cobblestone villages that were rich silver mines until they were ghost towns.

Amid all this, you'll come across rich indigenous cultures, local cuisines and sophisticated dining and drinking opportunities. You can climb among pre-Hispanic sites, spend hours in museums, hit the nightlife and festivals or shop 'til you drop for local *artesanías* (handicrafts). It may take a few hours between cities, whether by car or bus, but it's well worth the effort.



FERRANTRAITTE/GETTY IMAGES ©

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA SIERRA GORDA

Spectacular nature and church missions. **p549**

QUERÉTARO

Independence history and art museums. **p541**

ZACATECAS

World-class art museums. **p552**

Find Your Way

COAHUILA

The Northern Central Highlands covers a vast area of Mexico. To get a thorough taste of Mexican nature, urban history and culture, you can do an entire circuit, or visit one or two places only.

Zacatecas, p552

Extraordinary world-class art museums dominate the colonial buildings of the proud and remote city of Zacatecas.



Guanajuato, p514

The historic silver city winds down a valley and is action packed, with sights, student bars and a very Mexican flavor.



San Miguel de Allende, p521

The 'Aspen' of Mexico, San Miguel glows in its own success: glorious terracotta and orange mansions house boutique hotels, posh drinking dens and high-end shopping.

Querétaro, p541

One of Mexico's fastest-growing cities, easy-going Querétaro fought hard for the country's independence. Excellent cafes and accommodations make it the perfect stopover before Sierra Gorda.

**BUS**

If you don't want to drive, an excellent bus system connects all the major hubs and, in most cases – with the exception of the Huasteca Potosina and Mineral de Pozos – also the villages beyond. Each region has its own 1st- and 2nd-class bus companies.

**CAR**

Having your own wheels is the best way of exploring the remote areas of the Huasteca Potosina and Sierra Gorda, as well as smaller villages. Drivers can be fast and erratic, and Sierra Gorda's roads that hug a cliff edge are extremely curvy.

**GUIDED TOURS**

Excellent day and multiday guided tours head into the remote areas of Sierra Gorda and the Huasteca Potosina, and are a good option if you're not comfortable driving or don't have time for the multihour bus trips.

San Luis Potosí, p530

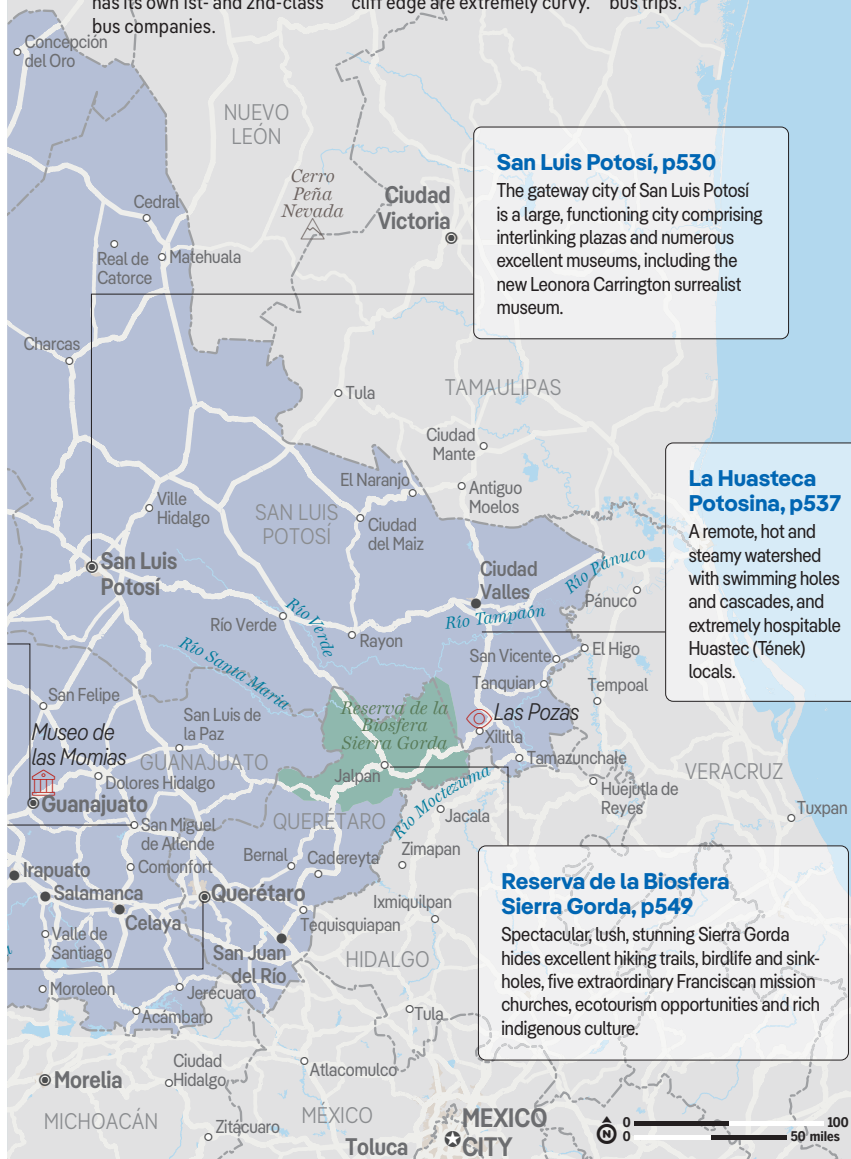
The gateway city of San Luis Potosí is a large, functioning city comprising interlinking plazas and numerous excellent museums, including the new Leonora Carrington surrealist museum.

La Huasteca Potosina, p537

A remote, hot and steamy watershed with swimming holes and cascades and extremely hospitable Huastec (Tének) locals.

Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda, p549

Spectacular, lush, stunning Sierra Gorda hides excellent hiking trails, birdlife and sink-holes, five extraordinary Franciscan mission churches, ecotourism opportunities and rich indigenous culture.



Plan Your Time

Cherry-pick your adventures in the vast and varied Northern Central Highlands, from pre-Hispanic sites and nature-filled wonder in remote reserves, to art and history museums in colonial cities and former mining villages.


HINT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES ©

San Miguel de Allende (p521)



Seasonal Highlights

May to September sees rain, particularly in Guanajuato. You cannot visit the Huasteca Potosina in September due to rainy season; roads can be impassable. Beware the cold in Real de Catorce.



FEBRUARY

Hit the Huasteca Potosina when the tourists have gone and when it's safe and accessible for watery fun.



APRIL

Semana Santa (Holy Week) brings a bevy of traditional religious festivities and parades.



AUGUST

A fun time to visit Zacatecas (if safe; see warning p552) for the annual three-day Mourismo Festival.

A Long Weekend

- Make a beeline for **Guanajuato** (p514) for two days of colonial history; its pedestrianized center flows down a valley that is packed with everything from grand buildings to Mexican cantinas. Start with a **walking tour** (p515) to take in the striking architectural works, including Teatro Juárez, then head up to the Pípila for a panoramic views.
- Grab a taxi to restaurant **Las Mercedes** (p515), then head to **La Valenciana** (p515) or **Museo de las Momias** (p516) and its mummified remains (if you can stomach it).
- Enjoy a sunset drink in one of the many rooftop bars. On the third day, do a day trip to **San Miguel de Allende** (p521).

Five Days to Travel Around

● Explore further the streets of **San Miguel de Allende** (p518), including its converted colonial buildings and artisans market. The next day, visit the fascinating pre-Hispanic ruins, **Cañada de la Virgen** (p528), before returning to San Miguel to hit its stores and chic **rooftop bars** (p522).

● The following day, head either to the **Sanctuary of Atotonilco** (p527) followed by a hot springs bath and lunch at a nearby **winery** (528) or journey to **Dolores Hidalgo** (p519) for a taste of independence, weird ice-cream flavors and colorful ceramics.

● Alternatively, spend the day exploring **Mineral de Pozos** (p526; you can cycle there with Bici Buro).

If You Have More Time

● Do a day trip to **Aguascalientes** (p536) to visit two unmissable museums that both focus on... death.

● Head to **San Luis Potosí** (p530) and enjoy a **mezcal tour** (p535). If you've a day spare to travel, **Real de Catorce** (p535) is a high-and-dry desert experience, or when safe to do so journey to **Zacatecas** (p552) for its incredible art museums.

● Alternatively, spend a day in and around **Querétaro** (p541) before doing a circuit: first to **Reserva Biosfera Sierra Gorda** (p549) via **Tequisquiapan** or **Bernal** (p546).

● Drive to Xilitla for a surreal garden experience at **Las Pozas** (p540) before dropping down into waterfalls in **Huasteca Potosina** (p537).



SEPTEMBER

On September 16, Dolores Hidalgo (p13) comes alive with a party celebrating its role in the independence movement.



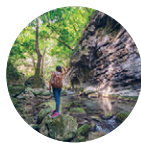
OCTOBER

The month to party hard in Guanajuato during the Festival Cervantino, an annual international arts event.



NOVEMBER

Beautiful weather with sun and mild temperatures brings down the 'snow birds' from North America, but few tourists.



DECEMBER

Pleasant climes and drier conditions make it perfect to visit the natural sights of Sierra Gorda.

GUANAJUATO

Guanajuato

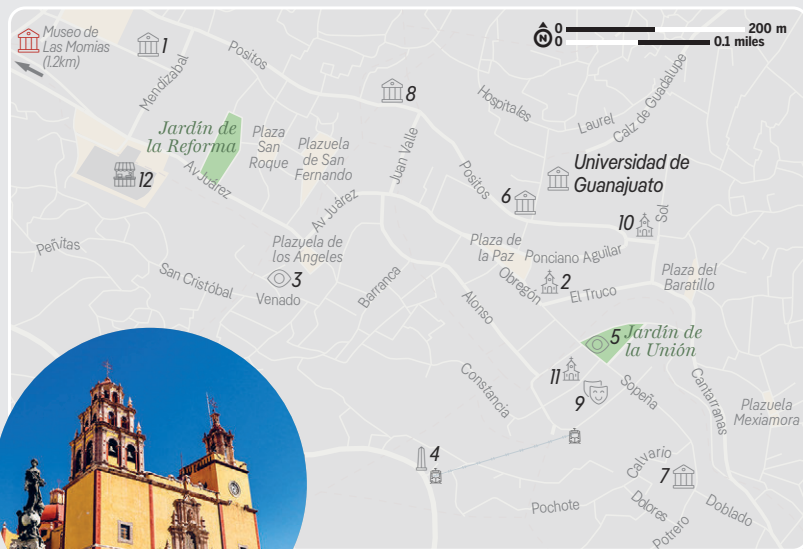
Mexico City

The extraordinary Unesco World Heritage city of Guanajuato, the state's capital, was founded in 1559 due to the region's rich silver and gold deposits. These days, stunning tree-filled plazas and brightly painted houses cover the steep slopes of a valley. Paved streets are lined with colonial buildings – many from the days of plundered riches – that house excellent museums and theaters. The city's main roads twist around the hillsides and plunge into long subterranean tunnels, formerly rivers.

The city is increasingly being marketed as an events hot spot; indeed there's always something happening, including the acclaimed annual arts extravaganza, Festival Cervantino. Yet this colorful and lively place holds center stage all year; much of the vibrancy, 'grittiness', late-night noise and prolific cultural activities, from *callejoneadas*, films, theater and orchestras to the bubbling street life, can be attributed to the 20,000 students of the city's University of Guanajuato.

TOP TIP

You do not need a car in Guanajuato; the streets are largely pedestrianized and driving can be difficult due to the narrow one-way system. Noise sensitive souls could consider a hotel on Paseo de la Presa, though these are largely boutique and it's a 15- to 30-minute stroll from the center.



Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato

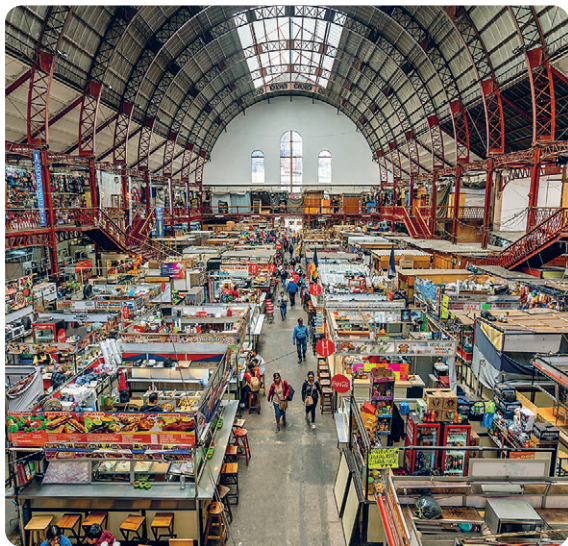
SIGHTS

- 1 Alhóndiga de Granaditas
- 2 Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato
- 3 Callejón del Beso
- 4 El Pipila
- 5 Jardín de la Unión
- 6 Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato

- 7 Museo Iconográfico del Quijote
- 8 Museo y Casa de Diego Rivera
- 9 Teatro Juárez
- 10 Templo de la Compañía de Jesús
- 11 Templo de San Diego

SHOPPING

- 12 Mercado Hidalgo



Mercado Hidalgo

Exploring the Alleys of Guanajuato

MUSEUMS, CHURCHES, PLAZAS AND MORE

Art, culture, grand architecture and religious relics reward visitors who take the time to wander the narrow streets of Guanajuato's historic center.

Start in front of **Templo de San Diego**, which is opposite **Jardín de la Unión**, the literal and figurative heart of the city. Constructed in 1663 by members of San Diego of Alcántara religious order, the facade – carved pink quarry stone – exemplifies Mexican Churrigueresque. To the left is **Teatro Juárez**, built between 1873 and 1903 and inaugurated by the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Be sure to enter or try to catch a live performance.

Northwest along Calle Sopena, the yellow and red **Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato** looms above the ordered Plaza de La Paz. The basilica holds a jewel-covered image of the Virgin, patron of Guanajuato. Wind your way downhill to **Mercado Hidalgo**; its design is based on a Parisian train station. Continue east to **Alhóndiga de Granaditas** (see p519) and right along Calle Positos via pretty Plaza de San Fernando. Meander through the alleys to Calle Positos and continue east where you'll find a line of interesting museums: the **Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato**, housed



THE ROLE OF SILVER

One of the northern hemisphere's richest silver veins was uncovered in 1558 at **La Valenciana** mine; for 250 years it produced 20% of the world's silver. Colonial barons were infuriated when King Carlos III of Spain slashed their share in 1765. The King's 1767 decree banishing the Jesuits from Spanish dominions further alienated both wealthy barons and poor miners, who held allegiance to the Jesuits. This anger was focused in the War of Independence. To see what all that wealth built, the Templo La Valenciana, 6km north of the city, is crammed with ornate golden altars, filigree carvings and giant paintings. Here, too, are two neighboring silver mines, Bocamina de San Ramón and Bocamina de San Cayetano. You can visit both.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN GUANAJUATO

Las Mercedes

Showcases traditional Mexican cuisine as grandmothers used to make – slow cooking and gourmet dishes. \$\$\$

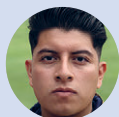
Mestizo

You don't come for the view (there is none), but it has great steaks and good service. \$\$\$

Café Tal

Guanajuato's best coffee; roasts own beans and does good espresso-based brews and hot chocolate. \$

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO TAKE THE BEST PHOTOS OF GUANAJUATO



Alan Vega (@alan_vega00), photographer and Instagrammer

Centro Histórico (Historic Centre)

Go early at sunrise, when the light is perfect and before the crowds arrive. It's wonderful to watch the city come to life.

El Pípila

Puesta del sol (sunset) is the ideal time to head here. It provides an unspoiled panorama, especially when a few clouds dot the sky; these contrast with the beautiful, colorful houses.

Hotel Chocolate

This is my 'secret' – head here at night (best to catch a taxi). Buy a drink from the restaurant and capture Guanajuato and its extraordinary lights from the terrace.



Callejon del Beso

ERASTUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

in the former mansion of mine owner, de San Juan de Rayas, is worth a visit.

Art-lovers should check out **Museo y Casa de Diego Rivera**, artist Diego Rivera's birthplace (in 1886) and now a re-creation of the Rivera family home and an excellent museum. Nearby is **Universidad de Guanajuato**, whose ramparts are visible above much of the city. The crenelated pediment dates from the 1950s. Next door, the **Templo de la Compañía de Jesús** is one of the largest constructions completed by the Jesuits in Mexico.

Quirky Guanajuato

VISTAS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

Guanajuato's **Museo de las Momias** is one of the city's most historically famous sights. Many foreigners see the 100 disinterred corpses as bizarre, but it can also be seen as a quintessential example of Mexico's acceptance – and celebration – of death.

The city's **subterranean walkways** (these are open to the sky) were originally constructed as channels to divert flooding; these days, along with the enclosed tunnels in and out of the city, they're roadways. Some tunnel entrances display interesting street art; beyond that, traffic fumes and darkness prevent a safe and pleasant stroll.

Further south down the valley is **Callejon del Beso** (Alley of the Kiss), the narrowest of Guanajuato's alleyways; here, the balconies of two houses practically touch. In a local legend, a fine family once lived here and their daughter fell in love with a common miner. Forbidden to see each other, the miner rented a room opposite and the lovers exchanged fur-



WHERE TO DRINK IN GUANAJUATO WITH ROOFTOP VISTAS

Bartola, El Rector

Enter the high-end El Rector hotel, head up a lift and sip slowly on a margarita with a sweeping valley vista.

La Notaría

A sleek, very centrally located bar with superb rooftop views, mellow music and good cocktails.

Antigua Trece (13)

Near Callejon del Beso, a wonderful rooftop surprise with spectacular vistas and mixology magic.

tive *besos* (kisses) from these balconies until their secret was discovered, leading the couple to a tragic end. These days it's become an Instagram opportunity.

If you're into literature, **Museo Iconográfico del Quijote** pays homage to all things Cervantes (the author of *Don Quijote*) through art and documents. The 'Quijote concept' was a promotional idea of some students in the 1960s (Quijote never came here); it's how the **Cervantino Festival** got its name.

Those with a head for heights should not miss ascending to **El Pipila** monument via the **funicular**, the incline railway that inches up (and down) the slope behind the Teatro Juárez. The birds' eye panorama is incredible.

Join a Callejoneada

THE TRADITIONAL WAY TO PARTY

Popular among Mexican visitors and foreigners alike, the *callejoneada* of Guanajuato is a fun activity. The practice was introduced in Guanajuato in 1963 by a group of university students after they learned about the Spanish tradition. A group of professional singers and musicians, dressed in traditional costumes, starts up in a central location such as a plaza, a crowd gathers (in this case, paid participants), then the whole mob winds through the alleyways, streets and plazas playing, dancing and singing heartily. Given the student involvement, in Guanajuato they are also called *estudiantinas* (student music groups), though these days, few performers – if any – are students, regardless of what they tell you. Stories, jokes and ditties (some dated; some dirty) are delivered in between songs, often relating to the legends of the alleys. Guanajuato has several competing groups, but all follow a similar format. The main differences? Volume, singing quality and the ability to whip the crowd into a frenzy.

To be part of the fun, buy tickets in front of Teatro Juárez from the groups themselves throughout the day. You can't miss the hosts in their uniforms of velvet. Proceedings generally kick off around 8pm daily. Note: these are in Spanish only; if you're concerned you won't understand, opt for another experience. But if you enjoy rowdy music and watching others, especially Mexican visitors, enjoy themselves, go along for the atmosphere.

NOT JUST ANY OLD BUILDING

Built between 1798 and 1808 as a grain storehouse, the Alhóndiga became a fortress in 1810 when 300 Spanish troops and loyalist leaders barricaded themselves inside after 20,000 rebels led by Miguel Hidalgo attempted to take Guanajuato. On September 28, 1810, a young miner nicknamed El Pipila tied a stone slab to his back and, thus protected from Spanish bullets, set the entrance ablaze. The rebels moved in and killed everyone inside. The figure that looms over Guanajuato is that of El Pipila.



HISTORY AT HIDALGO

If the history of the Cradle of Independence appeals to your inner history buff, be sure to head to Dolores Hidalgo (see p519).



GETTING AROUND

Don't even think about driving around Guanajuato. The entire city, from its paved pedestrian streets to its subterranean walkways, is one for your legs. That said, take care: pavements can be narrow and you'll want sturdy shoes. If you're driving, it's best to park in one of the car parks that are accessed via the subterranean roads (note: these are

'open' tunnels, versus the enclosed tunnels through which you enter town). Driving into town may seem overwhelming due to the tunnel network, but with the use of GPS and by following signs it's not impossible. To access sites on the edge of town (La Valenciana and Museo de las Momias, for example), it's easy to grab a local bus, or a green-and-white taxi.



Beyond Guanajuato

Dolores Hidalgo – the birthplace of Mexico’s independence and a center for ceramics and ice cream. Plus there are wineries en route.

Guanajuato’s surrounds include the hilly, tree-covered Sierra de Santa Rosa that you pass over en route to the small, working town of Dolores Hidalgo, 60km away. It’s easy to do a half-day or day trip here. Its *centro histórico* (historic center) has a pretty, tree-filled plaza and a buzzy local market. The main magnet is its independence sites, colored maiolica ceramics workshops and famous *nieves* (ice cream). It’s also home to Mexico’s famous *ranchero* musician Jose Alfredo Jimenez. Whether you travel from Guanajuato or San Miguel de Allende, you’ll pass numerous wineries that have sprung up over the last decade. You can do tastings or enjoy a meal. You could pass through here to or from San Miguel de Allende.



TOP TIP

Dolores forms the point of a triangle between Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende. The journey from San Miguel de Allende is shorter (one hour), though less pretty than the road from Guanajuato (1½ hours).



Dolores Hidalgo



Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores



WINERY ALERT

Guanajuato region's first ever winery, **Cuna De Tierra**, is located just outside Dolores Hidalgo. Wineries have since exploded around Dolores Hidalgo and San Miguel de Allende, especially over the last decade. See p528 for details on the wine route.

Dolores Hidalgo: Birthplace of Independence

RELIVING THE CRY FOR INDEPENDENCE

Begin at the **main plaza**, which boasts the **Hidalgo statue** and the **Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores** where Hidalgo issued the famous Grito. It's the focal point for the town's independence-day celebrations each year. To the west, the **Museo Bicentenario 1810–2010**, housed in the former Presidencia Municipal, provides a cultural and historical context of the first 100 years of independence. **Museo de la Independencia Nacional** charts the appalling decline in Nueva España's indigenous population between 1519 (an estimated 25 million) and 1605 (1 million). It identifies 23 indigenous rebellions before 1800 as well as several criollo conspiracies in the years leading up to 1810, and also details the heroic last 10 months of Hidalgo's life. **Museo Casa de Miguel Hidalgo**, his house when he was a Dolores parish priest, is a shrine to the hero.

Museo José Alfredo Jiménez is the birthplace of the king of *música ranchera*, who is beloved by Mexicans. A highlight is the **mural** by Octavio Ocampo, in which are hidden many figures and symbols.

For oenophiles, the **Museo del Vino de Guanajuato** relates the history of wine to the region and the wine-making process. And the **Zona Artesanal** along Avenida Jiménez is lined with workshops for majolica ceramics, the signature handicraft of Dolores ever since Padre Hidalgo founded the town's first ceramics workshop in the early 19th century.

To get here, regular buses depart both San Miguel de Allende (45 minutes) and Guanajuato (1½ hours).

MIGUEL HIDALGO AND EL GRITO

At 5am on September 16, 1810, visionary priest Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rang the bells to summon people to church. He issued the **Grito de Dolores**, a call for independence. Hidalgo led his growing forces from Dolores to San Miguel, Celaya and Guanajuato, north to Zacatecas, south almost to Mexico City and west to Guadalajara. He was captured by the Spanish and shot by a firing squad. His head was hung from a corner of Alhóndiga de Granaditas in Guanajuato.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN DOLORES HIDALGO

DaMónica

A snazzy and inviting Italian culinary marvel serving lasagna, pizza and gourmet seafood treats. \$\$

Cantina El Faro

This genuine and very atmospheric spot has been open since the early 1900s. \$

Cantina La Hiedra

Former hang-out of ranchero great José Alfredo Jiménez, a traditional cantina with (on-show-only) open urinal. \$

I LIVE HERE: THREE MUST-TRY ICE CREAM FLAVORS



Señor Jesús Torres, ice-cream maker and owner of artisanal ice-cream stand Helados El More.

Mantecado

This is the most traditional flavor – vanilla with dried fruits and nuts (with milk); it's been around since 1912.

Zanahoria

This carrot and nuts flavor contains the least sugar; it's the 'healthiest' option.

Garambullo

A traditional, water-based choice. It uses the red-purple fruits of a regional cactus; they're like grapes and we crush them, with skins. This creates a beautiful color.



Talavera

Ceramics & Ice Creams

EXPLORING (AND TASTING) ARTISTIC ELEMENTS

It is believed that parish priest and Mexican independence hero Padre Hidalgo introduced ceramics to Dolores Hidalgo in the early 1800s as a means of employment for locals. These days the ceramics are still produced locally, using a local clay. Though the style is often labelled 'Talavera' after Talavera de la Reina in Spain, this designation has been officially assigned to Puebla, but not Dolores Hidalgo. Nevertheless, it follows the same process known as 'majolica', whereby colors are hand-painted onto a white base glaze. These enamel designs made by the locals are beautiful. While many of the workshops and kilns are located elsewhere, for the products themselves, wander along the **Zona de Artesanías** on Avenida Jose Alfredo Jimenez, or drop into stores around town, including **Talavera JMB** at Puebla 60 and **Talavera Vazquez** at Puebla 58.

Mexico's original *nieves* (literally meaning snows, but like water-based gelati) were made using shaved ice and fruit flavors (milk was only used later). Dolores Hidalgo's tradition of inventive hand-made ice creams is often attributed to a local *nevero* (ice-cream maker) named Don Victorio González, who started making and serving flavored ices from containers around 1912. A few families followed suit and these days, **ice-cream carts** on the periphery of the garden are run by third- and fourth-generation *neveros*, each trying to outdo the other with quirky tastes. There's no 'right' place to choose from, so follow your taste buds to traditional lemon or lime or to shrimp, avocado and *chicharrón* (pork rind). An alternative to the vendors is an award-winning shop, **La Flor de Dolores**.

MARCO VILU/GETTY IMAGES ©
BOTTOM RIGHT: ELIEN HAAR ANDONI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



GETTING AROUND

Flacha Amarilla buses ply the routes every half-hour between Dolores Hidalgo and both Guanajuato (1½ to two hours) or San Miguel

de Allende (one hour). Dolores' bus station is handily located in the center of town.

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

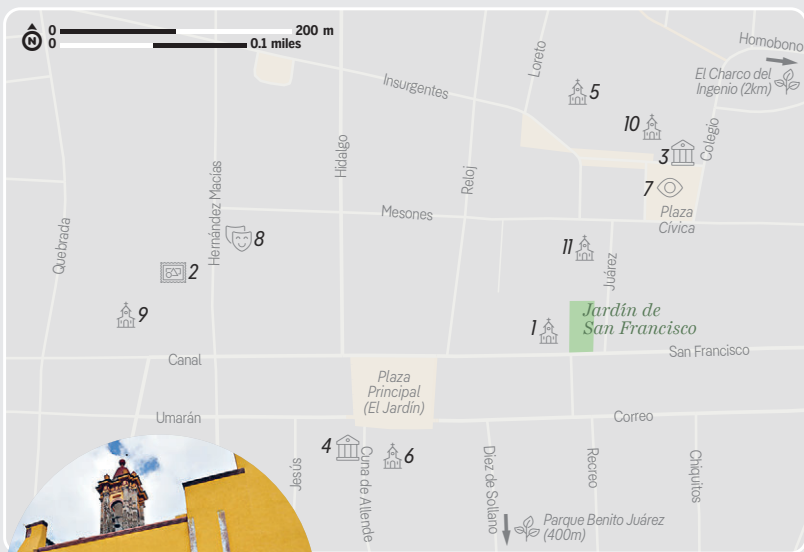


Bathed in striking orange hues, the cobblestone streets, buildings and gardens of San Miguel de Allende are enchanting. Popular with artists and creatives for much of the past century, the city attracts a massive population of North Americans and, especially on the weekends, cashed-up Mexicans from Mexico City. But it's not for everybody. Unless, that is, you revel in a place that has the feel of Aspen with a backdrop of Mexico, and a cosmopolitan atmosphere unlike anywhere else in the country.

Amid the plentiful high-end restaurants, excellent *comedores* serve local dishes. Abundant galleries abut fabulous *artesanías* (handicrafts) markets. And English-focused literary festivals occur alongside fireworks, parades and numerous other local cultural activities in the beautiful, tree-filled plaza.

TOP TIP

Driving in the narrow cobblestoned streets of San Miguel can be tricky; you do not need a car to get around town, though it can be useful for exploring the surrounds. That said, most sights are accessible on a tour, by bus or via taxi.



Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez El Nigromante (p522)

SIGHTS

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1 Capilla de la Tercera Orden | 5 Oratorio de San Felipe Neri | 10 Templo de Nuestro Señor de la Salud |
| 2 Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez 'El Nigromante' | 6 Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel | 11 Templo de San Francisco |
| 3 Colegio de San Francisco de Sales | 7 Plaza Cívica | |
| 4 Museo Histórico | 8 Teatro Ángela Peralta | |
| | 9 Templo de la Concepción | |

BEST ROOFTOP BARS

Azotea This welcoming spot looks down the hill beyond the city limits and is wonderful at sunset.

Bekeb A funky, modern cocktail bar that takes its mixology seriously.

Fátima 7 This place comes with a snooty attitude, but its terrace – almost touching San Francisco Church – is glorious.

Luna Rooftop Tapas Bar Part of the Rosewood Hotel, this offers a wonderful perspective: looking back up to San Miguel over the rim of your glass.

Quince This lovely place comes with snob value, expensive meals and Parroquia vistas.



ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES

Many of the archaeological finds in Casa de Allende's *Izcuinapan* exhibition were found at Cañada de la Virgen (528) and provide excellent context to the site.

A Stroll Around San Miguel

MEANDERING THROUGH SAN MIGUEL'S PAST

Start in San Miguel's heart, **Plaza Principal (El Jardín)**, in front of **La Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel**. San Miguel's most famous sight is characterized by its pink 'wedding cake' towers that soar above the town. These strange pinnacles were designed by indigenous stonemason Zeferino Gutiérrez in the late 19th century, though the rest of the church dates from the late 17th century. It holds the much-revered image of the Christ of the Conquest, made in Pátzcuaro from cornstalks and orchid bulbs, probably in the 16th century.

While on the main plaza, enter the fascinating **Museo Histórico Casa de Allende**, where Mexican independence hero Ignacio Allende was born in 1769. The building is also home to the town's history museum, which relates the interesting past of the San Miguel area. The museum's newest treasure, titled *Izcuinapan*, is an incredible collection of pre-Hispanic archaeological pieces and one of the town's few non-colonial treasures.

One block northwest of the plaza stands the 18th-century **Capilla de la Tercera Orden**. Part of a Franciscan monastery complex, the main facade shows St Francis and symbols of the Franciscan order. Next door, the elaborate late-18th-century Churrigueresque facade is that of **Templo de San Francisco**.

Two blocks west looms **Templo de la Concepción**. Its interior doorway is painted with a number of sayings to give pause to those entering. The church was begun in the mid-18th century; its dome, added in the late 19th century by the versatile Zeferino Gutiérrez, was possibly inspired by pictures of Les Invalides in Paris.

Behind this is the **Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramirez 'El Nigromante'**, a former monastery that was converted into a fine-arts school in 1938. Don't miss the murals of Pedro Martínez, plus the **Siqueiros Room**, which features the extraordinary unfinished mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros in the far corner of the complex.

Nearby, the **Teatro Ángela Peralta**, was built in 1873. It still hosts local productions, classical-music concerts and other cultural events.

Four blocks east, in the handsome **Plaza Cívica**, the **Colegio de San Francisco de Sales** was formerly a college founded in the mid-18th century by the San Felipe Neri order, and now houses part of the University of León. Many of the 1810 revolutionaries were educated here, while later Spanish nobles were locked up here when the rebels took San Miguel.



WHERE TO STAY IN SAN MIGUEL

Posada Corazón

This gorgeous, mid-century house is an airy B&B in the heart of San Miguel, and nestled in a lush garden. \$\$

Antigua Capilla

Stylish B&B built around a 17th-century chapel. Extraordinary breakfasts and a gorgeous plant-lined courtyard. \$\$\$

Casa Maricela

Homey, clean and unpretentious with excellent breakfasts and in a great location. \$\$



Templo de la Salud

To the west stands **Templo de Nuestra Señora de la Salud**; (Church of Our Lady of Health) outstanding for its Churrigueresque facade, blue-and-yellow-tiled dome and a big shell carved above its entrance. It was once part of the Colegio de Sales, and its paintings include one of San Javier by Miguel Cabrera. San Javier (St Francis Xavier; 1506–52) was a founding member of the Jesuits. Next door, the **Oratorio de San Felipe Neri** is a multitowered and domed 18th-century church. The pale-pink main facade is baroque with an indigenous influence. A passage to the right of this facade leads a doorway that holds the image of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude). Inside the church are 33 oil paintings showing scenes from the life of San Felipe Neri, the 16th-century Florentine who founded the Oratorio Catholic order.

Exploring San Miguel's Green Spaces

CACTI GARDENS AND MANICURED PARKS

In the early 1990s, a group of concerned locals strove to ensure the protection of an area northwest of town. The result? **El Charco del Ingenio**, a glorious 67 protected hectares that preserves a gorge. This labor of love – a garden and wildlife sanctuary – has been open to the public since 1991.



WHERE TO EAT VEGAN IN SAN MIGUEL

La Cabra Iluminada

One-hundred percent plant based dishes in a smart, minimalist environment. Open for breakfast and brunch. **\$\$**

Don Taco Tequila

A fabulous vegan take on traditional Mexican cuisine, from deconstructed tacos to quinoa salads. **\$\$**

La Raíz de la Tierra

A more upscale veggie experience with pretty dishes and a good tea selection. **\$\$**



KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE THROUGH PLAY

The bright, modern museum **La Esquina: Museo del Juguete Popular Mexicano** is a must-visit for all kids, big and small. This private toy collection of Angélica Tijerina was amassed over 50 years. Its objective is to preserve and promote toy-making traditions from around Mexico. Toys in various forms, mainly using wheat, straw, fabric, wood and recycled materials, have been made in Mexico since time immemorial. Moving limbs, tightrope walkers and other ingenious moveable features are a delight. To keep the custom alive, the museum also exhibits those works entered into an annual toy-making competition.

After wandering through the several sections, you can peruse the excellent on-site gift shop.



ARTS & MARKETS

San Miguel has some fabulous markets, from upmarket *artesanía* (handicrafts) to local food stalls. The best for crafts is Mercado de Artesanías, a pedestrian mall that starts at Mercado Ignacio Ramírez, San Miguel's central food market (enter via Calle Colegio). Here, you can pick up everything from Otomí embroidery, to hand-painted *alebrije* (folk art carvings of fantastical creatures). For a taste of a bustling Mexican food market which has *comedores* (food stalls) and is visited by few tourists, Mercado de San Juan de Dios is a 15-minute walk west of the center. Along Calzada de La Aurora there's Fabrica La Aurora, a remodeled raw-cotton factory with contemporary-art galleries and design studios (and a decent cafe).



R. M. NUÑEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Skull artesanía

It's a joy to wander through its extensive network of trails that head through wetlands and magnificent areas of cacti and native plants; at every turn there's something of ecological interest (birds and rare plants), scenic vistas (over reservoirs and past sculptures) and historical vestiges (a former water mill). The deep canyon at the bottom boasts the eponymous freshwater spring, El Charco del Ingenio.

Two-hour tours (in English) depart every Tuesday and Thursday at 10am. A fabulous information center, gift shop and excellent cafe serving fresh salads is on site, too.

Back in town, it's worth unseating yourself from under a laurel tree in the main plaza, and heading three blocks south to the gorgeous, shady **Parque Benito Juárez**, a lovely place to relax and meander through. Opened in 1904, this historic park was built due to the efforts of former municipal president Ignacio Hernandez Macías and designed after European parks (dictator President Porfirio Díaz was a francophile). It was renamed in 1916 after President Benito Juárez.

On the northeast corner of the park, be sure to check out a fountain built in 1960 – the source is El Chorro, the water source for which the town was settled. Public washing tubs were used here until the last few years.



GETTING AROUND

You do not need a car to get around San Miguel de Allende. But you will need sturdy shoes and a sure-footed, goat-style attitude – the town is hilly and the roads are paved and often slippery. Plus, the sidewalks are very

narrow. That said, there are many pedestrian-friendly streets and precincts. Local buses and taxis head to the bus terminal and you can easily catch a taxi to the likes of El Charco garden.



Beyond San Miguel de Allende



Pre-Hispanic sites. Mayan bath waters. Upmarket wineries. Colonial churches and sanctuaries. Canyons and desert. This area has it all.

You don't have to venture far from San Miguel de Allende to experience the semidesert of Guanajuato region, an area that's covered in a variety of cacti which blooms during the greener rainy season. Here, too, are verdant canyons and extraordinary pre-Hispanic sites, the most famous of which is the Cañada de la Virgen.

Within easy access for a day trip by taxi, bus and even cycling, the town is surrounded by a bevy of fabulous places, activities and gourmet treats, including wineries which offer tastings and tours. The most difficult place to access without your own transportation is the former mining town of Mineral de Pozos, but it's not impossible.

TOP TIP

For an alternative way of reaching Atotonilco or Mineral de Pozos, consider a guided bike-riding trip with Bici-Burro (bici-burro.com) in San Miguel.



Cañada de la Virgen (p528)



WHERE TO EAT & DRINK IN MINERAL DE POZOS

Posada de las Minas

This restored 19th-century hacienda has a bar-restaurant and serves the town's best cuisine. \$\$

El Secreto

This charming B&B's three rooms are nestled in a lovely garden featuring cacti, flowers and birds. \$\$

Hotel Boutique Casa Diamante

A surprisingly ritzy choice but one of Pozos's decent, clean options. \$\$



JANROB/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mine ruins, Mineral de Pozos

Mineral de Pozos

BRINGING A GHOST TOWN TO LIFE

Not much more than a century ago, Mineral de Pozos was a flourishing silver-mining center of 70,000 people, but the population dwindled because of the 1910 Revolution and the flooding of the mines. Crumbling houses, a large and unfinished church and discarded mine shafts were the ghostly legacy of abandonment.

For decades it's seemed that this tiny place has been gradually winning back its place on the map, albeit very slowly: over the years, houses have been restored here and there, and life has returned to the streets, especially on weekends. But during the week, it still remains a haunting, wind-whipped village of low-rise buildings lit by rays of mountain light.

Visitors can explore the crumbling buildings and fascinating surrounds – including several mine ruins – on a guided tour with local travel agency, **Cinco Señores** (weekends only; in English). You'll need your own wheels to make the one-hour drive alone – the bus takes a whole day. Alternatively, cycling tour company **Bici Burro** (bici-burro.com) in San Miguel de Allende also rides to the village.



WHERE TO FIND FESTIVALS IN & AROUND SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Señor de la Conquista

The image of Christ in the Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel is feted on the first Friday in March.

Fiesta de la Santa Cruz

A mock battle, decorated oxen and giant puppets in this deeply spiritual festival in late May. In Valle del Maíz, 2km from San Miguel.

Fiesta de los Locos

A colorful Carnavalesque parade through town with floats and dancers throwing candy to the crowd. Mid June.

As well as galleries, many craft shops are dotted around town, where community members sell their work. **Manos Creativas**, managed by local women as part of an income-generating program, sells dolls dressed with handmade regional costumes.

On the northern edge of town, the lovely lavender farm **Rancho Lavanda** grows lavender for use in beauty products.

If you are struck by the village's silence, and you want a good night's sleep free of fireworks, church bells and bar music, consider staying the night.

Hot Springs

WALLOWING IN HOT WATERS

Several hot mineral springs surround San Miguel, all within several kilometers of each other, and have been transformed into commercial *balnearios* (swimming pools). Most have pretty, landscaped gardens, and picnic grounds with snack bars and spa services. The waters are up to 100°F (38°C). Places get overrun on weekends but weekdays are peaceful, especially early mornings.

The local and tourist favorite is **La Gruta** (lagruta-spa.com.mx), where a thermal spring is channeled; its three small pools have varying temperatures.

Escondido Place (escondidoplace.com) has seven small outdoor pools and three connected indoor pools, each progressively hotter.

The family-oriented, kid-friendly **Balneario Xote** (xoteparqueacuatico.com.mx) water park (think waterslides and pools) is 3.5km off the highway down a cobblestone road.

The newest, the **Mayan Baths** (mayanbaths.com), goes all out for luxury and price. Around M\$2700 gets you use of the baths only and you need to reserve ahead.

The *balnearios* are accessed via the highway north of San Miguel, the nearest a 20–30-minute drive. The most convenient transportation is taxi (around M\$200 each way; you can ask the driver to return for you at an appointed time). Alternatively, take a Dolores Hidalgo bus from the San Miguel bus station, or a local bus marked 'Santuario' (hourly) from Calzada de la Luz. These buses will stop out front, or at the turnoffs to some of the *balnearios* from where you'll need to walk. To return to town, the easiest option is to call (or pre-arrange) a taxi.



PRE-TOUR CAFFEINATION IN SAN MIGUEL

With so much in the region around San Miguel to keep visitors occupied, coffee-lovers will want a strong cup each morning to fuel them up for the adventures ahead. Fortunately, there are some great options in the town where you can get your hit before joining a tour.

Ki'bok takes their quality espresso coffees seriously, and boasts a cute upstairs terrace to boot. San Miguel's most under-rated coffee stop, Zenteno, may be tiny in size but it pulls huge flavors in its excellent brews. And the only problem with Lavanda is its popularity; the long queues are testament to its quality.

Guanajuato International Film Festival

Short films in July. Includes Cine entre Muertos, where horror films are screened in graveyards.

Fiestas Patrias

Two months of cultural programs in late August. Check with the tourist office for a full event schedule.

San Miguel Arcángel

Thousands of fireworks and all-night festivity celebrating the town's chief patron saint at the end of September.



SANCTUARIO DE ATOTONILCO

En route to the springs, don't miss this church in the hamlet of Atotonilco, 11km north of San Miguel. Known as Mexico's Sistine Chapel for its exquisite folk murals (completed by local artist Martínez de Pocasangre to communicate bible stories to 'illiterate' local indigenous people), it's an iconic site. In 1810, nationalist heroes Ignacio Allende, Miguel Hidalgo and independence rebels came here en route from Dolores to San Miguel to take the shrine's banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe as their flag. It's where pilgrims start on their solemn procession two weekends before Easter, carrying the image of the Señor de la Columna San Juan de Dios church in San Miguel.

Cañada de la Virgen

A SPOTLIGHT ON PRE-HISPANIC CULTURES

Located 25km southwest of San Miguel, Cañada de la Virgen is a pre-Hispanic pyramid complex that dates from 540 CE and was in use by different groups until around 1050. Bones of 20 bodies were discovered here. Although it's not as impressive as some Mexican pyramids (particularly Teotihuacán), the site has its own special ambience. Ten years ago, when the site first opened, it was believed to be primarily a ceremonial center due to the alignment of temples to the planets, important to the solstices. While this hypothesis still stands, the site's role has expanded, thanks to research including that by local anthropologist, Alberto Aveyra.

Fascinating aspects include the design of the site's buildings, which reflects the surrounding landscape. Aveyra believes that the site was an important pilgrimage end point and learning experience for the ancient indigenous inhabitants, given its location in the seventh of seven canyons through which they had to walk.

To visit the site you can drive or take a taxi from San Miguel (45 minutes). However, the easiest and most fulfilling visit is to take a four-hour tour from San Miguel with Aveyra (artesanosdeltiempo.mx). During two hours on site, he relates the cultural and historical context of the ceremonial road, the circular Temple of the North, House of the Longest Night, and the main pyramid, the House of the Thirteen Heavens.

Once at the Cañada de la Virgen, it's compulsory to take a shuttle bus that runs between the ticket office and the ruins (7km away; departures on the hour between 10am and 4pm.) Wear sensible shoes.

'Wine-ing,' Ballooning and Horseback Riding

EXPLORATION FROM GROUND TO SKY

Winery Visits

San Miguel is blessed with many wineries that, over the past decade, have popped up within a 30km radius. In a day, you can comfortably visit two or three. Some wineries are family-style concerns, while others are part of national conglomerates. Given the gorgeous settings, among vines and landscaped gardens, you won't mind what you're sipping (nor the quality, which varies enormously). Expect sleek tasting rooms (some are architectural gems), restaurants, and on-site wine tour-cum-tastings. Tours generally take around 1½ hours, during which you learn about the regional wine-growing



WHERE TO EAT EN ROUTE TO ATOTONILCO

Los Senderos

This relaxed spot has a winery as well as its restaurant and even a lake-front beach. \$\$

El Vergel

Just beyond San Miguel on the Dolores road, this pretty spot serves up some decent cuisine. \$\$

Nirvana

A hotel-restaurant complex with gardens and a Mexican menu. Handy to the sanctuary. \$\$



Vineyard, San Miguel de Allende

history, before visiting the cellars. You end with a wine tasting (generally one to three varieties) and, depending on the winery, a cheese and charcuterie plate, too. The easiest way to visit a couple of wineries is with **Follow Me Tours** (fm-tours.mx) from San Miguel de Allende.

Ballooning

For highs of a healthier kind, you can float above San Miguel on a one-hour sunrise balloon flight with **Globo San Miguel** (globosanmiguel.com). The valley is bathed in the incredible pinks and oranges and yellows that the town is known for, with panoramic views of 'Los Picachos' mountain and the local lake. This provides the Instagram shot of a Mexican lifetime.

Horseback Riding

You can live your inner cowboy on a horseback ride adventure through canyons, among semidesert cacti, or just around town. Trips vary from one-hour clip-clops to full-day rides (with lunch provided at a ranch) in canyon country. **Coyote Canyon Adventures** (coyotecanyonadventures.com) and **Rancho Xolotar** (xotolarranch.com) offer daily rides from San Miguel.



BEST WINERIES TO VISIT

San Lucas

Part of a large conglomeration of wineries, it has the most sophisticated infrastructure with fancy restaurant, and pretty lavender garden. A pleasant place to spend an afternoon.

Dos Bujos

One of the closest to San Miguel de Allende, this offers tastings and its restaurant has a delightful alfresco courtyard.

Cuna da Tierra

Highly respected as being the region's oldest winery that put local vineyards on the map. It's a handy 20-minute drive from Dolores Hidalgo.



GETTING AROUND

Sanctuario de Atotonilco, Mineral de Pozos, Cañada de la Virgen and all the wineries around San Miguel can be visited if you have your own wheels. However, the easiest way to do the latter two may be with a tour from San Miguel. Atotonilco can easily be reached

via taxi or public bus; from San Miguel, taxis charge around M\$150 to M\$200 for a one-way trip. Local buses signed 'Atotonilco' or 'Cruz del Palmar' depart from Calzada de La Luz every hour on the half hour (M\$13, 45 minutes).

San Luis Potosí

Mexico City

SAN LUIS POTOSÍ

A grand old dame of a colonial city, San Luis Potosí is the perfect place for wandering. The city's historic core comprises numerous plazas and manicured parks that are linked by attractive pedestrian streets. Although not as striking as Zacatecas (and lacking the magic of San Miguel de Allende or Guanajuato), this is a lively city nonetheless. Its cultural elegance is reflected in its architecture, impressive theater and numerous excellent museums. And there's much to cover.

Founded in 1592, San Luis is 20km west of the silver deposits in Cerro de San Pedro, and was named Potosí after the immensely rich Bolivian silver town, which the Spanish hoped it would rival. The city was once a revolutionary hotbed, an important mining town and a seat of government to boot. Today the city has maintained its poise as the prosperous state capital, orderly industrial center and university seat, though it sees relatively few visitors.

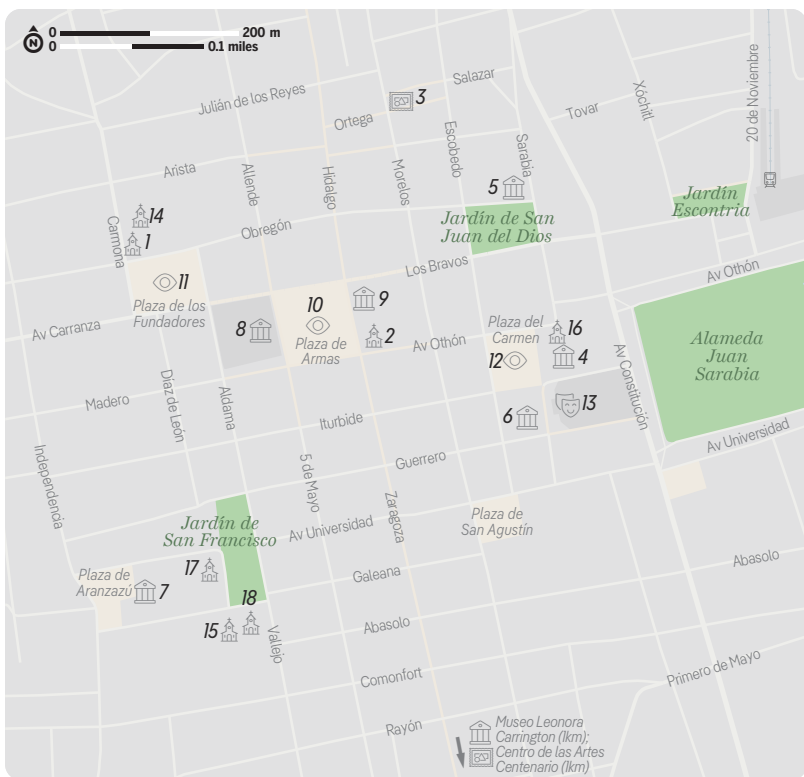
TOP TIP

For information on the city, visit the city's tourist office on the east side of Plaza de Armas. If you plan to explore the remote regions of the Huasteca Potosina and as far as Xilitla, it's worth popping into the state regional tourism office, Sector (visitanluispotosi.com), for good maps and information on off-the-beaten-track attractions.



CLAUDIO BRIONES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cerro de San Pedro

**SIGHTS**

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1 Capilla de Loreto | 7 Museo Regional Potosino | 14 Templo de la Compañía |
| 2 Catedral Metropolitana de San Luis Potosí | 8 Palacio de Gobierno | 15 Templo de la Tercera Orden |
| 3 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo | 9 Palacio Municipal de San Luis Potosí | 16 Templo de Nuestra Señora del Carmen |
| 4 Museo del Virreinato | 10 Plaza de Armas | 17 Templo de San Francisco |
| 5 Museo Federico Silva | 11 Plaza de los Fundadores | 18 Templo del Sagrado Corazón |
| 6 Museo Nacional de la Máscara | 12 Plaza del Carmen | |
| | 13 Teatro de la Paz | |

Plotting Your Plazas

HISTORY IN AN ARCHITECTURAL RIOT

To get a good sense of San Luis Potosí, it's worth tackling the city plaza by plaza, each of which is a riot of historic buildings. Even if you're not into architecture and colonial history, the pedestrian alleys that link them are a joy to wander.

At **Plaza de Armas** the three-nave baroque **Catedral Metropolitana de San Luis Potosí** (1660 and 1730) features replicas of statues in Rome's San Juan de Letrán basilica. The 19th-century **Palacio Municipal** was the home of Bishop Ignacio Montes de Oca from 1892 to 1915. The city's coat of arms in stained glass overlooks a double staircase. The



Templo de Nuestra Señora del Carmen



BEST PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Cafe Cortáoz

It may be simple, but it's a breakfast institution. Queues of locals form outside its doors. \$\$

Chau Resto

A good, central option with reliable Mexican and local dishes. \$\$

Croque La Vie

An inexpensive French eatery serving up quiche and French-inspired dishes. \$\$\$

Papalote Guateque & La Oruga y La Cebada

Sharing the same premises, these neighboring spots are perfect for a night on the town. \$\$

La Histórica Cantina de Autor

They do some serious cocktail shakin' here, including excellent mezcal- and tequila-based options. \$\$

La Piquería

A simple little place that serves up cocktails with a focus on mezcal. \$\$



ADOL SETYAWAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Museo Nacional de la Mascara

neoclassical **Palacio de Gobierno** (1770 and 1816) used to lodge Benito Juárez, first in 1863 when he was fleeing from invading French forces, then in 1867 when he confirmed the death sentence on Austrian puppet-emperor Maximilian.

Plaza de los Fundadores (Founders' Plaza) is where the city was born. The large building on the north side, constructed in 1653 as a Jesuit college, was probably where Diego de la Magdalena, a Franciscan friar, started a small settlement of Guachichiles around 1585. The **Templo de la Compañía**, built by the Jesuits in 1675, features a baroque facade while the **Capilla de Loreto**, a Jesuit chapel from 1700, has unusual twisted pillars.

Dominated by the bulk of the Templo de San Francisco, and with a lovely fountain gracing its interior, **Jardín de San Francisco** is one of the city's most fetching squares. The altar of the 17th- and 18th-century **Templo de San Francisco** was remodeled in the 20th century, but the sacristy (the priest's dressing room), to the right of the altar, is original and has a fine dome and carved pink stone. The **Museo Regional Potosino**, originally part of a Franciscan monastery founded in 1590, exhibits information on pre-Hispanic Mexico, especially the indigenous people of the Huasteca. The small **Templo de la Tercera Orden** (1694 and restored in 1960) and **Templo del Sagrado Corazón** (1728–31), both formerly part of the Franciscan monastery, stand together at the plaza's south end.

Plaza del Carmen is dominated by San Luis' most spectacular structure, the **Templo de Nuestra Señora del Carmen** (1749–64). On the vividly carved stone facade, hovering angels show the touch of indigenous artisans. The entrance and roof of the Camarín de la Virgen are a riot of small plaster figures. The **Museo del Virreinato** displays paintings and artifacts



BEST PLACES TO STAY IN SAN LUIS POTOSÍ

City Centro

The new city-centre edition of this chain hotel is a good choice for visitors. \$\$

Hotel Museo Palacio de San Agustín

Formerly a house for retired monks, this restored property is stuffed with antiques. \$\$\$

Gran Hotel Concordia

It's all about the location at this pleasant, unpretentious place on the Plaza de las Armas. \$\$

from the Spanish vice-regency, as well as temporary exhibitions. The neoclassical **Teatro de la Paz** (1889-94) contains a concert hall, an exhibition gallery and a theatre (look out for upcoming events). The superb **Museo Nacional de la Máscara** displays a fascinating collection of ceremonial masks from across Mexico and around the world, and explains the evolution of pre-Columbian masks in Mexico.

On the **Jardín de San Juan de Dios** the **Museo Federico Silva** houses an excellent museum that's devoted to the work of Mexican artist Federico Silva (b 1923). The 17th-century building was a hospital and then a school. Its transformation into a museum of sculpture ingeniously integrates the building's neoclassical finish with the haunting monolithic sculptures of Silva.

Transformed Spaces

MODERN ART IN HISTORIC LOCALES

San Luis residents are proud of their artistic spaces, many of which are fabulously renovated historic buildings. If you're into architecture, visiting these buildings will blow your mind. If you're into art, prepare to be equally stimulated. Opened in 2018, the **Museo Leonora Carrington** (leonoracarrington-museo.org) is an incredibly transformed 19th-century prison. The original design was a panopticon, where a group of buildings are monitored from a central tower. It was transformed to house the amazing artworks of Leonora Carrington. A British-Mexican artist, Carrington led a complicated life, eventually ending up in Mexico where she continued to produce artworks. Her surrealist pieces, both paintings and sculptures, contain elements of magical realism. Edward James, he of Xilitla fame, was a fan and collected her works.

Elsewhere, the striking **Centro de las Artes Centenario** (centrodelasartesslp.gob.mx) was a prison until as recently as 1999. It is believed to have briefly held Francisco Madero. In 2009, it was transformed – without losing its fundamental design – into an arts and cultural center. It's a must-visit for architects.

Back in the historic center, the city's former post office has been cleverly transformed to the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (MAC; macsanluispotosi.com) and its art exhibitions change every three months. These can range from the sublime to the ridiculous, depending on your tastes, and include well-known and up-and-coming artists from San Luis.

A REVOLUTION BEGINS

Known in the 19th century for its lavish houses and imported luxury goods, San Luis was twice the seat of President Benito Juárez' government during the 1860s' French intervention. In 1910, the dictatorial president Porfirio Díaz jailed Francisco Madero, his liberal opponent, in San Luis during the presidential campaign. Freed after the election, Madero hatched his Plan de San Luis Potosí (a strategy to depose Díaz), announcing it in San Antonio, Texas, in October 1910; he declared the election illegal, named himself provisional president and designated November 20 as the day for Mexico to rise in revolt – the start of the Mexican Revolution.



THE WORLD OF SURREALISM

You can see more of Leonora Carrington's lithographs, drawings and sculpture, at the Museo Leonora Carrington (p540) in Xilitla.



GETTING AROUND

The easiest way to tackle the historic center – a series of interlinked plazas – is on foot. However, to reach some of the museums, you will need to take a taxi. Local buses run from the bus terminal to the center (take a 'Centro'

or bus 46), and a booth in the bus station sells taxi tickets. Heading out of town, first-class buses head to major cities; handy routes also go to Matehuala (for Real de Catorce) and Xilitla (the Huasteca Potosina).



Beyond San Luis Potosí

Over three days you can sip on artisanal mezcal then explore the high and dry desert on foot, horseback or in revamped jeeps.

The two main attractions from San Luis are the tours to local mezcal makers and the trek to Real de Catorce, a former silver-mining town and revitalized ghost town, located deep in the dry hills of the Sierra Madre Oriental. The mezcal tours take a day, but if you make the trek to Real, 250km north, you'll need to spend a night. It's worth it.

The stark scenery with expansive views of the high-desert plateau, and the town's tumbleweed ambience – where doors still creak in the breeze and cobblestone streets end abruptly – make it a fascinating visit.

You can take in the views by hiking, horseback riding or on a jeep ride.



TOP TIP

Expect extreme temperatures. Beware the hidden shafts around the village. No protective hats are provided on horseback rides.



Real de Catorce

Desert Highs in Real de Catorce

HIKES, HORSES AND JEEPS

Adventure- and culture-seekers will find plentiful diversions in Real de Catorce – well worth the lengthy multistop bus journey here. Catch a bus from San Luis Potosí to Matehuala (3 hours), then catch one of four daily departures to Real (1½ hours), transferring to a smaller bus for the last stretch.

Hiking

An easy solo hike is to **Pueblo Fantasma**, a hillside ghost town one hour from town. You can wander to **Socavón de Purísima**, the large chimney of a former mine; passing through a split rock, the Cerro Trocado, en route.

Horseback riding

Explore the numerous trails that lead out to the stark, fascinating desertscape around Real on horseback. The most well-trodden guided trail ride is to **El Quemado**, the sacred mountain of the Huicholes. Guides hang around Real's main square (mainly on weekends).

Jeep rides

Trips in 'Jeep Willys' bump their way to similar locations to the horses and operate mainly on weekends.

Exploring the Village

CHURCHES & MUSEUMS

Thousands of Mexican pilgrims descend annually (late September to early October) to **Templo de la Purísima Concepción**, the village's impressive neoclassical church, to see the supposedly miraculous image of St Francis of Assisi displayed at the front of the church.

Opposite here is the **Centro Cultural de Real de Catorce**, the former mint that made 1,489,405 pesos' worth of coins in the mid-1860s. These days, it houses a cultural center and gallery.

The main joy is in clambering up steep, cobblestone streets and envisaging it in the 19th century, when opulent houses and shops lined the streets and a bullring formed the entertainment.

Mezcal Tour

THE NITTY GRITTY OF MEZCAL

For over 200 years, mezcal has been produced in the *altiplano* (highlands) of San Luis Potosí. Many producers are once again growing agave plants (*agave salmiana* in this region). They then undertake the intricate process of treating the plant, first harvesting and cutting, then cooking and milling, and finally distilling the juice.



HOME OF THE HUICHOLAS

The remote Sierra Madre Occidental is the home of the Huicholes, one of Mexico's most distinctive and enduring indigenous groups.

Every year the Huicholes leave their isolated homeland and make a pilgrimage to the Sierra de Catorce. In this harsh desert region, they seek out the *Lophophora williamsii*, known as peyote cactus. The rounded peyote 'buttons' contain a powerful hallucinogenic drug that is central to the Huicholes' rituals and complex spiritual life.

Peyote is illegal in Mexico, though the Huicholes are permitted to use it for their spiritual purposes. Travelers who ignore this may be subject to severe penalties. For the Huicholes, indiscriminate use is regarded as sacrilegious.



WHERE TO EAT, DRINK AND STAY IN REAL DE CATORCE

Café Azul

A friendly Swiss-run cafe of many years standing that serves healthy, light snacks. \$

Bar Amor y Paz

Funky Mezcal bar decked out in antiques with retro seating and quirky chandeliers.

Mesón de Abundancia

This hotel-based eatery is the best of a pretty poor selection, serving Italian and Mexican. \$\$

DEATH MUSEUMS IN AGUASCALIENTES

Those interested in Mexico's fascination with death should not miss Aguascalientes, home to two outstanding museums: the **Museo Nacional de la Muerte** and **Museo José Guadalupe Posada**. The first provides one of the most comprehensive representations of death in the world. It's thanks to collector and engraver, Octavio Bajonero Gil (1940-2019), who amassed over 2500 items, drawings, literature, textiles, toys and miniatures, including Mexico's famous dressed skeleton, *La Catrina*.

The second museum, the fascinating Museo José Guadalupe Posada, provides another perspective on the fate that awaits us all. The hallmark of Aguascalientes native José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) is the *calavera* (skull or skeleton). The commonly reproduced satirical dressed skeleton, *La Catrina*, is his creation.



SCHOENING/GALAMY STOCK PHOTO ©

Museo Nacional de la Muerte

Travelers can now see firsthand some of these *mezcalerías*, many of which operate in the original haciendas. You'll observe the distilling processes – ancestral (a traditional method in clay pots), artisanal and/or industrial – and learn about the difference between *pulque* and mezcal. Some productions are rudimentary, while others more high-tech.

Known as the region's **Mezcal Route**, different trails cover various mezcal factories. Tour operators will take you to their favorites, many of which are on the road to Zacatecas, and most within a two-hour radius. These include the likes of **Mezcal Campanilla** in Mexquitic de Carmona (the closest to San Luis), as well as to **Ex-haciendas Laguna Seca** and **Santa Isabel**.

While on tour, at various points along the way, you might stop at communities and churches, sample local treats including *gorditas* and learn about *chinicuiles* (the worms at the bottom of some mezcal bottles).

The makers run through the process and you can ask questions about their secrets to making a decent brew.

The best mezcal tour companies include **Operatour Potosina** (operatourpotosina.com.mx), where English-speaking cultural guide Lori also covers village highlights. Alternatively, mezcal expert and English-speaking guide Miguel of **Auténtico San Luis** takes visitors on a fascinating mezcal journey (autenticosanluis.com). These depart from, and return to, San Luis Potosí.



GETTING AROUND

If you want to walk in Real de Catorce, there's plenty to keep you occupied for a couple of days, though in town, it's hard going on cobblestone streets so bring solid shoes. If driving your own car, you will reach the town along a 25-km long cobblestone road. If it's really busy, you may not be able to enter the Ogarrio tunnel and you'll have to leave your car

at the eastern tunnel entrance and continue by pickup or cart. If coming to Real by bus, you change to a smaller bus at the entrance to the town's 2.3km-long Ogarrio tunnel. To get to Real de Catorce, you need to catch a bus from the town of Matehuala (1½ hours; around four departures) to/from San Luis Potosí (three hours) and Querétaro (5½ hours).

LA HUASTECA POTOSINA



The remote region of La Huasteca Potosina is a world away from the grand colonial cities and semidesert that comprises so much of the rest of the central highlands. Instead, this is a steamy land of lush, tangled jungles and iridescent tropical flowers that hide stunning aquamarine waterfalls and swimming holes (the toothpaste-blue hue is due to the high calcium content in the surrounding rocks). Mexicans are proud of this region and the rich culture of the local Huastec people (Tének). Until fairly recently, it was known mainly to Mexicans; few international visitors ventured here. Nevertheless, adventurous travelers who make the effort for a few days will be beguiled by the breathtaking scenery, extraordinary sinkholes and bird-watching.

From here, you can access the Sierra Gorda through the hilly winding road that heads through the village of Xilitla, home to Las Pozas, the surreal garden of the eccentric character, Edward James.

TOP TIP

Don't head here in September when the rains are at their heaviest in the rainy season and the roads are impassable. The best time to visit is in the dry season, between November and March, when access is easy and the colors of the water are a beautiful aquamarine.

VICENTE NUZ/GETTY IMAGES ©



Cascada de Tamul (p538)



SWIFTY BUSINESS FOR BIRD LOVERS

Two extraordinary limestone sinkholes are renowned for thousands of *vencejos* (white-collared swifts, not swallows!) that nest in the caves. You can see the phenomenon at dawn (and dusk) when the flocks leave (and return) to the caves, spiraling their way noisily up (or dive-bombing down) to the opening. The first, Sótano de las Golondrinas, or Swallows' Cave, is several kilometers west of Aquismón. A 30-minute drive south of Aquismón brings you to the second cave, Sótano de las Huahuas. This jungle-fringed chasm is home to tens of thousands of swifts as well as green parrots. This cave is a much less touristy experience than Sótano de las Golondrinas, though it requires a little more effort to reach.

LA HUASTECA POTOSINA



Water-Logged Adventures

WATERY FUN IN THE JUNGLE

The entire region is dotted with waterfalls, waterholes and water-based activities. Even if you don't want to swim, the postcard-like vistas are worth it alone. If you have your own wheels, you can visit several of these over a couple of days, giving you enough time to hike to and enjoy the experiences.

Accessible from either **Ciudad Valles** or **Aquismón**, **Cascada de Tamul** comprises milky-blue water that plunges 105m into the pristine **Río Santa Maria** (which becomes the Tamañón). It's easily the Huasteca Potosina's most spectacular waterfall, as is the setting, in a canyon surrounded on all



WHERE TO SLEEP IN THE HUASTECA POTOSINA

Hotel Salto de Meco

Lovely cabins and swimming pool overlooking the turquoise waters downstream from Cascada El Meco. **\$\$**

El Molino

A pleasant, former 18th-century sugarcane factory that's a useful stopover in Rioverde. **\$\$**

Refugio Huasteco Hotel Boutique

In the middle of Tamasopo; a small, clean and neat option. **\$\$**



God's Bridge

sides with thick forest. Due to its remote location, you'll often have the place to yourself.

The best and safest way of approaching the falls is to paddle upriver in a wooden *lancha* (canoe). The return journey takes 3½ hours. You can arrange trips on arrival into Tan-chachín or La Morena.

A two-hour drive northwest of Ciudad de Valles, the stunning 38m-high **Cascada El Meco** is for viewing only. The **Restaurante El Mirador del Salto del Meco** overlooks the falls; you pass here to access the observation decks. If you don't make it here, further south the gorgeous **Minas Viejas** is well worth the 78km trip northwest from Ciudad Valles. There's a waterfall with a drop of 55m, a stunning pool and a series of smaller cascades that drop over terraces. Adventure groups head here to 'jump over' the terraces.

Further south (24km northwest of Ciudad Valles), **Los Mi-cos** comprises seven waterfalls of different heights that cascade down a riverbed. It's one of the busiest sites; many operators located in the car park offer boat tours (minimum four people) or jumping expeditions down the seven waterfalls (helmet and life jacket supplied).

Just west of Tamasopo (55km west of Ciudad Valles), there's **Cascada de Tamasopo**, a lovely set of three cascades and swimming holes. While it's very accessible, the downside is that it's very crowded, especially on weekends. It's by far the most commercial falls experience, with many bars and cafes on site.

Around 5km northeast of Tamasopo along a rough road, **Puente de Dios** features a 600m-long wooden walkway (and 300 steps) with stunning rainforest views and fabulous swimming opportunities. The main feature, **God's Bridge**, is a

I LIVE HERE: MUST-TRY REGIONAL DISHES & COFFEE



Lori Jones, owner of independent tour company Operatour Potosina.

Zacahuil A Huastecan tamale made with corn dough and stuffed with pork and chicken, plus a tomato sauce, and wrapped in a banana leaf.

Coffee Xilitla's mountains are covered in wild coffee plants. Locals pick and roast the beans. Many local cafes serve large mugs of coffee.

Enchiladas Huastecas These are enchiladas Potosinas (enchiladas made with chile-infused corn tortillas), filled with scrambled eggs, and served with a piece of meat known as *cecina*, along with black – not the regular brown – beans.



WHERE TO SLEEP IN XILITLA

Hotel San Jose

About 500m from the main square in Aquismon with large, clean rooms and a swimming pool. \$\$

Hotel Tapasoli

In keeping with the surreal theme, these 'hobbit' houses offer cabins and rooms that resemble birds nests. \$\$

Posada El Castillo

The home where Edward James stayed in Xilitla; decorated with quirky antiques and art. \$\$\$

MADCAP CREATOR: EDWARD JAMES

Las Pozas' creator, the English eccentric Edward James (1907–84), was blessed with both an excessive imagination and wealth. He became a patron of Salvador Dalí in the late 1930s and subsequently went on to amass the largest private collection of surrealist art in the world. In 1945 he arrived in Xilitla where he met Plutarco Gastelum, who helped build Las Pozas. It began with 40 local workers crafting giant, colored concrete flowers beside a jungle stream. Then, for 17 years, James and Gastelum created ever larger and stranger structures – many of which were never finished – at an estimated cost of US\$5 million.

turquoise-colored waterhole with an adjoining cave entrance, though this is not recommended in high waters.

A final (more remote) option, accessed from the town of Rioverde, is **Laguna de la Media Luna**, a surreal, mint-green-colored lagoon that's fed by six thermal springs with temperatures ranging between an appealing 80.6°F and 86°F (27°C and 30°C). Given that it's a bit of a trek to get to, it's best for enthusiastic snorkelers and divers; you can view beds of water lilies, an ancient petrified forest and several fish species. You can hire snorkeling gear from one of the many stalls inside the area.

The easiest option to head to several of these waterfalls, combined with a trip to Xilitla, is with English-speaking Lori Jones from **Operatour Potosina** (operatourpotosina.com.mx) based out of San Luis Potosí.

Surreal Gardens & Museums

TRIPPY SCULPTURES, PLANTS AND WATERFALLS AROUND XILITLA

You need to join a guided tour to visit **Las Pozas**, the audacious and madcap experiment that comprises a magical labyrinth of garden and surreal sculptures covering 36 hectares of idyllic thick jungle on the steep slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Think a bizarre series of concrete pagodas, bridges and spiral stairways that lead nowhere. Ensure you reserve your tour ahead online at en.laspozaxilitla.org.mx; tours in English depart 10am daily.

Las Pozas is worth a significant diversion for anyone with the vaguest of creative inclinations. You must stick with the leader who, over an hour or so, will guide you through the mazelike trails and will explain the background to this project. While it's frustrating to be given limits in a garden that calls out 'explore me!', it protects both the sculptures and gardens from being 'over-loved' (read destroyed).

At the time of writing, the new

Edward James Museum was

about to open opposite the garden entrance. Elsewhere in Xilitla, visit the **Leonora Carrington Museum**

(leonoracarringtonmuseum.org/xilitla), dedicated to – you guessed it – surreal sculptures. And, if you really want to live out the trippy experience, a number of hotels have adopted the surreal theme.



SURREALMANIA?

If you can't get enough of surreal sculptures, and enjoy those of Leonora Carrington, there's another **Leonora Carrington Museum** in San Luis Potosí (p533).



GETTING AROUND

Buses head to the towns of Xilitla and Ciudad Valles (via San Luis Potosí or Jalpan, if you're visiting Sierra Gorda first). However, given the remote nature of the region, ideally you need your own transportation. A feasible option is to

head off with local tour operators in Xilitla and Ciudad Valles. If you're pushed for time, the easiest option is to explore the region with a tour guide from San Luis Potosí (p536).

QUERÉTARO

The delightful heart of Querétaro consists of plazas linked by pedestrian streets that are jammed with historic churches and world-class museums and galleries. These, plus good bars, excellent coffee spots and decent accommodations, make for an interesting getaway for a couple of days. The advantage here is that you don't compete with tourists at every stop; the layout of the city – with its various focal points – means there's plenty for a visitor's love.

Most of the city's sights are colonial; there are few pre-Hispanic remains, though it was the Otomí who founded a settlement here in the 15th century. This was absorbed by the Aztecs, then by the Spaniards in 1531. Franciscan monks used it as a missionary base, while in the early 19th century, Querétaro became a center of intrigue among disaffected criollos plotting to free Mexico from Spanish rule. These days, you'll meet many Mazehua-Otomí people in the city, some selling handicrafts.

TOP TIP

After getting your fill of the sights (not to mention good coffee), check out Querétaro's fermenting scene of craft breweries at Brewer Gastro Pub (cervezatoro.com/brewer), Cervecería Hércules (facebook.com/jardinhercules) and Mutt Brewing Co (facebook.com/muttbrewing). These have beer gardens and, in some cases, on-site brewing facilities.



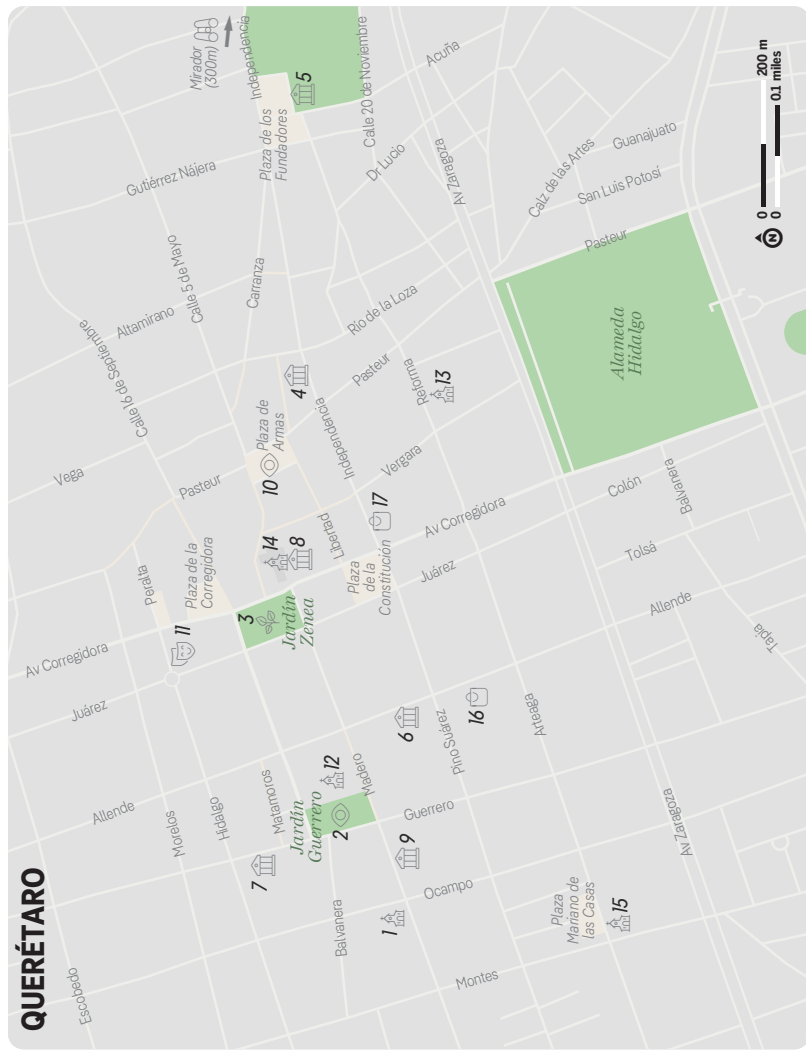
Querétaro's aqueduct (p543)

QUERÉTARO

- SIGHTS**
- 1 Catedral de Querétaro, San Felipe Neri
 - 2 Jardín Guerrero
 - 3 Jardín Zenea
 - 4 Museo Casa de la Zacatecana
 - 5 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Querétaro
 - 6 Museo de Arte de Querétaro
 - 7 Museo de la Ciudad
 - 8 Museo Regional de Querétaro
 - 9 Museum of the Calendar (Mucal)
 - 10 Plaza de Armas
 - 11 Teatro de la República
 - 12 Templo de Santa Clara
 - 13 Templo de Teresitas
 - 14 Templo San Francisco
 - 15 Templo y Convento de Santa Rosa de Viterbo
- SHOPPING**
- 16 Cedral
 - 17 Elaborante Manos Vivas



Querétaro



Walking Through Querétaro's Past

FOR HISTORY BUFFS OR PLAZA PEOPLE

A day spent sauntering around the center of Querétaro is the best way to appreciate both the city's majestic architecture and the important role it played in Mexico's history. Start at the 18th-century **Plaza de Armas**, a large square lined with colonial buildings, mansions, lush trees and a fountain with a statue of the **Marquis de la Villa del Villar del Aguila**, who constructed the city's **aqueduct**. Head south to **Museo Casa de la Zacatecana**, a restored 17th-century home and a good place to get a sense of life in colonial-era Querétaro.

Double back to **Plaza de Armas** and wander past **Templo San Francisco** to **Jardín Zenea** to enjoy the elaborate **19th-century kiosk** and a **fountain** with a sculpture of the Greek goddess Hebe. Nearby, the **Museo Regional de Querétaro** has interesting exhibits on pre-Hispanic Mexico, archaeological sites, the Spanish occupation and the state's various indigenous groups. The upstairs exhibits reveal Querétaro's role in the independence movement and post-independence history. Further northwest is the statue of **Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez**.

Continue to **Teatro de la República**, an old, functioning theater where a tribunal met in 1867 to decide the fate of Emperor Maximilian. Mexico's constitution was also signed here on January 31, 1917. Swing southwest to **Jardín Guerrero**, which is fronted by **Templo de Santa Clara**, and on to **Mucal** (see p544). Further west, the 18th-century **Catedral** features both baroque and neoclassical styles; it's said that the first Mass in the cathedral was led by Padre Hidalgo (see p519).

Getting Arty in Querétaro

LOCAL ART IN ALL FORMS

With a legacy of indigenous crafts, colonial frescoes, religious architecture and boundary-pushing young artists, Querétaro's art scene is strong, and the city's many public galleries, museums and churches reflect this.

Head to the **mirador** to view the extraordinary 'artistic' structure – the 1.28km-long aqueduct and 74 towering sandstone arches. Nearby is the city's new **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Querétaro** (MACQ), a fabulously restored building that houses contemporary exhibits by local, national and international artists.

Back in the historic center, the **Museo de Arte de Querétaro** (MAQRÓ) occupies a splendid 18th-century baroque monastery that's alive with angels, gargoyles and statues.

QUERÉTARO'S ROLE IN INDEPENDENCE

Conspirators, including Miguel Hidalgo (see p519), met secretly at the house of doña Josefa Ortiz (La Corregidora), who was the wife of Querétaro's former *corregidor* (district administrator). When the conspiracy was uncovered, the story goes, doña Josefa was locked in her house (now the Palacio de Gobierno), but managed to whisper through a keyhole to a co-conspirator, Ignacio Pérez, that their colleagues were in jeopardy, leading to Padre Hidalgo's call to arms. This key event is celebrated today during Mexico's independence celebrations every September. Plaza de la Corregidora features a 1910 statue of doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez bearing the flame of freedom.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN QUERÉTARO

Tikua

Authentic southeastern Mexican cuisine – from the *xi'i*, a mushroom salad, to the Oaxacan chorizo recipes. **\$\$**

Brewer Gastro Pub

Local brewer plus very good chef equals a casual drinking spot with fabulous brews and excellent dishes. **\$\$**

Monono

One of the best cafes and coffees around, this small and modern place serves up delectable gourmet breakfasts.



MAKE TIME FOR THE MUSEUM OF THE CALENDAR

The extraordinary museum **MUCAL** (mucal.mx), housed in a stunningly restored mansion, is unexpectedly fascinating. Established by the owner of Landin calendars, which are said to have graced most homes in Mexico for decades, these quirky artworks are sprawled over 19 exhibition rooms. But there's more to it than Mexican calendars alone. The presentations start with how the galaxy – and therefore time – works before taking you on a journey through decades of retro artworks used in calendars, as well as the timepieces themselves. The excellent garden cafe is the perfect spot to wind down, and to reflect on the titillating and politically incorrect retro calendar depictions.



FERNANDO MACIAS BONO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Museo Regional de Querétaro

The Flight from Egypt (Huida a Egipto) by baroque artist Juan Rodríguez Juárez has been shown in the Louvre among other famous galleries.

Inside the ex-convent and old prison that held the deposed Emperor Maximilian, the 11-room **Museo de la Ciudad** holds contemporary art exhibits, while lovers of neoclassical architecture should swing by the 19th-century **Templo de Teresitas**, the city's only neoclassical building comprising cantera stone and six Ionian columns.

The 18th-century **Templo y Convento de Santa Rosa de Viterbo** is Querétaro's most elaborate baroque church, with a four-sided clock, pagoda-like bell tower, curling buttresses and lavishly decorated interior.

For local artisanal handicrafts, you'll see Otomí makers selling their Lele dolls. For a hippy version of crafts, with handmade jewelry and dream catchers, look no further than **Manos Vivas** (Independencia 20), or at the indigenous community program **Cedai** (Centro de Desarrollo Artesanal Indígena; Calle Ignacio Allende Sur 20) where you can pick up unique handmade jewelry, toys, dolls and decorations.



GETTING AROUND

With a series of interlinked plazas, you can easily visit most of Querétaro's sights on foot and a car is not necessary. Querétaro's modern Central Camionera is 5km southeast of the center. Both taxis and local buses head into the center (the numbers change, so check).

To get to the bus station from the center, take the city bus marked 'Central' (ie Central Camionera) from Calle Zaragoza, or any bus labeled 'TAQ' (ie Terminal de Autobuses de Querétaro) or 'Central' heading south on the east side of the Alameda Hidalgo.



Beyond Querétaro

Exploring the Querétaro region's surrounding villages – both agricultural hubs and the Otomí villages of Sierra Queretana – gives you a taste beyond the colonial-focused capital.

Querétaro state is famed for its vineyards and cheese production. Much of the wine industry is based around Tequisquiapan, a small town 63km southeast of Querétaro that, along with Bernal, provides insight into the daily lives of provincial towns. The joy in these places, on a day visit alone, is watching life unfold before you. Fridays are when locals head in to do their chores and market shopping, though visitors flock to both places on weekends.

For a niche experience, visit the Sierra Queretana, the rural region of the Otomí people, and particularly the atmospheric village of Amealco de Bonfil – if only to learn about Otomí culture and the beautiful Lele dolls for which Amealco is renowned.



TOP TIP

The wonderful Mercado de la Cruz market is a great place to grab local bites, especially tacos and *gorditas* (corn tortilla-based pocket stuffed with cheese, meat and other fillings).

SERGIO MENDOZA HOCHMANN/GETTY IMAGES ©



Peña de Bernal (p546)

BERNAL'S MAGIC

The monolith of Bernal is known to have mystical elements; during the vernal equinox thousands of pilgrims converge on the rock to take in its positive energy. Bernal is also known for its delicious *gorditas*, especially those filled with *nopales en penca* (cheese sauce with nopal cactus). Ask the way to the food market. For shopping, head to **La Aurora** (bernalmagico.com), an interesting *artesanias* shop and one of the last remaining places where weavers still work the looms. Ask permission to see them in the attached workshop.



SANDROFOTOGRAFIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Muñecas de Lele

Tequisquiápan & Bernal

TWO MAGICAL TOWNS IN ONE TRIP

An easy day trip from Querétaro, the pretty towns of Bernal and Tequisquiapan (teh-kees-kee-*ap*-an) are on many travelers' radars in this region. Bernal is dominated by the impressive **Peña de Bernal**, a giant rock that is the third-largest monolith in the world. Beyond that, there's little to do but wander through its pretty center; its shops sell cheese, candies and street food. On weekends it bursts with Mexican visitors; however, if you come during the week you'll find a provincial town quietly going about its business.

Further east, **Tequisquiapan** has always been popular as an agricultural village, with a gorgeous plaza pinned by an impressive church, plus colorful colonial buildings and excellent markets. More recently, it's seen the arrival of cashed-up visitors and this has slightly altered its vibe. Smart restaurants and boutique hotels have appeared in its pretty, bougainvillea-lined streets. It's a lovely place to wander around and the pace is delightfully relaxed.



WHERE TO EAT IN TEQUISQUIAPAN

Los Agaves

Aims to be 'high Mexican and international' and almost pulls it off. \$\$\$

Camino a Bremen

Ultra-casual surroundings, but it serves top-class wood-fired pizzas and in-house pasta dishes. \$\$

Origen

Becoming Tequis' 'gourmet' place; Mexican-Mediterranean dishes are fine, but the courtyard surrounds are better. \$\$

Amealco de Bonfil & the Muñeca de Lele

RAG DOLLS AND WOOLLY MAMMOTHS

The main reason travelers take the 1½-hour drive to **Amealco de Bonfil** is for the small but interesting **Museo de la Muñeca** (open daily 10am to 5pm). It displays a range of dolls from around the world, along with award-winning, country-wide creations of the Muñeca de Lele.

The Muñeca de Lele ('lele' means 'baby' in the Otomí dialect) is a brightly colored doll adorned with traditional frock, two plaits and a head-dress of ribbons. These days, it's the Otomí of the Amealco municipality – specifically the communities of San Ildefonso Tultepec and Santiago Mexquititlán – who've been recognized as the 'official' makers, possibly because of their intense production and marketing efforts. Each doll takes several days to make; you've probably seen the women sewing and selling the dolls on the streets and plazas of Querétaro.

'Lele obsessives' might enjoy going a step further by learning the literal craft of these dolls. The museum offers workshops every Saturday, where the Otomí artisans share their techniques.

Once you've had your fill of frills, check out the display of the fossils of the woolly mammoth, and be sure to head to the pretty plaza, as well as the local market, to try the local treats.

Cheese & Wine Route

A TASTE OF QUERÉTARO'S TREATS

While you can tour the region's wineries and cheeseries on your own, an organized tour provides an easy way to get around (plus it means you can safely sample a vino or three). On a standard day tour from either Querétaro or Tequisquiapan you will normally see a couple of bodegas and a cheese farm, with tastings at all, along with a quick visit to Bernal. From Querétaro, the long-established, English-speaking **Descubre Turismo** (descubremex.com.mx) arranges group tours. It's best to reserve a couple of days in advance. If not, it costs little more for groups to arrange a private tour. The company has access to the likes of Bocanegra, a cheeserie, as well as high-end wineries and experiences, all accompanied by excellent explanations.

If you go on your own, ask at the tourist office in Tequisquiapan for details of bodegas open to visitors. One of the most accommodating, and also one of the largest and most important bodegas in Mexico, is **Finca Sala Vivé** by Freix-

NOT JUST ANY DOLL: MUÑECA DE LELE

Thanks to some clever marketing, the rag or baby doll called the Muñeca de Lele has become an important symbol of Querétaro state. The doll's origin is a little unclear. Some believe it's a derivation of traditional dolls that were made with clay, corn and palm strands. Others say that they were introduced by Guadalupe Rivera Marín, daughter of Mexican painter Diego Rivera. While head of a social handicrafts program, she introduced doll-making to the Otomí and Mazahua women who'd flocked to the capital for work from México state, Michoacán, Querétaro and Guanajuato.



THINGS TO BUY IN AMEALCO DE BONFIL

Lele Doll

'Leles' come in all sizes, from those small enough for a keyring, to ginormous versions.

Panchito

The male lele is Panchito, he with a bandana and cowboy hat.

Artisan pottery

The market sells local takes on pottery items, including many pots for gardens.

I LIVE HERE: THREE SECRET SPOTS TO VISIT IN THE QUERÉTARO REGION



Mariana Álvarez Díaz Barriga, owner of local tour operator Descubre Turismo.

Cañon del Caracol, Maconí

An incredible three-hour walk up a narrow canyon, comprising amazing rock formations, including one of a snail; it's for the adventurous only.

La Casita Ecológica, Jalpan

This beautiful cabin is made of ecological materials; you completely disconnect from the world and connect with nature.

Pulque of Amealco de Bonfil

Amealco maintains the traditional indigenous practice of preparing *pulque*. Pulquería Don Frederico provides tastings, along with the history and background of the drink.



Vineyard near Tequisquiapan

enet México. Tours run regularly (English-language tours are daily at noon and 4pm Monday to Friday) and include a look at the cellars plus the all-important wine tasting.

Tours also run out of Tequisquiapan. **Viajes y Enoturismo** (viajesyenoturismo.com.mx) is a professional agency that specializes in wine and cheese tours, and offers interesting day trips in and around the Tequisquiapan area. These cost slightly more than the tours from Querétaro.

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GETTING AROUND

Regular Flecha Amarilla buses depart Querétaro's central bus station to Tequisquiapan (1½ hours) and Bernal (1 hour); connecting Bernal and Tequisquiapan is trickier, but doable, though you must change

buses at Ezequiel Montes. Amealcenses buses ply the route between Querétaro and Amealco. To go beyond these places or between villages, you ideally need your own vehicle.

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA SIERRA GORDA



The best way to really experience off-the-beaten-track Mexico is to head to the country's 'green jewel': the lush Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda in the rugged Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range of northeast Querétaro. It covers 32% of the state (383,567 hectares) and is the most ecosystem-diverse protected area in the country. You can expect stunning wilderness areas, old-growth cloud forests and semideserts.

Incredibly, the Sierra Gorda is also home to five 18th-century Franciscan missions that can be reached in one (long) day. The restored churches are notable for their colorful facades carved with symbolic figures, fascinating and very beautiful interpretations of the indigenous people who built them.

Despite the region's remoteness, once you're here it's becoming increasingly accessible thanks to local ecotourism projects.

TOP TIP

If you want to stay at any of the excellent eco-lodges or cabins outside of Jalpan (recommended), be sure to reserve in advance with **Sierra Gorda Eco tours** (sierragordaecotours.com), a local organization whose eco-tours directly support both the Sierra Gorda Alliance for Conservation and local communities through their micro-enterprises.



Cuatro Palos

SIGHTS

- 1 Cuatro Palos
- 2 El Chujeje
- 3 Las Adjuntas
- 4 Misión Francisca del Valle de Tilaco
- 5 Misión Nuestra Señora
- 6 Misión San Miguel Concá
- 7 Misión Santa María del Agua de Landa
- 8 Misión Santiago Apóstol de Jalpan
- 9 Puente de Dios
- 10 Sótano del Barro

**MISSION
INFLUENCE**

Until the arrival of Franciscan missionaries, the local indigenous peoples – Huastec, Chichimeca, Jonaces, Ximpeces and Pame – had resisted conquerors and missionaries who tried to colonize and evangelize those living in this region. For better or worse, Fray Junípero Serra's impact was enormous. Mandatory conversion (as many argue) or otherwise, to convert the locals to Catholicism it's said that he learned the local language as well as provided food to the locals, while also teaching them construction techniques.

The Missions of Sierra Gorda

MISSIONS, INDIGENOUS ART, RICH CULTURES

In the mid-18th century, five missions were built in the remote regions of Sierra Gorda under the Franciscan leadership of Fray Junípero Serra: **Santiago Apóstol de Jalpan** (the first, built in 1751–58), **Nuestra Señora de la Luz de Tancoyol**, **Santa María del Agua de Landa**, **San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco**, and **San Miguel Concé**.

Each of the five missions follows a similar baroque architectural style, with a cross-shaped ground plan, an atrium, a sacramental doorway, processional chapels and a cloister. The missionaries' fundamental idea was to teach biblical stories through imagery; locals carved into local stone their own interpretations of religious iconography. Designs include the expressive faces of angels, saints and virgins, along with flora and fauna of the Sierra, with jaguars, rabbits and Mexico's symbol, the double-headed eagle.

If you have your own wheels, you can visit these on your own. Allow a day to cover them all; otherwise, you can tour the missions with **Aventurate** (aventurate.mx; 441-1033129), **Sr Arnoldo Montes Rodríguez**, an independent Spanish-speaking guide (441-108-88-24; up to four people M\$3500), or **Sierra Gorda Ecotours**.

Revel in the Green Jewel

HIKING AND NATURE-BASED FUN

Prepare yourself for some wonderful hikes to waterfalls and rivers in the area. En route to **Jalpan**, you'll pass the turnoff to **Cuatro Palos** (access is just before Pinal de Amoles). One of the most scenic places in the region, it overlooks the most spectacular ridges of the Sierra Gorda. Here, oak forests collide with the semidesert.

Water-based experiences include **El Chuveje**, an easy 20-minute stroll from the main carpark. It's a spectacular waterfall 30m tall; nearby, beautiful alamo trees provide shade.

Puente de Dios is a wonderful, if solid, 3½-hour return walk along the **Rio Escanela**; the M\$120 fee includes a guide for one to four people.

Only 30km north of Jalpan (a 45-minute drive), is **Las Adjuntas**, the confluence of the Ayutla and Santa Maria Rivers. The Ayutla's cold waters run through rocky riverbeds, with good swimming holes, while the Santa Maria River is warmer, and shallow. You can swim here when safe to do so.

**WHERE TO SLEEP IN SIERRA GORDA****Ecological cabins**

Check out the eco-friendly options coordinated by Sierra Gorda Eco Tours. \$\$

Mision Jalpan

The best of a pretty average lot of hotels (most low- to mid-range) in Jalpan, but useful for amenities. \$\$

Cabaña Sierra Gorda

Simple but charming; the best budget choice in Jalpan; a 15-minute walk from the center, near the presa (reservoir). \$\$



El Chuveje

A hard-core trip takes you to the **Sótano del Barro**, the world's second-largest free-fall vertical cave at 410m deep. Here, you can see resident macaws as they make their exit from the cave. You need to leave in the middle of the night to be here for dawn. Alternatively, you can camp at the area's only accommodations, a basic, but comfortable cabin (see sierragordaecotours.com).



SIERRA GORDA ECOTOURS

Sierra Gorda Ecotours (sierragordaecotours.com) is the area's principal organization for tourism. As part of the Alliance for the Conservation of the Sierra Gorda, a group of local organizations dedicated to preserving the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve, it lists all the community projects, including places to stay (normally eco-cabins), places to eat locally (casual restaurants or food stalls) and places to visit. The website is a useful tool for planning.



GETTING AROUND

The only limitation to accessing the area is transportation: the easiest way to reach the missions is with a local tour guide (from Jalpan or Querétaro), but to get to the trailheads to

waterfalls and the like, you need your own wheels. To reach Jalpan, buses run daily to/from Querétaro, as well as Xilitla and Ciudad Valles.

ZACATECAS


 Zacatecas

 Mexico City

The most northern of Mexico's silver cities, the high and dry city of Zacatecas – a Unesco World Heritage site – is packed into a narrow valley and hemmed by a steep and imposing hillside. The fascinating historic center has plenty to keep you occupied for a couple of days; it's jam-packed with colonial buildings, magnificent museums and steep, winding streets and alleys that ooze charm.

If art is your thing, the city has some of the country's best art galleries that show everything from eye-popping modern works to some of the most valuable historic pieces in the world. After you've had your fill of Picassos and Dalís, head to the lofty heights of La Bufa, or underground into a former mine.

At the time of writing, the US government has a Do Not Travel advisory for Zacatecas and Zacatecas State (see Top Tip for details). Check the travel advice before heading here.

TOP TIP

In recent years, Zacatecas, and nearby villages including the pretty Jerez, have been the center of violence due to turf wars between drug cartels. Murders have occurred frequently. While violence is not generally directed at tourists, tourism has suffered enormously as embassies warn against traveling to the region and city.



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Zacatecas

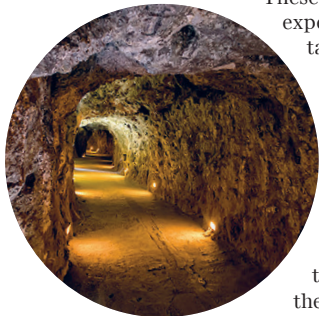


Mina El Eden, La Bufa & Guadalupe

ZACATECAN HISTORY'S HIGHS AND LOWS

Visiting one of Mexico's richest mines, the **Mina El Edén** (1584–1960s), provides a sobering insight into the terrible price paid for mineral wealth. Digging for hoards of silver, gold, iron and zinc, enslaved indigenous people who worked in horrific conditions. Up to five people a day died from accidents or disease.

These days, it's a rather different experience: a miniature train takes you inside **Cerro del Grillo** on a narrow-gauge railway (540m). Then guides lead you for another 350m or so along floodlit walkways past shafts and over subterranean pools. While recorded digging sounds evoke the experience, you'll pass the fossil room with fossilized



MUSEO VIRREINAL DE GUADALUPE

It's worth visiting the village of Guadalupe, seven kilometers from Zacatecas. This former convent houses the **Museo Virreinal de Guadalupe**, with the building's original religious paintings by Miguel Cabrera, Juan Correa, Antonio Torres and Cristóbal Villalpando. Visitors can also see the library and its 9000 original volumes dating from 1529.



WHERE TO DRINK IN ZACATECAS

Cantina las Quince Letras

Founded in 1906, this oft-crowded classic also displays artwork of well-known local and international artists. \$\$

Mina Club

Party in the tunnel of the Mina El Edén (Thursday to Saturday only; minaaleden.com.mx). Enter via Socavón La Esperanza. \$\$

Bar Quinta Real

It's not often you get to have a cocktail overlooking a 17th-century bullfighting ring. \$\$\$

WORLD-CLASS ART WALK

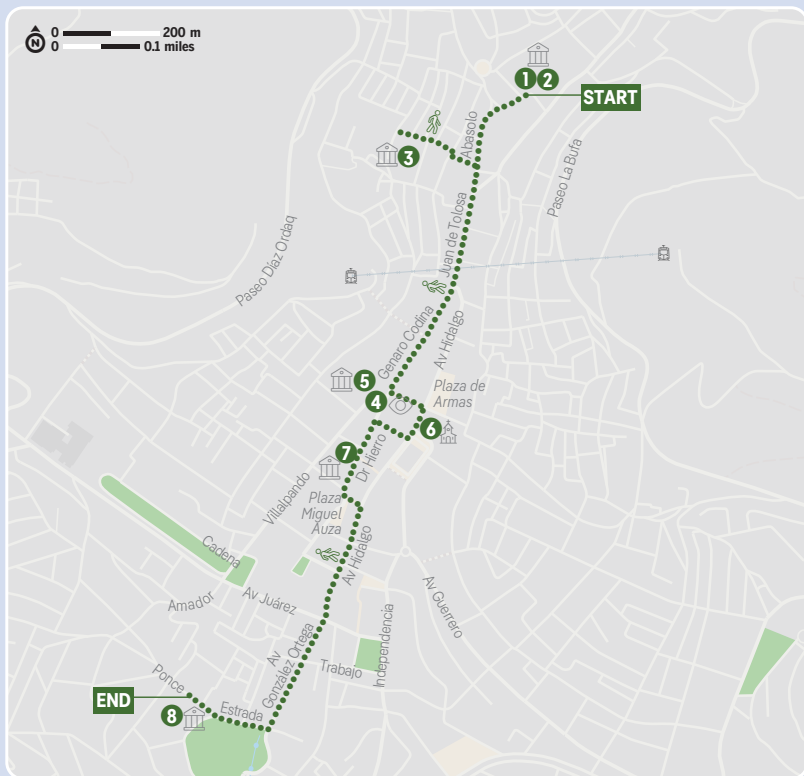
Start in the far north at the **1 Museo Rafael Coronel**, imaginatively housed in the ruins of the lovely 16th-century **2 Ex-Convento de San Francisco**. The Mexican folk art and its incredible mask collection is from Zacatecan artist Rafael Coronel, son-in-law of Diego Rivera. Go 'abstract' in the **3 Museo del Arte Abstracto Manuel Felguérez** where you can view a stunning collection of abstract painting and sculpture, particularly the work of Zacatecan artist Manuel Felguérez.

Back in the center, on the **4 Plazuela de Santo Domingo** and occupying a 17th-century former Jesuit college, the **5 Museo Pedro Coronel** is one of provincial Mexico's best art museums with 20th-century works by Picasso, Rouault, Dalí, Goya and Miró (yes, really!); and pre-Hispanic Mexican artifacts, and masks.

Southeast of here is Zacatecas' main **6 Catedral**. Built between 1729 and 1752, the pink-stone is an ultimate expression of Mexican baroque. The grand altar, the work of Javier Marín, a famous Mexican artist, features 10 large bronze figures and the figure of Christ arranged on a backdrop of golden blocks.

A five-minute stroll southwest brings you to **7 Museo Zacatecano**, Zacatecas' former mint, a contemporary museum that exhibits 19th-century religious imagery and all things *zacatecano*. Don't miss the museum's Huichol art.

At the city's far south on Parque de Sierra de Alicia and overlooking the magnificent aqueduct, the **8 Museo Francisco Goitia** displays work by 20th-century Zacatecan artists.





Cable car to Cerro de la Bufa

fish and rocks from around the world, along with a small meteorite and silver and gold in their natural state. It's cold in the mine so bring a jacket.

For those with heads for loftier heights, you can climb – or catch the cable car – to the Cerro de la Bufa, the impressive rock outcrop with great views over the city. Here, too, is **Museo Toma de Zacatecas**, which memorializes the 1914 battle fought on the slopes of the **Cerro de la Bufa**, led by revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Felipe Ángeles against President Victoriano Huerta's forces. You'll also find the **Mausoleo de los Hombres Ilustres de Zacatecas**, the tombs of Zacatecan heroes from 1841 to the present.



LAS MORISMAS DE BRACHO

Las Morismas de Bracho is a three-day theatrical event that takes place in Querétaro during the last weekend of August. A religious group, St John the Baptist Brotherhood, is responsible for performing the play cycle: King Herod's decree to behead St John the Baptist; Charlemagne and Oliveros; and the most intense, the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, a decisive naval victory by Christian states over the Ottomans.

Between 10,000 to 14,000 Zacatecos dress up in traditional soldiers' uniforms (the 'Turks' are dressed like 19th-century French soldiers) and re-enact the battles. For the visitor, the most accessible aspect is the procession, where thousands of horseback riders, kings and soldiers of all ages wind through town.



GETTING AROUND

You will not require a car in Zacatecas; it is a very pedestrian-friendly town. The *teléferico* (cable car) will get you to La Bufa. The main bus terminal, Central de Autobuses Zacatecas,

is located an easy 3km taxi ride southwest of the center. Deluxe, 1st- and 2nd-class buses operate to/from here.

BAJA PENINSULA

DESERT BEAUTY AND OCEAN MAJESTY

One of the world's longest peninsulas and most breathtaking road trips holds something at every turn.

Baja in all its immense, mystical beauty stretches from gritty Tijuana to Los Cabos, 1250km away. In between lie fantastic vineyards, snowcapped mountains, parched deserts and turquoise seas that take your breath away. The region hosts an astounding number of plants, animals and birds, as well as people: everyone from hippie burn-outs and sun-dazed surfers to uppity big-city folks can find something – or somewhere – to enjoy here. It's not just for tourists, either: the locals take great pride in their state, and rancheros here produce some of Mexico's finest beef from these parched, often barren lands.



Like so many parts of Mexico, the area was first colonized by Jesuit missionaries, who trudged their way through vast tracts of desert to find pockets of indigenous natives to convert, with typically disastrous consequences. Today, this legacy is visible in the many missions – some ruins, some rubble, but others, such as Loreto, still operating today. The Doors lead singer Jim Morrison tapped into Baja's magic with regular visits to San Miguel, near Ensenada, but nowadays the region is known for sportfishing, diving, surfing and wind sports, especially the Sea of Cortez side, which gets incredible trade winds in winter. Surfers drool for Pacific swells that arrive regularly enough to set your watch by.

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THE MAIN AREAS

LOS CABOS

Escaping starts here. **p562**

LA PAZ

Authentic charm. **p570**

LORETO

Quiet and relaxing. **p578**

ENSENADA

Classy and grand. **p582**

TIJUANA

Gritty but charming. **p590**



Above: Divorce Beach (p564); Opposite: Ensenada (p582)



Ensenada, p582

South of Tijuana but worlds apart, Ensenada is a mega-destination for cruise shippers as well as those driving south from the US border.



Tijuana, p590

This quirky city gets a bad rap due to border issues and drug crime, but despite the gritty exterior, it's a vibrant, fun place to experience the real Mexico.



BUS

A robussssssst (get the pun?) bus system connects all major Baja destinations, so assuming you're OK with a 24-hour bus trip, you can easily travel from one end of the peninsula to the other.



CAR

Baja makes for one of the world's greatest road trips, so doing it justice really requires a car. A 4x4 is nice but optional: most places you'll want to get to don't require 4WD.



BOAT

If you're one of the lucky visitors, you'll find yourself in a boat, making the slow-yet-beautiful trip down the stunning, azure Baja coast. The coves, bays and open water are unparalleled, and you might be in company of gray whales, too, in wintertime.

Find Your Way

Baja is truly a choose-your-own-adventure kind of place, with vastly different regions in the north and south. We've hand selected the best spots to spend your time.

Loreto, p578

Quiet, elegant and reserved, Loreto hosts one of the few surviving Jesuit missions as well as offering many Sea of Cortez side delights.



La Paz, p570

The most 'Mexican' of all Baja's cities, La Paz has a beautiful bayside malecón (beach promenade) and excellent dining opportunities.

Los Cabos, p562

Made up of the twin cities of Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo, the 'Cabo's' are a key cruise-ship stop and party destination.



Plan Your Time

Baja lends itself to exploration, and chances are you'll find yourself wishing you had more time whether you've budgeted a week, a month or a year. Picking one spot to explore works well, too.



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El Arco (p563)



Seasonal Highlights

Ironically, northern Baja is often hotter in summer (and winter!) than southern Baja because of cooling Pacific breezes, but it's still hot and dry, with the occasional fall hurricane thrown in.



JANUARY

Nothing beats ringing in the **New Year** in Los Cabos, assuming you love to party and don't need to sleep.



FEBRUARY

Gray-whale migration (p581) is at its peak, with the graceful creatures easily visible from shore or boat.



MARCH

The 250km **Baja 250 road race** starts – and ends – in otherwise quiet, off-the-beaten-path San Felipe.

If You Only Do One Thing

● Go to **Los Cabos** (p562), whether you're crossing from the mainland into La Paz or flying in from Mexico City or elsewhere. The two Cabos are quite different, so try to get to both of them: for many, they define Baja as a must-see destination.

● Take a sunset tour out to **El Arco** (p563), or party till morning in **Cabo San Lucas** (p564).

● Sip a lovely glass of wine as you stroll around the art night in **San José del Cabo** (p562). Laze beachside and watch the gray whales offshore.

● If time allows, hop north to either **Cabo Pulmo** (p569) or **Todos Santos** (p568).

Three Days to Travel Around

● Start in Los Cabos (see left) on your first day, then rent a car and begin getting away from it all. Head to Todos Santos (see left) for a bit of surfing and stay overnight in **La Paz** (p570).

● Kayak or take a launch to see **Espíritu Santo** (p576) and visit **Balandra Bay** (p574).

● Come down the peninsula's Sea of Cortez side, visiting quiet **Cabo Pulmo** (p569) on the way.

● If time permits, duck out to **La Ventana** (p577) for unparalleled wind-sport and snorkeling fun before you start heading south.

If You Have More Time

● If you've got a week or two, think about traveling the whole peninsula. You'll find that Baja really has three sections: the 'green desert' of the South Cape, from Los Cabos (see left) to La Paz (see left); the central stretch, up past **Loreto** (p578); and, finally, the frontera area near the US border, with **Ensenada** (p582) and **Tijuana** (p590).

● There's simply so much to see here that a short paragraph can't describe it. But the vistas, and the parched desert running down into azure water on either side, will take your breath away.



JULY

The dead of **summer** and it's hot, hot, hot - a great time to come if you want to avoid the crowds.



SEPTEMBER

The **low season**, with many stores and restaurants closing up for a month or two.



NOVEMBER

The 1000km **Baja Mil race** happens each year in November, bringing 'truggies' and other souped-up off-road vehicles in droves.



DECEMBER

Ho, ho, ho, Santa Claus is coming...to PARTY! Don your red cap and plan on singing carols with hordes of tipsy revelers.

LOS CABOS

Los Cabos

Mexico City

Los Cabos are actually two different cities – the twin sisters of Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo – and they couldn't be more different. CSL, as it's often known, is the wild, crazy, Vegas-style party spot, with until-the-wee-hours clubs and conga lines where waiters pour tequila into your open mouth as you go by. A Friday or Saturday night (or heck, any night) here is eyebrow raising. That is, if you remember any of it.

San José del Cabo, on the other hand, is a quiet, stately, even sedate place where fine art galleries abut delicious dining options, ice-cream cafes and tasty coffee spots. The popular art night (currently Thursdays) sees crowds spilling into the street to take in shows and galleries, and dine at cafes. While a few rooftop bars stay open latish, they're the kind of places you'll go to have a good conversation rather than get plastered and wake up wondering where that tattoo came from.

TOP TIP

For those used to the convenience of a one-way rental in places such as the USA, well, get ready for disappointment. In Baja there's no one-way rental, which means if you're planning to rent a car and head north to the border, you'll have to drive all the way back again.



KARTINKINZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Souvenirs, San José del Cabo



Land's End

CABO'S ICONIC ROCKS

Even when dwarfed by one, two, or sometimes three cruise ships, Land's End is worth visiting. This is the end of Baja; you've gone as far as you can go. Take a water taxi out and you'll get to visit **El Arco** (the Arch) for some selfie-taking and scenic photos, see the resident sea lion colony, getting up close to the friendly creatures, and you'll likely spot a pelican – or 50 – as you go.

Most people combine a trip to El Arco with a stop at nearby **Lover's Beach**, and most of the water-taxi captains expect to either drop you off and return in a few hours (for those doing serious sunbathing), or at least wait 15 to 30 minutes while you take a few pictures. If you have phone service, getting the name and number of the captain can make it even easier: just call when you're ready to be picked up.

Water taxis are the cheapest and most common way to get out and around Land's End, but there are other options. Glass-bottomed boats will give non-snorkelers a peek at the underwater world. There's also a number of catamarans that operate at various times of day, bringing people for sunset or party tours. These usually don't stop at the beaches, but they're a nice way to see the rocks and the sea lion colony, and drinks and snacks are often provided.

TOP CHEAP TACOS

La Taquiza

Packed spot for cheap eats, especially tacos. Look for the bright pink sign. \$

Taquería el Paisa

Hugely popular spot for cheap tacos and more right on the main drag of Lázaro Cárdenas. \$

María Jiménez

Off the beaten path east of the marina, María Jiménez has delicious tacos and a whole lot more. \$\$

Taquería El Venado

One of the cheapest but also one of the best, hidden off Niños Héroes. \$



WHERE TO FIND HIGH-END HOTELS IN LOS CABOS

Bungalows Breakfast Inn

Delightful bungalows and rooms around a quiet, lush garden and pool, with drool-worthy breakfasts. \$\$

Finisterra

An all-inclusive resort mostly overlooking the Pacific, with giant pools and a noteworthy spa. \$\$\$

Pueblo Bonito Pacifica

This mega-chain has deals that are often too good to miss, and beautiful ocean views. \$\$\$



LOVE...OR DIVORCE, YOU CHOOSE

The stretch of white sand just before El Arco has two names. On the Cabo side, it's known as **Lover's Beach**, a popular sunbathing spot. Walk past the rocks to the Pacific and you're in different territory: this is known as **Divorce Beach**, and while the connection to all things love remains opaque, it's not a good beach for swimming, thanks to strong Pacific currents and capricious waves. If you have decent walking shoes, look for the path up the rocks on the north side to a **viewpoint** high above. It's spectacular, though rocky and filled with cacti spines. Don't suggest to your special someone that they go up there barefoot, lest you find out why Divorce Beach got its name.

Fine Dining

PARADISE FOR DINERS

Anyone with a yen for Mexican food – or any other food – will find themselves hard-pressed for better variety than in Los Cabos. Everything from grilled meats to fresh seafood is on the menu here, and at all price points. You can drop hundreds of dollars on a fancy meal, or buy a great street taco for just a few pesos. And, for the most part, it's all good.

Mexican food is obviously a top choice, and there are lots of options. Your all-inclusive stay, if you're in one, will often have a Mexican-themed option and some hotels open their dining to non-guests. What's on the menu? Basically anything.

Mexican specialties include the celebrated *chiles en nogada*, a stuffed chili with pork and beef that has a creamy walnut sauce. Sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds, it has the green, white and red coloring of the Mexican flag.

Grilled meats are easy to find, and meat lovers often find the flavors here are second to none, in part because so much of the meat is locally produced.

Seafood may be caught literally hours before it's on your plate. Spiny lobster is a specialty, but be aware that if cooked badly, it can be tough – a disappointment when you're paying premium pesos for the experience. You're safer with shrimp or fish dishes.

Los Cabos also offers cheap street food that's not just passable, but tasty. Look for places that are packed with locals and you won't go wrong.

Party Time

LET LOOSE!

Let's face it, Los Cabos (or Cabo San Lucas, in particular), is as well-known for partying as Vegas or Cancún, and for good reason – its clubs and nightlife rival anywhere in the world. Whether you're hanging out with rock stars at Cabo Wabo, partying with bridesmaids-gone-wild in **Vaquita**, or watching waiters dance on tables in **El Squid Roe**, you're sure to have a wild and crazy time and make great memories.

Being prepared before you start partying is well advised. Parking is hard to find, so if you can avoid driving, you'll save yourself a lot of headaches. There's also a zero-tolerance policy to drinking and driving, so if you do opt to drive, make sure the designated driver is 100% sober when you leave. It's also good to know that looking for illegal stuff can quickly land you in hot water, so don't go looking for anything you wouldn't seek out at home.



WHERE TO EAT IN CABO SAN LUCAS

Mi Casa

The place to go for mariachi-fueled fun with giant margaritas and tasty, if touristed, main dishes. \$\$\$

Mariscos Mazatlan

Seafood lovers won't leave here disappointed, and the sea-themed murals add ambiance. \$\$

Los Ajos

A non-*zona hotelera* option on the outskirts of town, with a delicious buffet and home-cooked options. \$



Lover's Beach

But if you're just looking to let loose, maybe drink a little too much and have a great time, Cabo aims to please, with loud, raucous clubs, contests you won't want to tell your grandma about, and plenty of cheap alcohol. And, yes, there are certainly tattoo parlors that will eagerly tat you with whatever great idea you have.

On & Under the Water

WET, WILD AND WONDERFUL

Los Cabos, and by that we mean Cabo San Lucas, San José del Cabo and the lesser-known Cabo Pulmo (p569), offers excitement and thrills not just on shore, but also in and under the water. A panoply of water sports and activities are front and center here, from snorkeling on a majestic catamaran, to hard-core live-aboard fishing trips or hanging 10 on giant Pacific surf swells. Any way you get underwater, it's a thrill. There's a clarity to the water, especially on the calmer Sea of Cortez side, that is unparalleled.

Sportfishing is the reason many anglers come here, and the marina is filled with all kinds of craft dedicated to catching the best of what the sea can offer. **Snorkelers** will find it's easy to zip out to underwater reefs and pinnacles that have



EL SQUID ROE

Of all the crazy Cabo club options, El Squid Roe tops the list, so much so that it's almost a beloved Cabo institution. Yes, there are other great places to party (see below), but if you haven't had tequila poured down your throat while dancing crazily in a conga line of scantily clad waiters and patrons, well, have you really lived at all?

By day, El Squid Roe is unassuming, even seedy. But all that changes after dark, when it fills with everyone from party-hungry cruise shippers to locals expending weeks of pent-up party energy. Eardrum-splitting tunes, frenetic waiters serving shots while dancing topless on tables, and other alcohol-induced madness make it a great part of a night to remember.



WHERE TO FIND CABO BOAT TOURS

Pez Gato

Long-standing catamaran tours that offer snorkeling, sunset and other cruises.

Cabo Blue Trimaran

Offers premium sunset, snorkeling and other area tours.

Jungle Booze Cruise

Like it sounds, this is the wild and rowdy option, with a focus on beverage consumption and having a good time.



ZIPPERS

Many of the surf breaks, such as Cerritos (p568), are on the Pacific coast, but one of the most accessible to the Cabo area is Zippers, a sweet spot that you can watch from the road pullout at Km 17 between Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo (what's known as The Corridor). You'll need southerly swell to see Zippers really pop, but when it rolls in, watch out: these waves break right on top of some shallow reef, and aren't to be trifled with. Those who get up on the board are rewarded with a smooth ride all the way to the beach, rivaling the break at San Miguel (p588), near Ensenada.



PATRICIA MARROQUIN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Catamaran, El Arco (p563)

delighted swimmers for decades. For those who like their water creatures supersized, the gray whales that pass by are simply amazing. Many overlook the other marine creatures that are here: humpback whales, eagle and manta rays, sea lions and a random shark or two.

To really immerse yourself in what the waters here have to offer, a **diving trip** is a necessity. There are plenty of reputable diving outfits, but be sure to ask what's included and how many dives the fee covers.

Being under the water isn't the only reason to come here: **surfers** flock to the various breaks and enjoy world-class waves at almost any time of year.



GETTING AROUND

Shuttle vans run up and down 'The Corridor' to hotels and B&Bs between the two Cabos. Be wary of airport touts who offer transportation

or other freebies in exchange for attendance at time-share pitches. These are scams and should be avoided.



Todos Santos ● Cabo Pulmo
Los Cabos

Beyond Los Cabos

Some of the best Cabo experiences are when you get away from it all to the north or east.

Los Cabos is great but there comes a time when waking up with a splitting headache and wondering what you did – or didn't – do last night wears a little thin. There's an assortment of great activities that won't leave your liver in jeopardy awaiting those who hit the road and venture out for a bit. To the west, on the Pacific side, are the quaint towns of Todos Santos and the ever-burgeoning surf-town of Pescadero, just to the south – seek out Cerritos Beach, which is one of Baja's best, with gold-flecked sand and waves that surfers of all levels can enjoy. On the other side – the East Cape – Cabo Pulmo sits like an underwater jewel. Explore!

TOP TIP

The road from Los Cabos to Todos Santos is now a four-lane highway, so renting a car doesn't involve crazy potholes (for now anyway!).

JAVIER GARCIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Surfing, Baja Peninsula



CERRITOS BEACH

Just south of Todos Santos is the small town of **Pescadero**, once mostly a collection of surf bungalows and shacks for local fisherfolk. It's on the map now and for good reason: Cerritos Beach is a gem, with powder-smooth sand flecked with gold dust that shimmers in the waves, and nice swell that draws surfers from all over the world. The lineup here can get busy, so more advanced surfers will want to head north to **La Pastora**, which breaks hard onto rocks the size of watermelons and is thus not for beginners.



RHEITNER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Hotel California

Magical Village

QUAINT AND CHANGING

Todos Santos, about 40 minutes north of Los Cabos by car, lies on the Pacific coast and was quiet, forgotten and overlooked...until recently. People zipped up from Cabo to dine at the restaurants or snap pictures at Hotel California (which is not *the* Hotel California, though rumors persist). All that changed when it was added to the list of Mexico's *pueblos mágicos* (magical villages), and tourism has boomed, though not without causing some long-term residents to pine for by-gone days. It's still a lovely place to visit for a bit of calm and culture, and (for now, anyway) the streets aren't filled with touts and the restaurants offer a mix of tasty local food and tourist options. Crumbling brick and adobe walls stand beside brand-new buildings, and tiny mom-and-pop shops operate next to vegan and organic-produce stands.

It's also an art-lovers' town, with numerous **galleries** and **studios** to peruse, with many of the artists finding inspiration in the surrounding desert, which some describe as the Sedona of Mexico. Like Sedona, Todos Santos is on a key 'vortex convergence,' leading to claims that it resonates with spiritual power. Whether you believe that or not, it's still a beautiful, historic and quaint spot that many fall in love with, and a refreshing escape from the frenetic pace of either of the two southerly Cabos.



WHERE TO EAT AROUND TODOS SANTOS

Baja Beans

In Pescadero, but the best coffee around, with tasty pastries and baked goods, and a farmers market. **\$**

Café Todos Santos

This long-standing restaurant is open for breakfast and lunch, and has a nice bakery as well. **\$\$**

Tre Galline

Some of Todos Santos' best Italian food served in a romantic, clean, candlelit, open-air space, with lots of potted plants. **\$\$\$**



Diving, Cabo Pulmo

Coral Reef Snorkeling & Diving

SEA OF CORTEZ REEF

Cabo Pulmo is the often-forgotten third Cape, and lies on the eastern side of the peninsula. Getting here is becoming easier with each passing year, as more and more houses are built on the East Cape between Cabo Pulmo and San José del Cabo. But for now, it's still mostly dirt road and you should expect a few bumps along the way. Once here, you'll find a quiet village of mostly fishing and diving shacks, a few restaurants and a couple of hotels and bungalows. It's not much to look at on the land, but step into the water and you'll find a different scene.

The region has one of the world's most northerly coral reefs, and despite the onshore development, it's been protected since 1995, and in 2005 it was added to the Unesco World Heritage list. Since then, fish and marine life has rebounded, making it a fantastic spot for snorkeling and diving. Though underwater activities are the main draw, **Playa Arbolitos** is a popular sunbathing spot for couples or families and, from there, a cliffside trail runs out to a beautiful and isolated rocky point called **Cabo del Shiro**. This walk requires a bit of climbing at the start and (depending on trail conditions) can be a bit rough at times, but the rewards are in seeing some wave-washed rock formations that look more like rhinoceros hide, and snorkeling or swimming in solitude, since you'll be unlikely to share the area with more than a couple.

I LIVE HERE: TAKE A SPANISH CLASS



Ivonne Benítez

Guzmán is the founder and owner of Hablando Mexicano, a Todos Santos-based Spanish-language school. hablandomexicano.com

When you visit a foreign country one of the best things to do is to immerse a bit in the place through the language. You will see that even tacos taste better when you order them in Spanish, that people will have bigger smiles when you greet them in their language, '¡Hola! ¿Qué tal?' Learning Spanish is more than just the grammar – it will let you enjoy the culture, the flavors, the rhythms. I founded Hablando Mexicano because I wanted to share a bit of my country, and that is what we do: we teach you to love Mexico!



GETTING AROUND

Getting to these more remote areas is possible with buses, or even by using your thumb and hitching a ride, but if you're coming with a

surfboard, there's really nothing better than having your own vehicle. Car-rental rates vary but are usually about US\$50 a day.



La Paz

The Malecón

THE HEART OF LA PAZ

The *malecón* is a fixture in many Mexican cities, and La Paz is no exception. The long cement walkway rims the entire harbor, from the marina in the west all the way to the end of the tourist zone in the east as the road heads off toward **Pichilingue** and **Balandra Bay**. It's the hub of all happenings, from people exercising – running, walking, doing yoga, even demonstrating – to the meeting spot for tours and other boating expeditions. Buskers come to impress crowds. Families walk with toddlers in tow. Volleyball teams assemble their players before duking it out on the sand. It's a delightful part of La Paz' community experience.

It's also pretty, especially when the sun illuminates the shallow bay and turns the water a milky jade. You can rent paddle boats, SUPs or kayaks and head out exploring on your own. Alternatively, take tours on *pangas* (skiffs) to other parts of the bay or even Isla Espíritu Santo.

Then evening comes, and the day's activities end, the pelicans and frigate birds roost for the upcoming night, and the sky turns the color of peach or melon. Breezes calm, the water reflects the pastels of the clouds, and joggers take advantage of the coolness.



MARINA DE LA PAZ

Tucked away at the western edge of La Paz Bay is the marina, which is more than just a spot for mariners. It's a departure point for many of the tour operators, but more importantly, it's a fun spot where expats from all over get together and dine or drink as they swap stories and catch up on the day's news. Even if you're not on a boat, you can enjoy a beer at the bar and find fellow travelers. For whatever reason, it's a little easier to strike up conversations with strangers here than in the packed clubs further away on the *malecón*.



WHERE TO STAY IN LA PAZ

Hotel 7

Right on the *malecón*, the snazzy, upscale Hotel 7 offers convenience and a bit of class. \$\$\$

Hotel Lorimar

Simple, clean, convenient rooms down a side street one block from the shoreline. \$

Posada de las Flores

A luxurious escape in the city's far eastern side with quiet rooms, soft beds, piping hot water and flowers everywhere. \$\$\$

After dark, teens come out to hang with their friends, the nightclubs turn up the volume, and restaurants welcome hungry diners. The *malecón*, in all its changing glory, is the heart of what it means to enjoy La Paz.

Drool-worthy Dining

GREAT EATING AWAITS

La Paz is blessed with a wealth of dining options, from incredible – and incredibly cheap! – street tacos all the way up to fancy and fanciful spots you’ll need to save your pesos to afford. Part of the reason for this bounty is the location: fresh seafood on hand, hillside gardens with fresh produce, and nearby *ranchos* producing the area’s finest beef and poultry. It’s fresh, it’s local and it’s delicious.

There are some notable exceptions, such as the chain stores you’ll see at every mini-mall, which aim to appeal to travelers desperately searching for the familiar taste of home. But for those who want to broaden their palate, La Paz is a great city for food. Mexican specialties are easy to find, but the town is surprisingly diverse and you can get excellent Italian – far beyond the typical pizza and pasta fare – as well as seafood, much of which comes from the nearby waters. Spiny lobster is a nice, if pricey, option for those willing to splurge. Octopus and calamari are also sublime.

Look to the *malecón* for after-dinner desserts and sweets: stroll and you’ll find gelato shops, Mexican *helados* (ice cream), *aguas frescas* (juices made with fresh fruit), cakes and coffee. All of it is tasty, and few things are nicer than finishing a great meal by walking off some of the calories with a stroll in the warm night as you listen to the lapping of the waves.

Juvenile Whale Shark-watching

THE GIANT SHARK’S TINY VERSION

There are only a few places in the world where you can swim with giant whale sharks, the gentle filter feeders that are the world’s largest fish. The adults are enormous – the longest measured was 18m in length – but most adults are a far more modest 9m or so. Here though, just off the barrier peninsula that encloses La Paz Bay, juvenile whale sharks congregate, feeding in the warm waters before heading off to other parts of the planet. (Little is known about these fish, and active research is ongoing around whether these sharks migrate to other parts of the world or stay in the Sea of Cortez.)

There are a number of tour operators that take you out to approach or even swim near (not with, as that’s prohibited) these creatures. The best tours are with a team of biolo-

WHY I LOVE LA PAZ



Ray Bartlett, writer

La Paz is my kind of city in so many ways. I love that it has such incredible water, the bays, the beaches, the pelicans, the frigate birds – even the *palapa*-frond sun shades on the beach near the *malecón* get my heart racing in a way that approaches love. Best though, in my opinion, is that La Paz is – unlike Los Cabos to the south – not a city that belongs to tourism. It has authenticity and while there’s a popular hotel zone, it’s a small part of the city overall.



WHERE TO EAT IN LA PAZ

Oliva del Mar

Incredible Italian food served in a romantic, elegant setting overlooking the bay. \$\$\$

Super Tacos Hermanos Gonzales

Great street tacos with lots of salsas and toppings from a cart outside Pension California. \$

Tatanka

Creative and inspired seafood dishes prepared with art and care. \$\$



Sea lions

gists, who will fit you up with tools to help with studying the sharks. For instance, you might be tasked with determining the length of a dorsal fin, by swimming down and holding a measured rod near the animal while someone takes a picture. It's a plus because you get to participate in research as well as learn more about whale shark biology, and the keen-eyed scientists can often spot the sharks faster than an average *panga* captain. So you'll see more, faster, by teaming up with the scientists. The trips vary, and the needs are based on what scientific studies are ongoing at the time.

Beach Bliss

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES ALL FOR YOU

Even from the air, La Paz is breathtaking, with its long sweeping coastlines of powder-white sand abutting green azure bays perfect for exploring. The *malecón* is a popular spot for sunbathing, but you'll have more fun if you hop out to the many 'pocket' beaches that lie between La Paz' hotel zone and the furthest beach, **Tecolote**. These beaches often have space for only half a dozen cars, yet have all the necessities you require: a restaurant, some (often dicey) toilets, a drinks menu, some plastic chairs in the sand and shallow, current-free wa-

THOSE LOVELY SEA LIONS

Many places around La Paz have sea lion colonies, and these agile, graceful pinnipeds often thrill visitors with their cute faces, their antics in or out of the water, and their photogenic postures.

As cute as they are, it can be another story when you're snorkeling with them. It's best to give them a wide berth if you happen to find one swimming nearby, but you may find that despite your best intentions, the sea lion is approaching you, not the other way around. If this happens, don't panic; stay calm and let them investigate. Chances are they'll check you out and move on to something more interesting, like catching dinner.



WHERE TO FIND LA PAZ BEACHES

Tesoro

A popular beach on the La Paz side of Pichilingue, Tesoro has a restaurant and is a great spot to splash around.

Tecolote

The closest beach to Espíritu Santo, Tecolote teems with sunbathers; it's a great option if Balandra is full or closed.

Pichilingue

Tucked right next to the port, this beach is a top spot for watching the ferries and tankers come and go.



BALANDRA BAY

The best beach by far – the crown jewel in a gorgeous tiara, so to speak – is Balandra Bay, a series of three connected bays that can be as shallow as knee-high at times, or deeper than a swimming pool. The beach is delightful – soft, white sand – and the more adventurous can walk or wade out to the famous whale-tail rock that sits at the entrance. Parking is extremely limited, so arriving as early as possible is important to secure a spot. On certain days, the beach is designated for locals only, so you may need to plan around that. If it is closed, consider Tecolote, Tesoro or Pichilingue instead.



SPACEMALTY/GETTY IMAGES ©

Balandra Bay

ter that anyone can splash around in. They're delightful and, if you don't have a car, you can easily grab a taxi, or even bicycle out to them.

Slather on the sunscreen and don't forget to reapply. The sun here is no joke.

There's very little violent crime, but cars are sometimes broken into, especially in the more remote areas. Hide easy-to-spot valuables and be sure to keep your cell phone with you. Be wary even on the beach. A towel and shoes might not vanish, but if you've tucked your cell phone in there it's possible it might disappear by the time you return from a swim.



GETTING AROUND

From La Paz' port in Pichilingue, two ferries run to the mainland. One goes to Mazatlán, a 12-hour trip; the other to Topolobampo, about eight hours. Both ferries accept vehicles. You

will need to arrive at least 30 minutes before departure for walk-on passengers, and one hour prior if you have a vehicle.



Beyond La Paz

The region around La Paz has some of the area's most varied, and most beautiful, landscapes: cactus desert, verdant scrub, ocean beaches and more.

The vast areas surrounding La Paz will either bore or entrance: kilometers and kilometers of stunning 'green desert' filled with cardón cacti (often confused with saguaro but genetically distinct), palo verde, cholla cacti and other leafy desert scrub. Storms can bring flash floods, and droughts will parch the land, but rain or shine, it's gorgeous nature at its best, filled with rare bird life and animals, even big cats such as mountain lions. It also has pockets of exciting coastal tourist action and unparalleled offshore swimming, diving, fishing and snorkeling. Most of all, it's still essentially off the map and, as such, a region where you can truly kick back and get away from it all.

TOP TIP

Don't forget mosquito repellent, ideally something you've brought from home, as the local brands don't work as well.

NICOLE GLASS PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Low tide near LaVentana

I LIVE HERE: GETTING UNDERWATER



Tim Hatler has been the owner of Palapas Ventana and Cerralvo Island Adventure Service since 2003. @palapasventana

La Ventana is a magnet for stunning wildlife. Whales and other cetaceans, rays, dolphins, baitballs, sea lions and more are frequently seen.

Top snorkeling and diving spots include: **La Reina** Giant mantas and playful sea lions.

Punta Norte Drift dive over coral you'll never forget.

La Reinita Sea-life-encrusted pinnacle with octopuses and seahorses.

Tacote Videographer's dream with bright coral, turtles and tropicals.

Punta Sur Sea lion playground.

Pargon Villa Snapper hide and seek.

Roca Montaña Fish superhighway.

Keep your mask and fins close when cruising – you never know what you'll encounter!



VA FOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Espíritu Santo

Spirit of the Saints

A WATERY WONDERWORLD

If you're lucky enough to visit **Espíritu Santo**, you'll understand why the island's name means 'spirit of the saints'. It's a deeply mystical and, yes, even spiritual island where nature's beauty seems to be enhanced at every turn...or paddle, as the case may be. The best way to experience this beautiful island is on a kayak tour, ideally an overnight one. However, if you're short on time, there are day trips from Tecolote beach or even La Paz Bay that will whisk you here in a few hours.

The **finger bays** are long, narrow channels carved by eons of waves washing against the porous pink sandstone, eroding it in irregular 'fingers' that are now deep channels into the rock. The beaches and bays are stunning, as pretty from above as by kayak or boat. Tours will often lunch in a prime spot where you can snorkel or explore. The sea lion colony is also popular, but be warned: if you snorkel here, these creatures – though usually harmless and docile – are wild animals and, as such, are unpredictable. You could be seen as a mate or a threat, so give these graceful animals as much distance as you can.

The truly lucky will have the chance to camp out here, cooking over a fire and swapping travel stories as the stars get brighter and closer overhead until they seem near enough to touch.



WHERE TO EAT IN LA VENTANA

Palapas Ventana

These cozy bungalows have a great open-to-all restaurant on-site. \$\$

Marlin Azul

Tasty and authentic Mexican food under a bright, airy *palapa* roof. \$

Pizza San Antonio

Great pizza, live music and ping-pong. \$



El Triunfo

Ride Like the Wind

WIND-SPORT PARADISE

La Ventana, tucked away on the far eastern side of the La Paz peninsula, has gone from being an unknown, where-is-it spot 20 years ago to a hot, hip destination that's on the wind-sporters' map...or should be, thanks to unparalleled winter trade winds that windsurfers, kiteboarders and foil surfers drool for. At times, the whole horizon is filled with colorful sails and kites. But the excitement isn't only on the surface – it goes deeper than that. Great diving and snorkeling awaits just offshore, around **Cerralvo Island** and the smaller rocky outcrops, which offer stunning water clarity, perhaps thanks to the relative lack of current in the Sea of Cortez. For those looking to explore the area on land, there are fascinating indigenous cliff paintings and petroglyphs, and great hikes.

As important as the outdoor and water experiences are the chances to kick back and relax in an area still blissfully free of the relentless side of Mexican tourism. You can chat with new-found friends over a beer, find a stretch of untrodden beach, or even charter a *panga* and find a spot on Cerralvo that's entirely yours, at least for the day. At night, the moon shimmers silver over the water and the waves. Find a friend, raise a glass, and let things slip away.

EL TRIUNFO

Once the most populous town in southern Baja, the story of El Triunfo, like so many other mining towns, is one of boom and bust. It's had something of a tourist resurgence thanks to its very atmospheric smelter chimneys and buildings that still look like they're an 1800s movie set. The quaint, old-west feel may be changing, but for now it's a great spot to wander around and imagine life as it would have been centuries ago. The quirky, odd **piano museum** is one of several attractions. The **cemetery** is another photogenic, if creepy and macabre, reason to stop by. The gates, walls and tombs are beautiful and spooky in just the right way.



GETTING AROUND

Renting a car in downtown La Paz or the hotel zone is easy and straightforward, and is the most convenient way to venture to spots outside the La Paz periphery. Microbuses

make the rounds as well, and any official tour will ensure you get to the right place at the right time.

LORETO

Loreto was one of the few places where the Jesuits were able to keep a mission going in the face of droughts and diseases, and it is now an attractive city bordered on the east by the vast, blue sweep of the Sea of Cortez and on the west by the jagged, impossibly steep mountains of the Sierra de la Giganta (Mountains of the Giants). Giant they certainly seem, rising straight up from the surrounding land in spectacular peaks and spires. Loreto is nestled in the relatively small alluvial plain between these two geographic features and, as such, is a great spot to enjoy all the outdoor activities the region has to offer, from sea kayaking, diving and snorkeling to hiking and rock climbing. Further away, ancient cliff paintings harken back to long-lost civilizations that have left their mark.

TOPTIP

If you're doing water activities, be very aware of the weather, as paddlers and boaters are often surprised by how quickly the mirror-calm waters can become roiling torrents of waves and foam. Be safe and give yourself plenty of time to leave the water if a storm approaches.





Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó

Loreto's Mission

MARK OF THE JESUITS

The missions in and around Loreto have a complicated history, due to the effects of colonization and exploration on the indigenous cultures. All too often, a priest would arrive in a settlement that had been populated for centuries and, within decades, diseases ravaged, even erased, the culture. However, these structures – some well preserved and still in use, some mere crumbling adobe walls in the middle of nowhere – are an interesting and evocative part of Baja history. Despite the roads that exist now, it isn't hard to imagine the near-insurmountable challenges these missionaries faced, traveling hundreds of kilometers across parched desert or across rough, uncharted seas.

The **Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó** (aka, Loreto's mission) is a beautiful structure inside and out, with an off-center steeple, bell and arches that make for great photos, especially at night (though this was added in the mid-1950s and is not part of the original structure). The mission was founded in the late 1600s and the structure has survived since then, despite attacks from Monqui people, storms, earthquakes and other disasters, becoming for a time the most important mission in Baja and a central part of the Jesuit presence here. Due to attacks from the increasingly hostile Monqui, the mission and surrounding area were at one point protected by a strong outer wall. Eventually, it was the harshness of the region that closed the mission: earthquakes and hurricanes took a toll and it was closed in 1829. Today, it's used for key Catholic ceremonies and as a beautiful icon for the town.



WHERE TO EAT IN LORETO

Alma del Sur

Tasty southern-style cooking such as pulled pork or ribs at this friendly, casual restaurant with a full bar. **\$\$**

Cafe Ole

A busy, diner-type breakfast spot with outdoor seating near the mission. **\$**

Las Islas

A popular spot for seafood and more near the *malecón* with excellent water views. **\$\$**



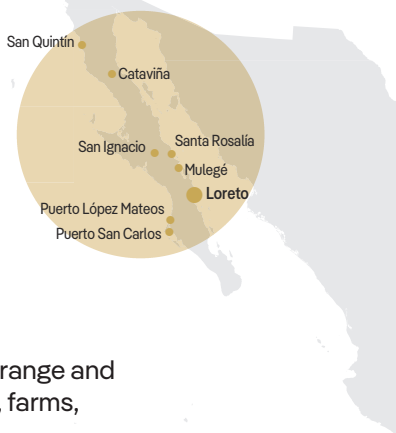
MISSIONS NEARBY

Of the 27 missions that once dotted the peninsula, only a few remain, but they're a popular destination for off-roaders or history buffs and make a good day trip.

The beautiful, remote **Misión San Francisco Javier de Viggé-Biaundó** (San Javier) is still in use today and has lovely, ancient olive trees growing nearby.

Misión San Luis Gonzaga Chiriyagui (San Luis Gonzaga) is a beautiful abandoned structure in the middle of the desert near Ciudad Constitución.

Not all missions are in the middle of nowhere: San José del Cabo's is the heart of the town's plaza, and San Ignacio to the north has a mission in town as well.



Beyond Loreto

Take the time to explore this region's strange and spectacular mix of mountains, deserts, farms, fields, volcanoes and ocean vistas.

Loreto is in the middle of a region of immense geological variety. Climb away from the shores and you'll find vast stretches of desert and ranchland. Yet that uniformity is deceiving, as San Ignacio, Mulegé, Santa Rosalía and other towns prove. Each one has a different character and some aren't even visible from the road. Drop into an *arroyo* (stream) and, boom, you're surrounded by palm trees – a true oasis amid the cacti and cows. This continues all the way north to the border. The moonlike boulders of Cataviña, opportunities for whale-watching, the tasty pismo clams...there's so much to see and do here despite the apparent monotony of the open road.

TOP TIP

Don't be afraid to stop for roadside snacks: *pitaya* (dragonfruit), dates and clams are all fresh as can be and make fun, tasty memories as you drive.



Misión Santa Rosalía



Misión San Ignacio Kadakaamán

Other Top Spots to Stop

FIND A NEW FAVORITE

The region between Ensenada and Loreto is vast and varied. Here are some great places to break up your drive.

San Quintín is known for its delicious pismo clams (prepared at roadside clam shacks) and for the California condors visible – if you're lucky! – in the nearby **San Pedro Mártir** forest, which is so high up you may even see snow. Bobcats, lynx, deer and a host of other animals live here in defiance of the desert below.

Cataviña is notable for its rounded, bizarre, even moon-like rock field that appears out of nowhere as you drive, and the cacti that rise around the boulders.

San Ignacio is a date-palm oasis tucked below the horizon, surprising drivers with its lushness and greenness, and with a restored Jesuit mission, the **Misión San Ignacio Kadakaamán**.

Mulegé has a decent expat scene and the beautiful, restored **Misión Santa Rosalía** above its palm-studded river.

Santa Rosalía, on the Sea of Cortez coast, has the **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara**, a Catholic church designed by Gustave Eiffel. It's often confused with Mulegé, due to the name Rosalía, but this town was never a mission site.

Puerto San Carlos and **Puerto López Mateos**, near Ciudad Constitución, are both famous for gray-whale watching. The majestic animals come into shallow bays to give birth, and seem relatively unafraid of the eager boats that go out to see them up close.



HOTEL CALIFORNIA

There are at least three, possibly more, Hotel Californias in Baja California and Baja California Sur. Don't be misled: according to the Eagles, there never was an *actual* Hotel California; it was a metaphor for the entire state. That hasn't stopped places drawing connections and cashing in on the name. The Eagles even filed a lawsuit against the owners of the Hotel California in Todos Santos, claiming the hotel was making money by promoting a connection that didn't exist.

You'll see a Hotel California in Ensenada, a Hotel Las Californias in Insurgentes and, of course, the famous and often-photographed Hotel California in Todos Santos. And who knows, you may spot another one or two along the way!



GETTING AROUND

Frequent buses zip north and south, stopping at each of the places listed here along the way, so getting to each is relatively easy, with the

exception of the whale-watching port towns, which are accessible by local shuttle or taxi.

ENSENADA

Ensenada

Mexico City

Like any town where cruise ships come and go, Ensenada has a bit of a dual personality. It can be quiet, even feel dead, one night, and then fill with frenetic energy the next. You'll encounter street touts hawking wares, but you can easily find quiet spots where you can have an authentic conversation with locals or fellow travelers, and Ensenada has lately become known for its food, including great Mexican and Italian.

There's a lot of history here as well, such as the iconic Hussong's Cantina, the oldest continually operating bar in Baja. Interestingly, both Hussong's and the nearby Bar Andaluz claim to be the original creator of the margarita. Regardless of which legend is true, you can enjoy excellent margaritas at both. The main tourist street has nearly everything: bars, shops, restaurants, stores, and even some chain restaurants for those who crave them.

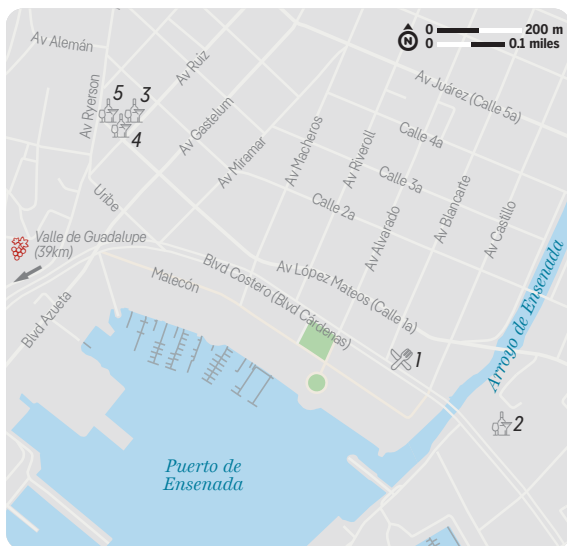
TOP TIP

The character of Ensenada changes dramatically with the arrival and departure of the cruise ships. If you want a packed bar full of people, be sure to go out on a night when there's a ship or two docked. You'll find the town pretty quiet otherwise.



DARRYL BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK

Papas & Beer merchandise store, Ensenada

**EATING**

1 Il Massimo

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

- 2 Bar Andaluz
- 3 Hussong's Cantina
- 4 Mango Mango
- 5 Papas & Beer

HUSSONG'S CANTINA

Anyone who visits Ensenada is almost required to stop in at Hussong's Cantina, Baja's oldest continually operating bar. It opened in the 1800s and remains much as it must have been back then: double-hinged saloon-style doors, a bar that takes up much of the room, wooden floor planks that have been polished smooth by centuries' footsteps. It also – as does nearby Bar Andaluz – claims to be the originator of the famous margarita. It seems odd that two Ensenada venues could have independently come up with the same drink at the same time, so one of them must be fibbing, but at this point, it's impossible to tell. Give them both a try!

Nightlife Shenanigans

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN

Ensenada is famous for spring break craziness and things can get pretty wild, depending on when you're here. Nightclubs blare out heart-thumping music loud enough to hear from blocks away, and if you get closer, you'll have to shield your eyes from the neon and lasers. But there's more on offer here than just the in-your-face glitz and glam. Ensenada has a quiet, mellow side, too, and if you stay a few nights you'll surely find a spot that fits your style.

If you just want to party, head to the streets of López Mateos and Ruíz, home to most of the neon action. You'll find plenty there to keep you busy: **Papas & Beer**, **Mango Mango** and other Cancún-style bars are easy to find and offer cheap, often-watery drinks, usually with all-you-can-binge options. But tucked right next to them is **Hussong's Cantina**, with its right-out-of-the-1800s feel and a different kind of atmosphere entirely. Head across town to **Bar Andaluz** for a state-ly, if mass-produced, margarita in a historic building where original murals still adorn the walls. It's an odd spot, with pitchers of tasty margaritas being sloshed out a dozen at a time, rather than the craft cocktail experience one might expect from a place oozing history and charm.

**WHERE TO STAY IN ENSENADA****Santa Isabel**

This convenient tourist-zone mainstay puts you right in the middle of things and has clean, midrange rooms. \$\$

Hotel Santo Tomas

Slick, snazzy upscale option a few steps from Ensenada's port. The elevator has a funky Star Trek feel. \$\$

America Hotel

A friendly if run-down budget option with green neon outside the tourist zone. On-site parking is a plus. \$



IL MASSIMO

There are Italian meals and then there are meals that make you think you're actually in Italy...and then there's Il Massimo, a small, cozy, warm and friendly spot on Cárdenas, just minutes from the marina and port. The food is served fresh, with attention to detail and a sense of purpose that's all too often lacking even at the best of restaurants. The chef-owner, Massimo, will likely come to your table, all smiles, and may even tip you personally as to which dessert to order. If you have the chance, follow the meal with the handmade liqueurs. They're to die for, but they serve a medicinal function, too: helping to digest that amazing meal.

Whether you're looking to dance and twerk at a frenetic pace with drunken strangers, or sip a revered cocktail in quiet solitude, Ensenada has you covered.

Delicious Dining

IN FOR A TREAT!

Tie on that napkin and pick up the fork; you won't be disappointed with Ensenada's dining options, and the menus are as varied as the people who visit. French, Spanish, fusion, Italian and, of course, great Mexican are all available, much of it within walking distance of the tourist zone. A few hot spots have traded proximity for a view, so don't be afraid to hop in a cab to some of the outliers. But many of the best are right there in downtown. The flavors, the freshness, the colors and the ambience all blend to make a meal in Ensenada something to remember.

In a way, the food here reflects Ensenada's multiethnic, multicultural character, and is as much a melting pot as the miners and fortune seekers who came here in the 1800s. Look for great street food on the side alleys that run perpendicular to López Mateos. Closer to the ocean, you'll find a number of excellent seafood options near the marina. Then there's all the pricier, yet still very tasty, dinner spots on main streets Cárdenas and López Mateos. There's not enough room to list everything that's worthy, so ask around for suggestions if you need them. Many a meal can be washed down with a local wine from nearby Valle de Guadalupe or San Ignacio, too.

Wine for Tipplers & Tasters

THE LOVELY VALLE DE GUADALUPE

Once upon a time, the **Valle de Guadalupe** was poised to be Baja's version of Napa or Sonoma, with rolling hills and vast vineyards as far as the eye could see. Fast forward 15 years and a lot has changed, and some would say not for the better: most of those gorgeous grapevines are gone, and the area now is mostly a patchwork of walls, houses, dirt roads and some hotels.

What hasn't changed is the wine-tasting opportunities, with many of the larger vineyards still maintaining a presence here, even if the grapes are sourced from other valleys such as San Ignacio. The grapes that are here are now mature, as is the process for vinting, so tipplers and tasters can expect a delightful day spent with nose to glass. Look for well-rounded, robust reds, a few surprising natural wines (which use natural airborne yeast for fermentation, with a taste hinting of



WHERE TO BAR HOP IN ENSENADA

La Bête Noire

Comfy leather couches and handcrafted cocktails make this a great spot to start a night on the town.

Bloodlust

Great cocktails and excellent wine flights in a funky building that looks like a giant squash.

Cuatro Cuatros

Delightful wine tasting with a spectacular view at this upscale hotel outside of the city.



Vineyards, Valle de Guadalupe

kombucha) and some nice rosés.

If you come on a tour, do yourself and the region a favor and opt for one that doesn't dump you at night into a loud party. These club-type venues have begun to erode the class and quiet of a nice pastoral landscape and have caused friction between neighbors and other grape growers. Look instead for spots that pair great wine with nibbles of cheese, bread or artisanal charcuterie, look out at the view (if there is one) or the sunset, and enjoy the tranquility that comes from discovering a new favorite wine.

Cruise Shipping Economy

PART OF ENSENADA LIFE

Cruise ships are the ebb and flow of life in Ensenada and can be credited both with revitalizing the economy and putting Ensenada back on the tourist map, as well as forever changing life here in ways that some find problematic. Ships bring hundreds of land-hungry tourists, many of whom have very little experience in Mexico and may not treat locals with the care they should. Still, the chance to cater to their needs keeps many businesses alive and you'll find that whether you're a tourist on or off ship, you'll be seen as



VALLE DE GUADALUPE WINERIES

There's so much to discover here, but these spots will give you a good start:

Pedro Domecq

One of the area's first wineries, offering great tapas and other side dishes to accompany its large selection of wines, available by flights, glass, bottle or case.

Baron Balché

A beautiful villa and garden make for atmospheric tastings.

Vena Cava at Villa de Valle

This hotel and winery built its cava (wine cave) from overturned boats and hosts tasting parties beneath them, underground.

Torres Alegre

A small but dedicated winery, the family-operated 'Happy Towers' is a spot with heart, a nice terrace view and excellent wines.



WHERE TO EAT IN ENSENADA

Calma

Lovely terrace setting and incredible cocktails make this a top dining choice for those wanting to step it up a little. \$\$\$

El Rey Sol

A classic spot that's stood the test of time, this French restaurant is right in the hotel zone. Leave room for dessert! \$\$

Humo y Sal

Funky, cement-themed spot with a small but tasty menu and some of the most unique tacos around. \$\$



CURIOS ABOUT CURIOS?

You may find it overwhelming to locate good souvenirs amid the vast options lining the streets of the hotel zone. But if you want friendly, English-speaking and family-owned, check out **Rosario's Curios**, on Blancarte near the corner of Cárdenas. This packed shop has all kinds of souvenirs, from postcards to blankets to amulets to hats and T-shirts. It won't have everything, but if you've got something specific in mind, chat with Rosario, who can give good suggestions about where to find items she doesn't have on her shelves.



SHERRY V. SMITH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Arroyo de Ensenada

a possible customer. There's something majestic about seeing a huge ship coming into port, often towering over the surrounding landscape. The main streets of López Mateos and Lázaro Cárdenas fill to overflowing with everything from ATV tours to horseback riding. The shops stay open late, restaurants get packed with diners and, of course, later, the nightclubs and bars cater to those who aren't quite ready to return to the boat.

But when the ships leave, there's a quiet, a calm, almost a collective sigh and things are suddenly peaceful again. You can find parking, you can even expect to walk into a restaurant and dine without a reservation. Whether you're a fan or a critic of the industry, it's front and center and unavoidable in Ensenada, and has both good and bad effects.



GETTING AROUND

Ensenada is well served by public transportation for those not wishing to drive. If you're planning to wine taste in the Valle de Guadalupe, you're well advised to opt for

a taxi or tour that will do the driving for you, since Mexican law has a zero-tolerance policy for drink driving.



Beyond Ensenada

Ensenada is just the starting point for a whole range of activities and possibilities.

Ensenada is tucked on the coast and is often overlooked as a spot for day tripping, but there are all kinds of great activities that lie just beyond its limits. The mountain ranges to the east and south offer the most for the traveler – in just a few hours you can be in what feels like the Canadian Rockies, among towering pine trees and lush conifer forests, with all the birds and animals you'd expect from an area far to the north. The unique geography of these mountain ridges means that snow-melt and rain collects in vast shallow lagoons, which are fun to experience in an area that's otherwise so dry.

TOP TIP

Rent a car if you can; you'll need to get off the bus routes to really get away from it all.

DR. JURGEN BOCH/NIEM/SUTTERSTOCK ©



Highway to Sierra de San Pedro Mártir (p588)



LAGUNA HANSON

If you want something a little different, consider a visit to Laguna Hanson, a flat, boggy area at the top of the Sierra Juárez range. Because the area has no natural outlet, it floods to a depth of several feet in the rainy season, allowing boating and other water sports, as well as excellent birding for those with a pair of binoculars or a decent zoom lens on their camera.

Even in the dry season, it's a worthy trip: the pine trees and cooler air offer a refreshing break from the city heat, and people come for a day with picnic supplies and hang out, talk and enjoy the fresh air.



ENRIQUE AGUIRRE AVES/GETTY IMAGES ©

Pelican, Guerrero Negro

Flight of the Condor

CONIFER FOREST AND CALIFORNIA CONDORS

Anyone thinking Baja is just dust, desert and coastline hasn't discovered the incredible **Sierra de San Pedro Mártir**, a vast wilderness that rises up just east of Ensenada and covers more than 730 sq km, much of it conifer forest and dense alpine scrub. The area's highest mountain, 3096m **Devil's Peak**, is the tallest in Baja. From the top, you can see all the way down to the azure Sea of Cortez. You can gaze up into the night sky, too, with one of Latin America's most important telescopes nestled into the top of a nearby mountain.

Bobcats, lynx and pumas call this range home, though spotting one of these incredible cats is rare. Also rare, and even more spectacular, is getting to see a California condor soaring overhead. The species has been reintroduced here and – for now anyway – the population is hanging on. You'll identify them instantly by the big number on their wing. If you're lucky enough to see one, don't approach it or interact with it in any way, as doing so is stressful to the animal and illegal. If a bird seems unhealthy or injured, contact local authorities rather than trying to assist on your own.



WHERE TO FIND SURF SPOTS NEAR ENSENADA

K-38

A great reef break for any surfer wanting to duck into Mexico from across the border.

Rosarito

This river mouth can get crowded at times, but easy access from Tijuana makes it popular.

San Miguel

A beautiful point break once frequented by the Doors vocalist Jim Morrison.

The drive to San Pedro Mártir is half the fun – two-plus hours of winding, sinuous pavement that begins in the desert, shifts slowly to scrubland and sage, finally to oak forest and then, after some ups and downs, into the cool, towering conifers. It's so breezy, even cold, that it seems impossible that the parched desert awaits, just a short drive away.

Migrating Species

SALT, WHALES AND BIRDING

Guerrero Negro is a quirky place that sits about halfway down Baja on the Pacific side. Its unique geography is ideal for salt production, and many tourists come to gawk and gasp at white **salt-drying flats** that stretch to the horizon, making the area one of the largest salt producers on the planet. Still other visitors come for chances to see the many **California gray whales** that migrate each year from northern waters to give birth to calves in the shallow inlets and lagoons such as **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** (also known as Scammon's Lagoon). These are only visible during the winter months, and the best time for seeing calves is February and March. In season, it's easy to find *pangas* willing to take you out, either individually as private tours or as part of a larger group. Though you are likely to have a very close encounter with these gentle, inquisitive creatures, you should not touch them or interact with them, as this may cause the spread of zoonotic diseases – harmful both to you and the whales.

Though a small, unassuming spot (don't come here expecting nightlife), the area is great for **birding**, with large lagoons on the town's northern and western sides that are good for year-round and migratory species. There's a quiet, relaxed, almost antique feel to being here, which many find very attractive, almost like being in an old-west town from the black-and-white movie days.



PISMO CLAMS

As you journey south from the border toward Guerrero Negro, you'll pass the quiet town of San Quintín and, shortly after, see shacks on the roadside offering delicious pismo clams. These are large, palm-sized bivalves that have a lot of meat, and the usual preparation is to open up a clam, add sweet onion, tomato, jalapeño and avocado, then wrap it in aluminum foil and cook over a fire for about 10 minutes. The result is a mouth-watering clamshell of deliciousness well worth stopping for. Some of the shacks are done up with whale skulls and skeletons, some have fancy colorful signs, but they're all tasty and all too often ignored by tourists who zip by never knowing what they've missed.



GETTING AROUND

Whether you're traveling by bus, car, boat or plane, be wary about crossing into Mexico without getting your passport stamped. The rules keep changing and the safest approach is to get your passport stamped, which should allow you 180 days to enjoy Mexico. If you

don't have it stamped, you're unable to prove when you entered the country, and thus, if an authority wants to claim you're there for longer than the allowed 24-hour limit, you've no way to claim otherwise.

TIJUANA

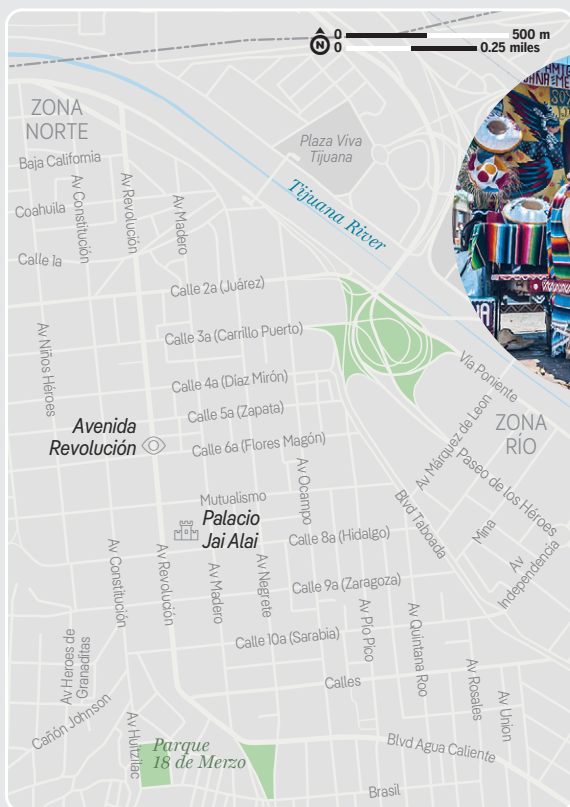
Tijuana, or TJ, often gets a bad rap due to tourists who come here for reasons (drugs, sex trade etc) that will land them in hot water quickly. No question: if you're looking for trouble, you'll probably find it. But if you're *not* one of those visitors (and please don't be), chances are you'll have a blast here. There's fantastic food, a lively party scene, great shopping and an atmosphere that's totally unique. Most of the tourism is centered around the famous Av Revolución, aka Av Revo...or just Revo, for short. There's an iconic arch marking the start of the tourist zone, and from there out to the Palacio Jai Alai you'll find a lovely stretch of shops, restaurants, clubs and bars. For those hopping here for a day trip across the border, it's a perfect way to add another country to your list. It's also a nice bookend – start or finish – to a trek up or down Baja.

Tijuana

Mexico City

TOP TIP

If you're not here actively looking for trouble, you'll likely be fine, but let's not mince words: do *not* come here for anything illegal. Penalties for drug use or sex trafficking are severe, and if you buy anything illicit you're contributing to cartel power that's causing untold suffering throughout the region.



'Zonkey'



Avenida Revolución

Avenida Revolución

IT'S ALL HAPPENING HERE

For many tourists, Av Revo, put simply, *is* Tijuana. It's all they see, and yes, some of it may include a rather bored-looking donkey painted to look like a zebra wearing a serape and a Viva Mexico sombrero. There's more to discover, we promise. Revo is block after block of great shopping, fun restaurants, bars and nightclubs where you can find pretty much anything you're looking for, unless that happens to be tranquility and quiet. In which case, you're out of luck, because TJ denizens know how to party. Start at the Arch and go south. There are museums to visit, the attractive **Palacio Jai Alai**, as well as great spots to stop for lunch, a snack, a fancy dinner, and lots of fun places to find great souvenirs. Those looking for more authenticity can seek out the side streets, and don't be afraid to grab some street food – it's often as tasty as snacks for which you'd pay premium pesos.

Those who are staying overnight may want to check out Av Sexta. It's a delightful street filled with bars, clubs and karaoke spots. If you're looking to bar hop, this is the street you'll want to have in your cell phone.



ZONA RÍO

There's a lesser seen and classier part of TJ a quick taxi ride away: the Zona Río. This swanky, upscale zone has hotels, restaurants and clubs all cut from better cloth than you'll find on Av Revolución. In a way, the Zona Río is where TJ becomes an actual city, with shopping malls, classy restaurants and nicer hotels instead of the catering-to-tourists zone near the border crossing. Come here to feel like you're in a normal burgeoning city, rather than a show. Some of the most notable Tijuana buildings are here, such as **The Towers**, a twin set of skyscrapers currently run by the Grand Hotel Tijuana. It's one of the nicest spots to stay in the entire city.



GETTING AROUND

The San Ysidro border is easy to cross with or without a car. With a car, just drive on in – but make sure you have Mexican insurance, easily obtainable at the many shops touting before you cross the border. (Your normal insurance may not apply in Mexico.) Without a car, you

can take the San Diego tram to the San Ysidro crossing, then walk across. If you do, make sure your passport is stamped, so you can prove entry – you should get up to 180 days to enjoy Mexico before having to leave.



Beyond Tijuana

There's a lot to see and do outside TJ, both along the border and to the south.

The region around Tijuana is overlooked by visitors, but for folks crossing into and out of Mexico, entry and exit in Tecate and Mexicali is usually smoother and easier, and the smaller towns around see far less of the stark, depressing border-town grit found in Tijuana. Tecate is the renowned birthplace of Tecate Lite beer, which has become ubiquitous across Baja and beyond. San Felipe offers beautiful tranquil beaches and great off-roading. If your schedule permits, duck over and check these towns out. There's also some fascinating geology that awaits anyone with an interest: the gneiss boulders at La Rumorosa take on almost human forms. The birds and wildlife are another reason to come.

TOP TIP

Cross the border at Tecate if you can, for vastly less traffic and a smoother, gentler experience in both directions.



GUILLEMO ARIAS/GETTY IMAGES ©

View of the Mexico-US border, La Rumorosa



Sea of Cortez

Mellow Chill-out Town

A SEA OF CORTEZ GETAWAY

San Felipe is a quiet spot on the Sea of Cortez and remains a delightful spot to swim, play and (we'll be honest) drink in the sunshine and surf. The relative tranquility is punctuated yearly by the famous – or infamous – **San Felipe 250**, a 250km off-road race that draws hundreds of entries each year and has become a fixture of the local economy. Big trucks, truggies, buggies and more flood the town for gas-guzzling, dust-kicking, off-roading fun. To partake or view the late February fun, festivities and gasoline-powered craziness, make your reservations early, lest you find the town's hotels are already full.

Other than that, San Felipe is a pretty mellow spot and a favorite for expats, RVers and families with kids who want Mexico without leaving the comforts across the border too far behind. The town historically depended on fishing, and that's still true today – fishing charters and seafood are a big part of the year-round economy. The quiet *malecón* is a perfect place to find souvenirs to take back home, and you can cross to the beach and find a spot to sun yourself as the gentle waves lap the shore. There's also delightful hiking in the nearby mountains, or you can go from San Felipe all the way to Baja's highest summit, the Devil's Peak, in the Sierra de San Pedro Mártir, the mountains you can see to the west.



LA RUMOROSA

This weird and wonderful boulder field lies directly west of Tijuana – you'll pass it if you head to Tecate and onward to Mexicali. It's a vast region of primarily gneiss boulders that were formed when the mountains rose up and were then exposed by erosion. The forms, similar to those found in Joshua Tree or other parts of the American southwest, evoke faces, animals and otherworldly forms, as well as ancient cave paintings in a spot called **El Vallecito** (The Little Valley), along with pottery and other artifacts. The road through La Rumorosa is full of hairpin twists and turns and, as such, can be hair-whitening for those who find the many car wrecks far below each corner disconcerting.



GETTING AROUND

These areas are served by buses either from Tijuana or Mexicali, as well as some private limousine shuttles that cross the border. The speed at which the buses take these hairpin

turns is truly death-defying, so renting a vehicle may allow you to go at a slower, less heart-stopping pace.



Above: Monterrey (p621); Opposite: Copper Canyon (p600)

COPPER CANYON & NORTHERN MEXICO

COWBOYS, DESERTS AND CANYONS

Mexico's frontier land is a magical canvas of vast deserts, jagged canyons and charming mining towns.

Northern Mexico's dramatic mountains, cactus-studded deserts and plunging gorges set the scene for countless Western movies. The people are as diverse as the landscapes of this vast region: revolutionaries like Pancho Villa left their imprint here, while cowboy-hatted *rancheros* (farmers) continue to spread the *norteño* culture and indigenous communities retain centuries-old traditions.

Of everything there is to see in northern Mexico, nothing comes close to the Barrancas del Cobre (Copper Canyon) and its majestic ridges, pine-clad mountains and intriguing Rarámuri (Tarahumara) communities. Arguably one of the world's most epic train journeys, the Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico (Chepe railway) takes you deep into the heart of Copper Can-

yon, unveiling spellbinding views at every turn. Chihuahua, the eastern terminus of the railway, is a city of historical depth and offers time travel through its countless museums and monuments. In contrast,

cosmopolitan Monterrey in the northeast brings you right back to this century with its upscale business districts, artsy institutions and inviting green spaces. To the south, Durango entices with a striking colonial center and Hollywood cowboy film sets.

Though the narco wars have impacted the north terribly in the past few decades, things have calmed down considerably and it is now much safer than before to visit. These days, foreign visitors are still few and far between in northern Mexico and you will often have the place to yourself.



HOLOS/GETTY IMAGES ©

THE MAIN AREAS

COPPER CANYON

Mexico's most spectacular canyon. **p600**

CHIHUAHUA

Cowboys and revolutionaries. **p613**

MONTERREY

Cosmopolitan living. **p621**

DURANGO

The Wild West. **p631**



Chihuahua, p613

Cowboy-hatted characters and revolutionary heroes dominate the low-key capital of Mexico's biggest state.

Copper Canyon, p600

Marvel at this outstanding work of nature – an area four times the size of Arizona's Grand Canyon – onboard El Chepe, a spectacular train journey.



Find Your Way

Northern Mexico encompasses some of the biggest states in the country, divided by vast deserts and colossal mountains. To help you discover this often misunderstood part of Mexico, we've curated the areas that best define this most iconic of regions.

**TRAIN**

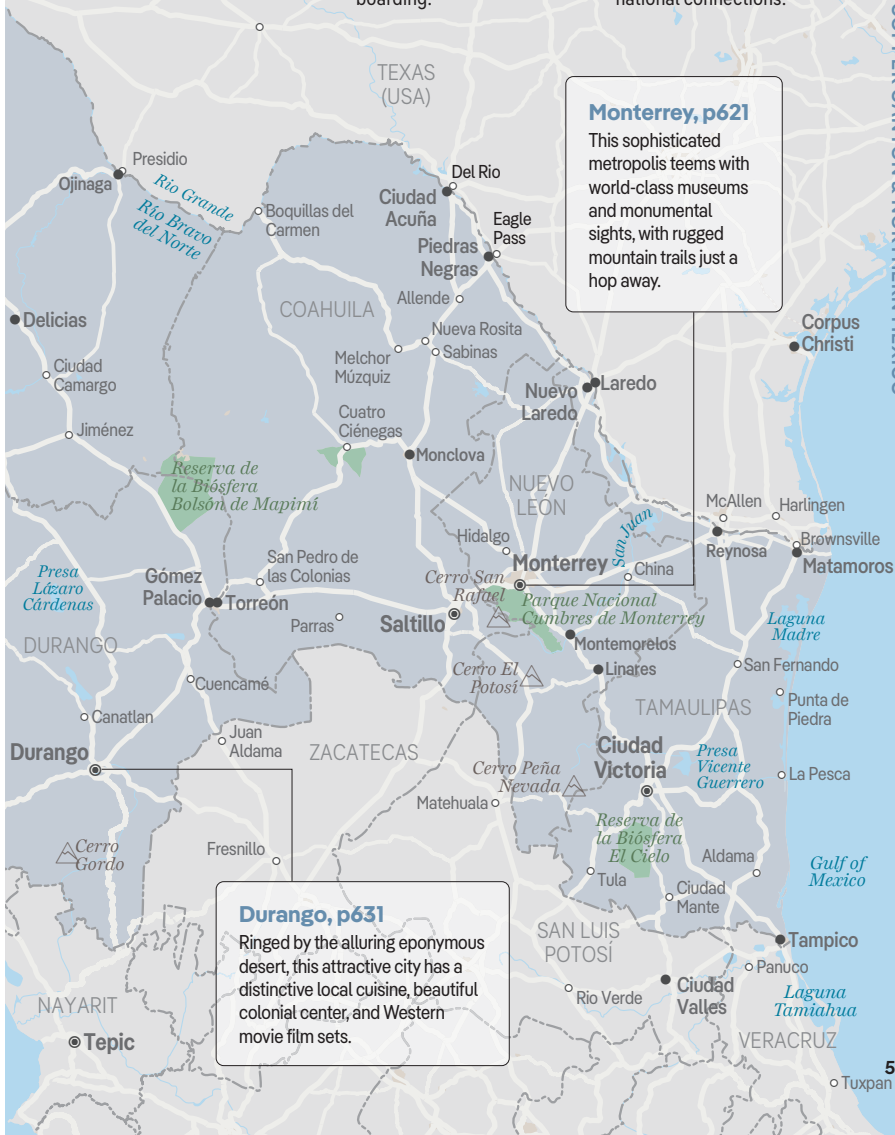
El Chepe climbs up the mountains of Chihuahua and zips through the theatrical Copper Canyon on one of the world's most scenic train journeys. It's easier than ever to plan your itinerary and book train tickets online, making stops at canyon-edge villages for epic hikes and horseback rides.

**BUS**

Buses are the cheapest way to explore the region. Bus companies including Grupo Estrella Blanca, Tufesa and Azules del Noroeste run regular services between towns and cities. Buy tickets online on their websites and simply show the QR code upon boarding.

**PLANE**

Domestic flights are an easy and fast way to travel around Northern Mexico. Monterrey, Chihuahua, Hermosillo and Torreón have international airports that are well-connected to the rest of the country and the US. Los Mochis and Durango have good national connections.

**Monterrey, p621**

This sophisticated metropolis teems with world-class museums and monumental sights, with rugged mountain trails just a hop away.

Durango, p631

Ringed by the alluring eponymous desert, this attractive city has a distinctive local cuisine, beautiful colonial center, and Western movie film sets.

Plan Your Time

Northern Mexico has mesmerizing canyons, imposing mountains and cactus-studded deserts. Take your time to hike, bike and chug your way through the backcountry of this frontier land.



ALEX BOBELIN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Divisadero (p609)



Seasonal Highlights

The best time to visit Northern Mexico is from September to November, when the weather is mild. It can get hot and dusty in summer and freezing cold in the winter months.



MARCH

Rarámuri (Tarahumara) athletes race across the Copper Canyon in the long-distance marathon, **Ultra Maratón Caballo Blanco**, every March.



JUNE

The rainy season starts and the whole Sierra Madre comes to life. **Día de la Marina** is celebrated in Guaymas, Sonora, with a naval battle reenactment, parades and fireworks.



JULY

A series of theatrical performances and reenactment of Pancho Villa's death commemorate the **Jornadas Villistas** in Hidalgo del Parral.

With Only One Day

- Hightail it to Los Mochis in Sinaloa and hop on board the **Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico** (El Chepe; p602) for the train ride of a lifetime. You can hoof it from one end to the other in 10 hours, starting from the Pacific Coast and ascending into the high altitudes of the **Barrancas del Cobre** (Copper Canyon; p600). Keep your eyes peeled as the train traverses bridges and chugs along the curved canyon walls.

- Most trains pause at **Divisadero** (p609) for 15 minutes – take the opportunity to hop off, gawk at the jaw-dropping vista, and jump back on. The train descends to Chihuahua's desert plains before ending its journey in **Chihuahua city** (p613).

In Three Days

- Divisadero makes a great stop along El Chepe train route as it's perfectly poised on the canyon rim, with the **Parque de Aventura Barrancas del Cobre** (p609) an easy 1.5km walk from the station. Check in to the only hotel in town, **Hotel Divisadero Barrancas** (p609), and drink in views of the canyon from your room.

- On your next day, rise early to catch the sunrise and hike the canyon rim trail to the adventure park. Ride the world's longest zip-line to the **Mesón de Bacajipare** (p609) viewpoint then catch the *teleférico* (cable car). The next day, hop back on El Chepe and end your journey in Chihuahua.

Two Weeks to Explore

- You can easily spend a week exploring the Copper Canyon region. Make your first halt at **Bahuichivo** (p610) and head down the steep serpentine road to the canyon-base village of Urique (p610) for riverside hikes. Stop overnight in **Divisadero** (p609) and climb back on the train to **Creel** (p606), where a slew of waterfalls and hot springs await.

- At the end of your train journey, get acquainted with Chihuahua and learn about its revolutionary history at **Museo Francisco Villa** (p619). Then fly over to cosmopolitan **Monterrey** (p621) and meander along the riverwalk **Paseo Santa Lucía** (p624) to the green lungs of the city, **Parque Fundidora** (p624).



AUGUST

The **Festival Internacional Chihuahua** brings over 600 artists to the city for dance performances, concerts and theatrical shows.



SEPTEMBER

Mexico's **Independence Day** is celebrated with fireworks, *musica norteña* and the traditional cry of independence from leaders: *¡Viva México!* *¡Viva la Independencia!*



NOVEMBER

As with the rest of the country, Northern Mexico celebrates **Día de Muertos**, with elaborate *ofrendas* (altars) and graveyard vigils.



DECEMBER

In Copper Canyon, winter is marked by low temperatures and even snow. **Christmas** is celebrated with festive food and atmospheric *posadas* (parties).

COPPER CANYON

Copper
Canyon

Mexico City

Embellished by pine-clad peaks and plunging ridges, Barrancas del Cobre (Copper Canyon) is one of Mexico's most magnificent natural settings. Wedged into the legendary Sierra Madre Mountains, this labyrinth of six main canyons covers an area four times larger than Arizona's Grand Canyon system and is deeper and greener than its American counterpart.

The Copper Canyon is rich in history and legend – fallen warriors and martyred missionaries have all left their mark here. Today, it is mostly home to the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) people.

The highland village of Creel is a convenient base, with excellent hotels, tour operators and scenic spots in close proximity. Further into the canyon system are Divisadero, Arepo and Cerocahui, all along or near the famous Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico (El Chepe) train route. Those looking to venture deeper should make time for the more remote (yet readily accessible) canyon-bottom villages of Batopilas and Urique.

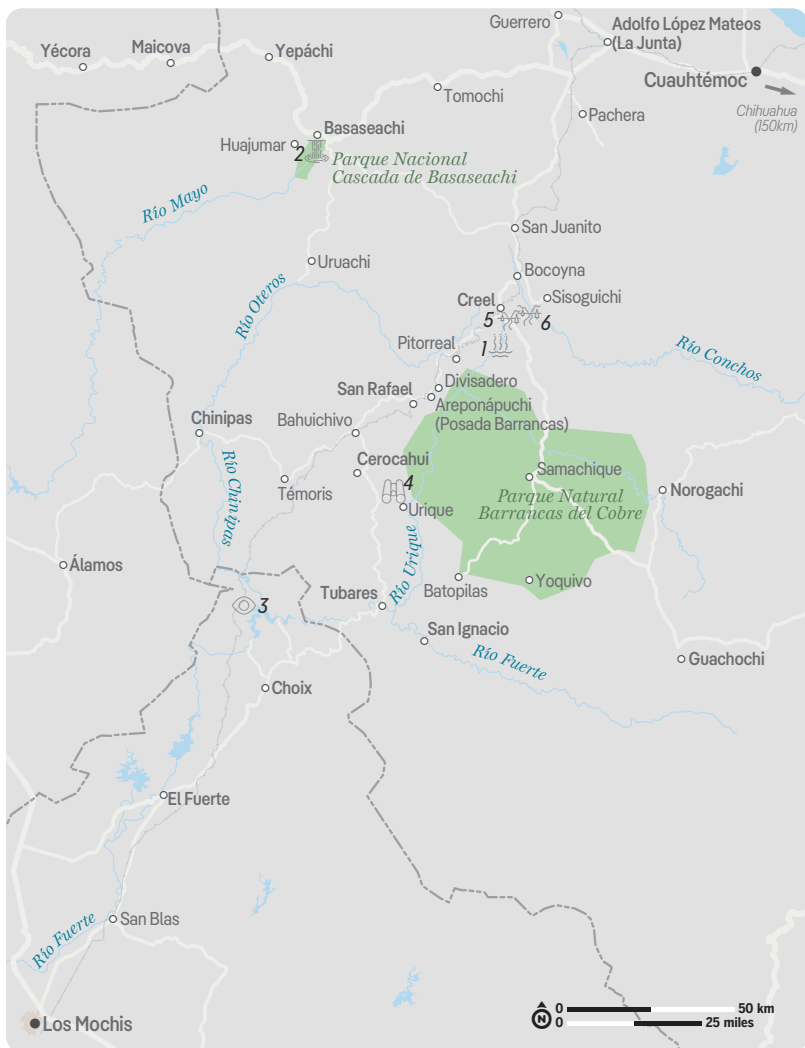
TOP TIP

Copper Canyon's biggest claim to fame is El Chepe train, although it's perfectly possible to visit the region by bus. The bus is faster, far cheaper and more frequent than the train. Bus services to the canyon-bottom villages like Urique and Batopilas operate according to the train schedule.



Valle de los Monjes (p606)

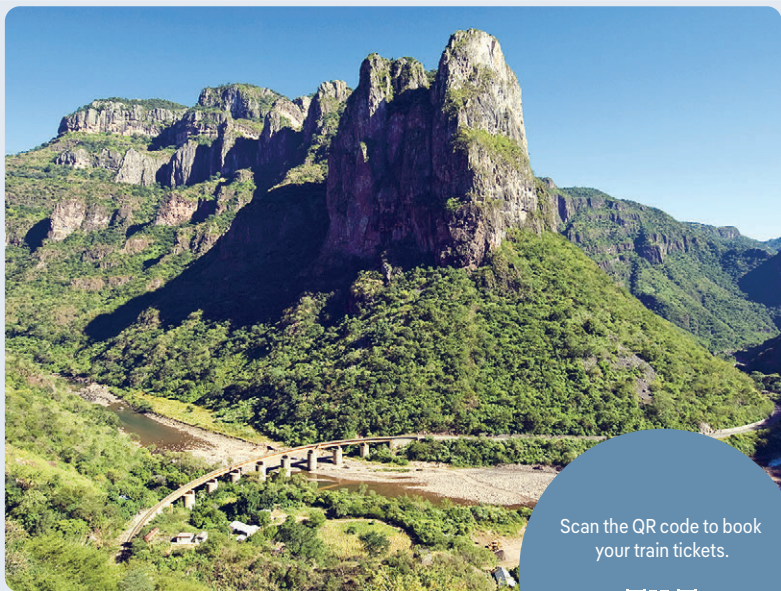
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**SIGHTS**

- 1 Aguas Termales Recowata
- 2 Cascada de Basaseachi
- 3 El Chepe Railway
- 4 Mirador Cerro del Gallego Cañón de Urique
- 5 Valle de las Ranas y los Hongos
- 6 Valle de los Monjes



Valle de los
Monjes (p06)



Scan the QR code to book your train tickets.



TOP SIGHT

El Chepe Railway

Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacifico is one of the world's most incredible rail journeys and Northern Mexico's biggest attraction. Nicknamed 'El Chepe' (using the Spanish initials of 'Chihuahua' and 'Pacifico'), the rail line itself is an engineering marvel: stretching over 656km of track, 37 bridges and 86 tunnels. Completed in 1961 after 60 years of construction, it is as phenomenal in its engineering prowess as in the astonishing canyon views it yields.

DON'T MISS

Divisadero

Parque de
Aventuras
Barrancas del
Cobre

Creel

Urique

Batopilas

El Fuerte

Mexico's Spectacular Train Journey

El Chepe meanders between Los Mochis near Mexico's Pacific Coast and Chihuahua on its central high plains, following a tortuous route from sea level to over 2400m at its highest point. This epic railroad teeters on the cusp of the Copper Canyon and reveals astonishing vistas at every turn.

You can actually ride the train all the way through in 10 hours – but you'll be missing out on the chance to explore this wild and rugged region. The biggest highlight of the rail journey is Divisadero, where you can stare into the actual Copper Canyon from a viewpoint next to the station. With an overnight stay, you can hike the canyon-edge trail to the nearby Parque de Aventura Barrancas del Cobre and soar over death-defying drops on one of Mexico's longest zip-line.

The Landscapes of Copper Canyon

Both directions of travel promise striking scenery, but most people choose to travel eastwards, from Los Mochis to Chihuahua, as the most spectacular section of the journey – between El Fuerte and Creel – should be seen in daylight. If you do choose the eastbound train, make sure to book a seat on the right side for the best views (left on the westbound train).

From Los Mochis, the train trundles through flat farmland, then begins to climb through hills speckled with dark pillars of cacti. It passes over the long Río Fuerte bridge and through the first of the 86 tunnels about four hours into the journey. The train hugs the sides of deepening canyons and makes a spectacular zigzag ascent into a tunnel above Témoris, after which pine trees appear on the hillsides.

By the next station, Bahuichivo, you are in the Sierra Madre uplands, with flower-dotted meadows punctuating an entrancing alpine landscape. After passing Divisadero – where most trains stop for 15 minutes – the train circles back over itself in a complete loop to gain height at the suitably named El Lazo (the Lasso), before chugging on to Creel and Chihuahua.

Chepe Regional vs Express

The railway operates two different trains – the luxury Chepe Express, and the slower, simpler Chepe Regional. Ticket prices for the trains are relatively high, with Express tickets almost double that of the Regional. Most tourists will find themselves on the Express train, as it's the otrain that can be booked online.

The Express has newish trains (running since 2018) with plush interiors, vintage-inspired design, and a separate dining car with excellent meals. There are three classes of carriages: *turista* is the cheapest, *ejecutiva* prices are 25% higher, while prices are double for *primera* seats. If you opt for the *primera* class, you'll also have access to a panoramic open-air viewing car affording enviable views. The Express runs only between Creel and Los Mochis, making just three stops (Divisadero, Bahuichivo and El Fuerte).

The Regional has two classes, though there's not much difference between *turista* and *económica* carriages – the former has a dining room, the latter a canteen. The carriages are showing their age (dating from the 1980s), though both classes have air-conditioning, heating and reclining seats with ample leg room. The Regional makes plenty of stops between Chihuahua and Los Mochis.

How to Buy Tickets

Chepe Express tickets can be purchased on the online booking system but Regional tickets are only be booked via email (chepe@ferromex.mx), phone (+52 5585264804), or directly at the train stations.

For the Chepe Express, you'll need to buy tickets in advance (a month ahead for the high season and holidays). The website accepts international credit cards, and even has a live chat feature with prompt customer support. Once you have your tickets, you just need to print them or show them on your phone at boarding.

HOW LONG IS THE JOURNEY?

A direct journey on the Chepe (without any stops) only takes 10 hours – but you won't get the chance to get off the train and explore the Copper Canyon. We recommend planning at least a week for your Chepe train journey, making four stops along the way (Creel, Divisadero, Bahuichivo and El Fuerte) and spending a night at each of them. You can also see the highlights in four days, limiting your stops to just Divisadero and Creel.

TOPTIPS

- Warm clothing, good walking shoes, a brimmed hat and sunscreen are essential for the Copper Canyon. In winter months, bring a thick jacket and fleece as the temperature can drop to zero.
- Plan to be *incomunicado* in some parts of the Canyon as there is no phone signal, particularly on the canyon floor. Most hotels will have wi-fi.
- Bring enough pesos with you as there are no ATMs in the villages and cash is required (though most hotels accept credit cards).
- Use a trusted local guide for off-the-beaten-path excursions to avoid drug cultivation fields and areas plagued by cartels or gangs.

DRIVING TIPS

Roads in the Copper Canyon region are in relatively good condition and driving can save you a ton of time and money, but proceed with caution as drug cartels control some areas. A normal sedan is good enough to navigate the roads, but a 4WD is best if you're planning to drive down to the canyon floor.

It's easiest to bring a rental car from Los Mochis or Chihuahua.

Always opt for *cuotas* (toll roads) whenever possible. Avoid traveling after dark, especially in isolated areas. As ever in Northern Mexico, check the safety situation carefully on the ground before setting out.

For the Chepe Regional, it's recommended to reserve tickets a couple of weeks ahead for peak travel period and a day in advance at other times. In practice, you can board the train at any station without a ticket if there are free seats and pay the conductor, but we recommend getting a ticket at the train station.

Train Schedule

As the trains only run twice a week (three times during the high season for Express), planning your train journey can be tricky. If you intend to make several stops, your best bet is to take a combination of Express and Regional trains. Keep in mind that the most scenic part of the rail journey is between El Fuerte and Creel. You won't be missing much if you drive or take the bus for the other parts of the trip.

The Chepe Express departs Los Mochis for Creel at 8am on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and from Creel to Los Mochis at 8am on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday in high season (the whole of April, July, August, December, and first two weeks of January). For the rest of the year, the eastbound Express (Los Mochis to Creel) runs Monday and Friday, while the westbound (Creel to Los Mochis) leaves Tuesday and Sunday. A straight-through journey takes about 10 hours.

The Chepe Regional leaves Los Mochis at 6am on Thursday and Sunday, and Chihuahua at 7am on Wednesday and Saturday. The journey officially takes 15.5 hours, though the slow-moving train makes many stops and often runs one to two hours late.

Schedules change and both trains tend to have delays, so timetables are a rough guide. There is no time zone change between Los Mochis and Chihuahua.



ARTERBA/GETTY IMAGES © TOP RIGHT: NINO CAPOTINO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Getting There

Both ends of the Chepe rail journey have airports and bus connections. The eastern terminus, Chihuahua, has an airport with direct international flights from Denver and Dallas, and domestic flights to Mexico City, Tijuana, Cancún, Guadalajara, Hermosillo and Monterrey. Buses arrive in Chihuahua's main bus station, 7km east of the center. The western terminus, Los Mochis, has a smaller airport with connections to Mexico City, Hermosillo, Tijuana, Mazatlán, and Guadalajara.



CHEPE EXPRESS (high season)

| Station | Mon, Wed, Fri | Tues, Thurs, Sun | Primera (M\$) | Ejecutiva (M\$) | Turista (M\$) |
|------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Los Mochis | 8am (departure) | 5:40pm (arrival) | | | |
| El Fuerte | 10:20am | 3:35pm | 2145 | 1625 | 1300 |
| Bahuichivo | 2:25pm | 11:25am | 3966 | 2697 | 2023 |
| Divisadero | 4:15pm | 9:55am | 4724 | 3212 | 2409 |
| Creel | 5:40pm (arrival) | 8am (departure) | 5641 | 3836 | 2877 |

CHEPE REGIONAL

| Station | Departure time (Wed & Sat, departing Chihuahua 7am) | Departure time (Thu & Sun, departing Los Mochis 6am) | Turista (M\$) | Económica (M\$) |
|------------------|---|--|---------------|-----------------|
| Cuauhtémoc | 9:25am | 7:07pm | 734 | 385 |
| La Junta | 10:24am | 6:12pm | - | 533 |
| San Juanito | 12:03pm | 4:23pm | 1468 | 770 |
| Creel | 12:47pm | 3:39pm | 1639 | 860 |
| Pitorreal | 1:42pm | 2:45pm | 1849 | 970 |
| Divisadero | 2:41pm | 2:14pm | 1959 | 1028 |
| Posada Barrancas | 2:52pm | 1:46pm | 1981 | 1040 |
| San Rafael | 3:16pm | 1:28pm | 2037 | 1069 |
| Cuítaco | 3:58pm | 12:35pm | 2175 | 1141 |
| Bahuichivo | 4:12pm | 12:24pm | 2213 | 1161 |
| Témoris | 5:12pm | 11:24am | 2429 | 1274 |
| Loreto | 7:14pm | 9:23am | - | 1515 |
| El Fuerte | 8:19pm | 8:19am | 3157 | 1657 |
| Sufragio | 9:26pm | 7:10am | - | 1778 |
| Los Mochis | 10:28pm | 6am | 3604 | 1891 |

THE RARÁMURI

Living on the rugged slopes of the Copper Canyon, the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) have survived centuries of European conquest, foreign diseases and, most recently, modernization. The majority still practice a traditional lifestyle, living in caves or cliff overhangs, and sustaining themselves with local crops such as corn and beans.

The name 'Rarámuri', means those who run fast. Rarámuri runners can run up and down the mountains, sometimes up to 20 hours without stopping. Every March, a long-distance marathon, Ultra Maratón Caballo Blanco (p610), is held in Urique. In 2018, María Lorena Ramírez became the first Rarámuri woman to compete in a European ultramarathon.

Creel Adventures

WATERFALLS, HOT SPRINGS AND ROCK VALLEYS

Copper Canyon's main tourism center, Creel, makes for a great base to explore the surrounding natural attractions. The tiny, low-key mountain town is strung out along the train tracks, and a handful of good hotels and restaurants are concentrated around the railway station.

The Rarámuri (Tarahumara), dressed in their colorful traditional wear, often descend upon the town to sell handicrafts to visitors. An excellent spot to learn about the Rarámuri culture is the **Museo Tarahumara**, moments from the train station. This small museum has interesting exhibits on the Rarámuri community, including a mummy found in the Copper Canyon cliffs in 1994.

Across the train tracks from the museum is the main square, **Plaza de Creel**, with a bandstand in the middle. If you're keen on buying Rarámuri handicrafts and contributing to the local community, the best place to go is **Artesanías Misión** north of the square. Store proceeds go to support the Santa Teresita clinic, which provides free medical care for the Rarámuri.

For a bird's-eye view of Creel, hike up to the **Cristo Rey statue**, where a white Jesus Christ figure is perched next to the *mirador* (lookout) on a hill 2.3km north of town. Take the stairs to the west of Gran Visión Av all the way to the top.

What makes Creel worth an overnight stay is the amalgam of unique rock formations, hot springs and cascades all within a day's hike, ride or drive. Rent a bike or a local guide and head off to the following sights on a full-day circuit. A day tour usually costs around M\$800 per person.

The Rarámuri *ejido* (communal farming district) of San Ignacio, 1km southeast of Creel, is home to over 4000 indigenous people living in caves and small huts among the farmlands. Near the *ejido* entrance is a cave inhabited by 14 Rarámuri, which can be visited by tourists (donations welcome).

Two kilometers down the road, the **Valle de las Ranas y los Hongos** (Valley of the Frogs and Mushrooms) enthalls with rocks that resemble the shape of frogs and mushrooms. Roam among the formation and hike up to the hilltop to see the rock-studded valley from above. Nearby is the 18th-century San Ignacio Mission Church, a crumbling stone-walled building where all the Rarámuri living in the *ejido* gather on Sundays.

Valle de los Monjes, approximately 7km further east, is a stunning outcrop of vertical rock formations that rise imposingly above the adjacent pine forests. It's easy to see why the Rarámuri named this area *Bisabrachi*, meaning 'Valley of the Erect Penises'. While you're here, make the short drive south to **Lago Arareko**, a U-shaped blueish-green lake with



WHERE TO STAY IN BATOPILAS

Hotel Juanitas

Clean, well-kept rooms and a shared river-facing courtyard make this a great budget option. \$

Riverside Lodge

This elegant colonial mansion is tastefully decorated with lavish murals and oak furniture. \$\$\$

Hotel Casa Real de Minas de Acanasaina

An atmospheric converted townhouse, with courtyards and antique-filled communal areas. \$\$



Cascada Cusárare

waters that reflect the surrounding coniferous trees and rocks. Paddle boats can be rented along the lakeshore (M\$100) for exploring and finding good swimming spots.

Continue 14km on the road past Arareko to reach the Rarámuri village of **Cusárare**. Head inside the 18th-century Misión Cusárare, built by Jesuits as a religious meeting place as well as a school to teach the locals Spanish and different trades. The Museo Loyola holds an exceptional collection of colonial paintings, but it is only open for guided tours. Around 3km from town is the **Cascada Cusárare**, a lovely 30m waterfall ensconced within a sweeping highland valley. The section from the road to the falls makes for a beautiful, shaded walk.

Another popular excursion from Creel is the hike to the **Agua Termales Recowata**, 35km south of Creel. Blissfully warm bubbling water is channeled into several inviting bathing pools tucked between the gorges, with a river running beneath them. To get there, drive on a dirt road from the highway to the parking lot, then hike for 3km down a rough cobblestone track to the hot springs. Alternatively, locals provide transportation in 4WDs from the parking lot.

At 134km northwest of Creel is one of the most impressive sights in the area: the **Cascada de Basaseachi**, Mexico's highest full-time waterfall. A plume of water tumbles 246m to the azure pools below, where you can swim. The area around the falls is a protected national park, home to the cougar, white-tailed deer and collared peccary. A plume of water tumbles 246m to the azure pools below, where you can swim. The best way to get up close to the falls is by hiking down to them, which takes three hours there and back. The area around the falls is a protected national park, home to cougar, white-tailed deer



BEST PLACES TO STAY & TO EAT IN CREEL

Hotel Ecológico Temazcal

The best budget option in town, with well-priced rooms and hospitable hosts. \$

Hotel La Estación

This renovated railway-themed hotel, conveniently located next to the train station, offers great value. \$\$

Hotel Colibrí

A newish, modern hotel run by a former teacher who's a wealth of knowledge on all things Creel. \$\$

Kino's

A cafe with a small but cozy indoor seating area offering excellent coffee, sweet treats and breakfasts. \$

El Tungar

Next to the train station, this is a casual, popular local joint dishing out comforting *pozoles* and *caldos*. \$

La Cabaña

A fixture in Creel's dining scene, this old-time favorite is known for serving the best cuts of meat. \$\$



WHERE TO EAT IN BATOPILAS

Doña Mica

This simple, small-scale diner hits the spot with hearty home-cooked meals. \$

Restaurant Carolina

Indulge in comfort food at this family-run restaurant a block beyond the main square. \$\$

Restaurante La Nevada

A popular joint for seafood and steak located by the town hall. \$\$

COPPER CANYON DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The US\$65-million Copper Canyon International Airport (Creel) was set to open in 2023. It was due to be completed in 2016, but disputes with local Rarámuri *ejido* (communal landholding) owners have caused major delays. The airport is part of the redevelopment project known as **Megaproyecto Barrancas del Cobre**. Locals generally welcome the prospect of more jobs and hope that the project will revitalize tourism in the area. There are tentative plans for an amusement park with a canyon-lip roller coaster, but with Copper Canyon tourism in decline, the future of the project is uncertain.



GALYNA ANDRUSHKO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Batopilas

and collared peccary. The views of the Candameña Canyon from the top of the falls are unrivaled.

It takes a full day to visit from Creel – you'll need to rent a car or book a day tour with an agency.

Descend to Batopilas

A CANYON-BOTTOM MINING TOWN

Dizzying switchbacks descend the steep-sided walls of the Barranca de Batopilas to the charming eponymous canyon-floor town. As you descend the vertiginous slopes, observe how the oak tree forest transitions into desert-like shrubs and prickly acacia trees. The temperature rises and the weather turns from temperate cool to sub-tropical dry.

Founded in 1708, Batopilas made its wealth from the silver mines and became one of the richest towns in Mexico. Reminders of its lavish past can be seen in the architecture of mansions and haciendas. **Hacienda San Miguel** was previously one of the most opulent buildings in the whole town, but now only its once-grand stone shell remains. **Museo de Batopilas** gives a good overview of the town's history, with a mock-up of the silver mine and some interesting artifacts.

The **Satevó Mission Church** is an easy 6km walk from town along the river that eventually comes to a bend where the glistening, whitewashed contours of the solitary church suddenly appear, framed in a forested river gorge. The building has a graceful, three-tiered bell tower and three domes. Today, no Rarámuri (Tarahumara) are living in the Satevó, but the size of the church and its location at the widest part of the Batopilas River indicate that there was once a fairly large Rarámuri community here.



WHERE TO STAY IN CEROCAHUI

Hotel Jade

Splashed with beautiful murals, this simple and welcoming place stands out for the hosts' outstanding hospitality. \$

Cabañas San Isidro

High in the hills above Cero-cahui, this working farm makes an idyllic rural base for canyon hikes and horseback rides. \$\$

Hotel Misión Cero-cahui

Beamed ceilings, fireplaces and leather Chesterfield sofas give this hotel an incredibly charming old-world atmosphere. \$\$\$

To get to Batopilas, catch a Transportes Turísticos mini-bus from Creel's main square. They leave every morning except Sunday. Visiting independently is easy if you have your own set of wheels – you don't need a 4WD on the paved road from Creel. But to navigate the back-road from Batopilas to Urique, you'll need a high-clearance 4WD to cross the Río Urique, passable only from November to April.

Thrills & Spills in Divisadero

BEST VIEWS OF THE CANYON

If you only have time to make one stop on El Chepe rail journey, make it **Divisadero**. The biggest highlight of the train ride for many, Divisadero station is perched close to the canyon rim, with a panoramic lookout a few meters from the tracks. Most trains halt here for 15 minutes, giving you enough time to hop off, stare down the canyon, and jump back on. But Divisadero well deserves an overnight stay, with an adventure park and a series of canyon-rim hiking trails and lookouts nearby.

While the Divisadero station doesn't have a village, there's a bustling souvenir market and food market with plenty of stands slinging *chiles rellenos* and *gorditas* on the sizzling stoves, next to the train platform. Right outside the station stands the **Hotel Divisadero Barrancas**, the only hotel here (the nearby village of Arepo has lots more accommodation choices).

An overnight stay at the hotel means you can rise with the sun and drink in cusp-of-the-canyon views at the magic hour. Although outdated and overpriced, it has a spectacular location and offers an array of canyon hikes, horseback rides and quad-bike adventures (including a free guided walk to a Rarámuri cave nearby).

Just 1.5km south of the train station, **Parque de Aventura Barrancas del Cobre** is the most-visited part of the Copper Canyon. The adventure park brims with exciting activities including Mexico's longest series of *tirolesas* (zip-lines) suspended over some deep canyon scenery.

The park's seven lines whisk you from an altitude of 2400m to **Mesón de Bacajipare**, the halfway point to the canyon floor. From there, you can catch the *teleférico* back up. Thrill-seekers will love the **ZipRider**, the world's second-longest zip-line at an extraordinary 2.5km in length; while those with more time should tackle the *via ferrata*, a combo rappelling and rock-climbing course.

Built over an awe-inspiring fissure in the canyon walls, the park center houses a glass-floored restaurant and souvenir shop. You can also arrange rappelling, rock climbing and downhill mountain biking here.



HOW TO GET TO AREPO

The Posada Barrancas station is within walking distance from Arepo, but only the Chepe Regional train stops here. If you're taking the Chepe Express, alight at Divisadero and catch a local bus to Arepo from the train station. These buses usually come to meet the trains and depart when the last train leaves Divisadero. If you're not carrying too much baggage, you can also hike the 3.3km canyon-rim trail from Divisadero to Arepo, enjoying wonderful views on the way.



WHERE TO STAY IN AREPONÁPUCHI

Hostal Font's

A newish hostel with warm dorm, clean shared bathrooms and inviting communal areas. \$

Cabañas Los Portales

The best value in town, with friendly staff and heating in the clean and spacious rooms. \$

Cabañas Díaz

Family-run lodge with dark cabins and tasty home-cooked meals. \$

URIQUE'S ULTRA-MARATHONS

Several ultra-marathons are held in Urique to pay homage to the local Rarámuri who have a centuries-old tradition of long-distance running. The Carrera de los Pies Ligeros ('Race of the Light Feet'), held each December, is a *rarajipari*, a long-distance Rarámuri relay running race with two teams kicking a ball along the course. The Ultra Maratón Caballo Blanco is an 82km ultramarathon held every March along tough canyon trails. It was created by Micah True, a legendary American runner known locally as Caballo Blanco ('White Horse') who lived in the Copper Canyon region for years.

Right on the lip of the canyon, **Areponápuchi** (affectionately called Arepo) is where you'll find more accommodation, ranging from rustic cabañas to canyon-edge lodges. At 3.3km southwest of Divisadero, the unremarkable village acts as a base for travelers visiting the adventure park before hopping back onto El Chepe train.

A **walking trail** with several viewpoints runs along the canyon edge from Divisadero to Arepo, and it can be easily hiked without a guide. Most accommodations can organize horseback rides, canyon trips and overnight camping treks down the canyon walls.

Riverside Hikes in Urique

SCENIC TRAILS AND LOOKOUTS

The next El Chepe stop, **Bahuichivo**, is a tiny settlement of a dozen houses, a church and a couple of hotels. Most travelers head straight to Cerocahui, 17km south of the station. A local bus leaves Bahuichivo station for Cerocahui after the last train of the day arrives.

Cerocahui is a sleepy place with a warm and laid-back air. A pretty yellow-domed church, **San Francisco Javier de Cerocahui**, dominates the main square, with a handful of restaurants and *abarrotes* (grocery) stores alongside it. Be aware that drug-related shootings and kidnappings have occurred here in recent years; a tour guide was murdered and four tourists kidnapped here in 2022. Check the safety situation before visiting.

At 24km southeast of Cerocahui, the **Mirador Cerro del Gallego Cañón de Urique** is a spectacular lookout that reveals the Urique Canyon in its full glory. It's located along the serpentine road to Urique – you can catch any Urique-bound bus to get here. From this elevation, you can see the Urique road zigzagging its way down to the canyon bottom.

The canyon-bottom village of Urique is a mere 40km trip from Cerocahui, but the treacherous – albeit extraordinarily scenic – descent can take up to 3½ hours on a local bus. The number of roadside memorials will give you an idea of how many people have perished on this perilous road.

Urique could not be more dramatically located – at the bottom of the deepest of all the canyons, along the west bank of the turquoise **Río Urique**. It's a natural hiking base, with easy day options that you can do along the riverside dirt road. You can choose to walk 7km upriver to the next village of **Guadalupe Coronado** or hike 4km downstream to **Guapalaina**, where a beautiful trail along a rocky stream leads to the azure natural pool, **Charco Verde**. Although swimming isn't allowed (as the water is consumed by the communities here), it's a wonderful trek up the canyon walls and past several Rarámuri homes.



WHERE TO STAY IN URIQUE

Hotel El Paraíso Escondido

Located on the main street, this cheap and clean motel is centrally located. \$

Entre Amigos

A beautifully designed place near the riverbank, with homey stone cabins, dorms and campsites. \$

Hotel Villa de Urike

This hotel might be half constructed, but it's still the best, with modern rooms, inviting pool and riverfront location. \$\$



Copper Canyon views

The Fort Town of El Fuerte

RIVERS, FORESTS AND PETROGLYPHS

After descending the mountain slopes and swishing past a trio of manmade lakes, prepare to swap your jacket for something fresher as the train pulls into the sultry coastal plains of El Fuerte, Sinaloa. Far preferable to Los Mochis as the start/end point on El Chepe train, El Fuerte is also worth an overnight stay to take a trip on the nearby river.

Founded in 1564, the town got its name from the 17th-century fort built on the distinctive **Cerro de las Pilas** to protect inhabitants from indigenous attacks. Today, a museum has been built at the top of the hill to resemble the old fort. The **Museo Mirador El Fuerte** has a moderate collection of Mayo handicrafts, ceramics and artifacts. The rooftop offers splendid views over the glassy waters of the Río Fuerte.

Río Fuerte is becoming a world-class birding hot spot, with common sightings of kingfishers, osprey and flycatchers by the riverbank. Many of the species here are endemic. Bird-watching guide Miguel Angel Leon at El Fuerte Tours runs educational and entertaining boat trips (M\$350 per person) along the river, including a hike to some of the over 300 petroglyphs that are scattered around the Cerro de la Máscara (Hill of the Mask).

The vast majority of the 2000-year-old geometric engravings depict human faces or masks carved by the ancient Yoremes (Mayos), native inhabitants of this region, between 100 BCE and 1500 CE. Surrounding the petroglyphs is the **Bosque Secreto** (Secret Forest), one of Latin America's last standing dry tropical forests. Five hundred years ago, the dry tropical forest covered an area of 550,000 sq km, stretching along the

BEST STAYS & EATS IN EL FUERTE

Mansion Serrano Hotel

This midrange hotel has a colonial facade, inviting rooms and even a pool with a waterslide. \$\$

Posada del Hidalgo

A rusty-red colonial hacienda converted into an atmospheric hotel with classic charm and beautiful public areas. \$\$\$

Hotel Torres del Fuerte

A 400-year-old hacienda with themed rooms, elegant interiors and a gourmet restaurant. \$\$\$

El Supremo

Locals rave about this casual eatery for having the town's best *machaca* (shredded dry beef). \$

El Malecón Restaurante

Head to the 2nd floor of this riverfront restaurant for filling breakfasts and delectable seafood. \$\$

Restaurante El Texano

Open-air seating and a versatile menu overlooking the main square. \$\$

El Mesón del General

Traditional, formal restaurant specializing in fish and seafood, and combo plates of river delicacies. \$\$\$



WHERE TO EAT IN URIQUE

Restaurante del Centro

Located right next to the main square, this prominent diner impresses with Mexican staples. \$\$

Jardín de Mama Tita

Step into the lush garden patio of this homey restaurant, owned and run by the warm and friendly Mama Tita. \$\$

Club 10

The only bar in town serves surprisingly good *aguachile* and *mariscadas* (mixed cold seafood). \$\$

BEST STAYS & EATS IN LOS MOCHIS

Hotel Fénix

A centrally located budget hotel with tiny but clean rooms. \$

Hotel Santa Anita

Dated but great value with spacious rooms. Just one block behind the main square. \$\$

Best Western

This business hotel has carpeted rooms and modern bathrooms. Right next to the main square. \$\$\$

La Cabaña de Doña Chayo

This long-established restaurant is popular for its *machaca*. \$

Isleño

Low-key seafood spot with outdoor seating and some of Los Mochis' best *camarones y pulpo al ajillo* (shrimp and octopus cooked with garlic). \$\$

El Farallón

Legendary upmarket joint serving a range of Sinaloan and trendy dishes such as the *torre de marisco* (seafood tower). \$\$\$

coast from Northern Mexico to Panama. Today, only 10% of it remains and much of it is found here.

A Brief Stop at Los Mochis

THE END OF THE TRAIN JOURNEY

The first or last stop on El Chepe, Los Mochis is mainly a transport hub for travelers who are either hopping on the train or venturing to Baja California by boat. There's nothing much to detain you in the giant urban sprawl, though those who have to stay overnight here will find decent eating and sleeping options available.

Founded by American utopian socialists in 1893, Los Mochis was originally set up around sugarcane cultivation. Today, the faceless city is relatively modern, without any real sight or reason for a traveler to linger. Plazuela 27 de Septiembre is the central plaza, but it's neither leafy nor inviting. In the evening, though, a row of food trucks takes over Calle Vicente Guerrero, on the square's eastern side, creating a much livelier atmosphere. To the west of the park is **Museo Regional del Valle del Fuerte**, a tiny institute showcasing the history of Sinaloa. All displays are in Spanish only.

One block south stands the **Trapiche Museo Interactivo de Los Mochis**, with engaging exhibitions and experiments for kids. Across the road is the **Jardín Botánico Benjamín Francis Johnston**, a glorious green space occupying the former estate of the eponymous American sugar mill impresario. Los Mochis' main claim to fame is its seafood – said to be the best in Northern Mexico.

For those looking to kick back, head 24km southwest of town to **Topolobampo**, a modest port town on the Sea of Cortez. Stroll its *malecón* (seafront esplanade) and stop for fresh-off-the-grill *pescado zarandeado* (fish marinated in dried chili and beer, split in half from head to tail). There are a few boat tours you can do in the area, the most popular of which is a cruise to **Isla Farallón** to see its sea lion colony (October–April). Azules del Noroeste buses leave the Los Mochis terminal every hour for Topolobampo.



GETTING AROUND

Connections are good within the Copper Canyon region, with frequent buses serving every station on the Chepe railway. Most of these local buses will meet the trains, picking up passengers when trains arrive and dropping them off for departure.

Autotransportes Noroeste runs regular buses from Creel, Divisadero and Areponápuchi. Transportes Turísticos has daily minibuses from Creel to Batopilas and Bahuichivo to Cerocahui and Urique. There are paved roads all the way from Chihuahua to Creel and on

to Divisadero, Batopilas and Bahuichivo. The road descending to Urique is unpaved and treacherous and we don't recommend driving it with a sedan. Always check your planned route before driving, as some areas are controlled by drug cartels.

From Topolobampo, you can catch a ferry to cross the Sea of Cortez and reach Baja California Sur (p555). Baja Ferries runs regular departures to Pichilingue, 38km north of La Paz, and cars can be transported. To get to La Paz, Ecobajatours runs hourly shuttles to La Paz.

CHIHUAHUA

Alluringly off the tourist radar, Chihuahua's eponymous capital city is barely known except as a terminus of the canyon-traversing Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico (El Chepe) rail journey. The sprawling city may be slightly rough around the edges, but it's bursting with homespun character, revolutionary history and hip student hangouts. More often than not, you'll find cowboy-hatted ranchers playing *banda* music on the streets, while the inviting smell of the regional *carne asada* (marinated grilled beef) wafts in the air.

For years, narco wars in Chihuahua state kept travelers at bay. These days, it is a relatively safe place to visit for anyone taking sensible precautions. That said, it's best to steer clear of the Golden Triangle area – where southern Chihuahua, northwest Durango and northeast Sinaloa converge – notorious for its opium production and high levels of violence. Avoid going anywhere off the beaten path without a guide.

Chihuahua

Mexico City

TOP TIP

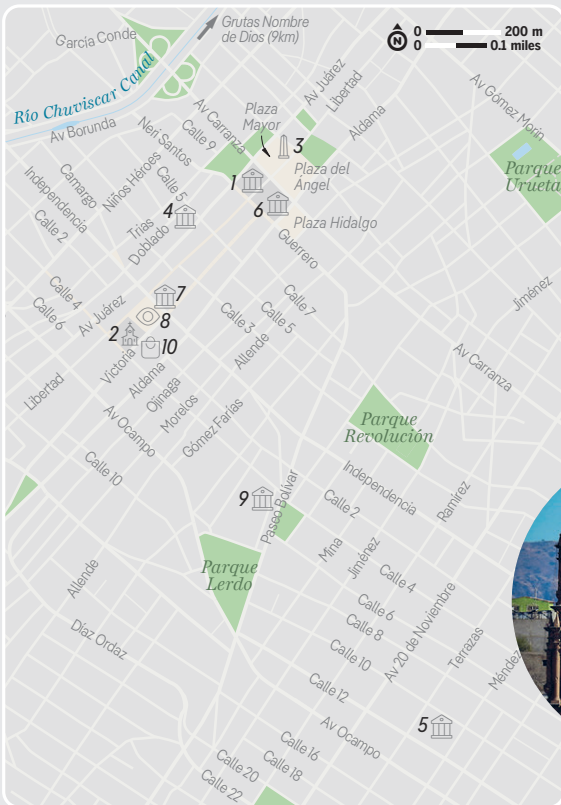
At just 15km northeast of the center, Chihuahua's medium-sized airport has direct international flights to Denver and Dallas. There are regular services to Mexico City, Tijuana, Cancún, Guadalajara, Hermosillo and Monterrey. Get your transfer at the official taxi desk inside the station; it costs around M\$300 for a one-way trip to the center.

SIGHTS

- 1 Casa Chihuahua
- 2 Catedral Metropolitana de Chihuahua
- 3 Homenaje al General Francisco Villa
- 4 Museo de la Lealtad Republicana Casa Juárez
- 5 Museo Histórico de la Revolución
- 6 Palacio de Gobierno
- 7 Palacio Municipal de Chihuahua
- 8 Plaza de Armas
- 9 Quinta Gameros

SHOPPING

- 10 Arte Popula Chihuahua



ESDEUWA./SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Catedral Metropolitana de Chihuahua

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK IN CHIHUAHUA

Escuadrón Montados y Burritos

Locals rave about the *montados* (a type of burrito) here. \$

Nómada

Let the playful dishes on its eclectic menu tickle your tastebuds while you admire views of the city. \$\$

Los Mezquites

This place is the local go-to for the premium *cortes clásicos* (cuts of meat) that Chihuahua is famed for. \$\$

La Casona

Taste Chihuahua's famed steaks and rich seafood at this elegant 19th-century mansion with a gorgeous central patio. \$\$\$

La Sotolería

A fun hipster-cowboy bar serving an overwhelming range of *sotol* and cocktails, plus grilled meat and *botanas* (snacks).

Momposina

With a bohemian vibe, this eclectic bar draws in the creative types with its artsy flair.

La Antigua Paz

This classic cantina has revolutionary memorabilia on the walls and a good mix of students, cowboys and millennials.



Casa Chihuahua

MARIBOL RIOS CAMPUZANO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Plaza de Armas

THE BEATING HEART OF CHIHUAHUA

Chihuahua's historical heart is pleasantly walkable, interconnected via several car-free boulevards. Its focal point is the **Plaza de Armas**, a quintessentially Spanish square overflowing with cowboy-hatted characters, shoe-shiners and masses of pigeons. A bronze sculpture of the city's founder, Don Antonio de Deza y Ulloa, stands in the center.

Presiding over the square is the baroque 18th-century **Catedral Metropolitana de Chihuahua**, which has an organ dating back to 1796. The entire building is made from ocher, and its main entrance features exquisite carvings made by renowned sculptor Antonio de Nava. With a height of 40m above ground level, the towers of the cathedral are considered unique among all baroque architecture.

For an elevated view of the cathedral, head up to the rooftop of the building to its immediate east. Nómada restaurant has floor-to-ceiling windows facing the main square, as well as an open terrace with glorious panoramas of the Chihuahua mountains. Come for the views, but stay for the food: its creative menu is a play on Mexican dishes, and its cocktails are to die for.

Adjacent to the restaurant building is **Arte Popular Chihuahua**, the best spot in town to browse Chihuahuan crafts, including Mata Ortiz pottery, and books on Chihuahua's history and Rarámuri culture. Local drinks and foods here run the gamut from *sotol* (a local spirit made from the desert spoon plant) to *carne seca* (beef jerky) and pecans.



WHERE TO STAY IN CHIHUAHUA

Hostal Kuira Bá by Rotamundos

A colorful and chirpy hostel with funky decor and cool vibes in a central location. \$

Doroteo Hotel Boutique

Rest your head at this themed hotel dedicated to Pancho Villa (whose birth name was Doroteo). \$\$

Central Hotel Boutique

This former monastery oozes romantic European charm with contemporary furnishings and an excellent restaurant. \$\$\$

On the northeastern end of the square stands the regal **Palacio Municipal de Chihuahua**, which houses the town hall and office of the President of Chihuahua. Characterized by Corinthian columns and stained-glass windows, the building is a perfect example of the architectural style during the Porfirio era: neoclassicism influenced by the French beaux arts designs.

Monuments & Palaces

CRASH COURSE IN CHIHUAHUA'S HISTORY

Once the key city of the Nueva España Provincias Internas, Chihuahua played a pivotal role in Mexico's history. A stroll around the historic center will reveal glimpses into its storied past.

Along the pedestrian-only Calle Libertad stands the gray, austere Palacio de Gobierno, with a perfectly preserved facade. Step inside this state-government building to admire the striking 1950s murals painted by Aarón Piña Mora. Covering entire walls in the courtyard, the vivid paintings dramatically show Chihuahua's eventful history – from the pre-Hispanic days to the colonization period and the Mexican Revolution. It was right at this spot where the Spanish executed Miguel Hidalgo in 1811. Learn more about the revolutionary priest and the War of Independence at the **Museo de Hidalgo** and **Galería de Armas** located within the *palacio*.

Across the road stands **Casa Chihuahua**, the former Palacio Federal (built 1908–1910) that functioned as a mint, a monastery, a military hospital, and now a cultural center and museum with an excellent collection of exhibits and information in both English and Spanish. The highlight here is the Calabozo de Hidalgo, the underground dungeon where Miguel Hidalgo was held prior to his execution. A plaque outside recalls the verses the priest wrote on his cell wall in his final hours, thanking his captors for their kindness.

On the opposite side of Av Venustiano Carranza, you'll find the colorful 'Chihuahua' letters and the **Homenaje al General Francisco Villa**, a giant bronze monument depicting Pancho Villa, his army, and moment when he got shot in his Dodge touring car.

Further south along Av Juárez is the maroon-colored building that houses the **Museo de la Lealtad Republicana Casa Juárez**. This was where ex-President Benito Juárez lived in exile from 1864 to 1866. The displays and documentaries depict how Juárez's military campaign, which was executed from Chihuahua, defended Mexico against the French invasion.



DISHES & DRINKS TO TRY IN CHIHUAHUA

Queso Chihuahua

A traditional cheese made from cow's milk. Supple, mild and buttery, it melts exceptionally well and is often used in baked dishes.

Montado A uniquely Chihuahuense dish made with wheat flour tortillas that contain different northern stews, topped with a layer of creamy, artisan cheese.

Sotol A distilled spirit with around 40% alcohol, made from the desert spoon plant found in the Chihuahuan desert. The Rarámuri people fermented *sotol* juice into a beer-like alcoholic beverage as early as 800 years ago.

Tesgüino The Rarámuri have made *tesgüino* beer from malted corn for centuries. Corn kernels are boiled with water and fermented together with herbs, roots or bark to produce a thick alcoholic drink.



BEST WINERIES IN CHIHUAHUA

Bodegas Pinesque

Established in 2009 after more than 15 years of winemaking as a hobby. Guided visits and tasting experiences provided.

Vinícola Casa Chávez

Fourth-generation winemakers in the Delicias Valley, where you can taste wine and pair it with classic *norteño* dishes.

Tres Ríos

This winery prides itself on wine that reflects the northern Mexican identity. Runs full-day tasting tours at two of its haciendas.

Visit Pancho Villa's mansion

VENERATING A LOCAL HERO



HIDALGO DEL PARRAL

Villa fans should venture south to **Hidalgo del Parral** (p619). The building from which he was shot and killed houses the Museo Francisco Villa.

MEXICO'S REVOLUTIONARY HERO

No hero in Mexico's history is as colorful or contradictory as Francisco 'Pancho' Villa. Before becoming the leader of the Mexican Revolution, Villa spent much of his adulthood robbing and chasing women. Born José Doroteo Arango to hacienda workers in northern Durango, he turned to banditry at the age of 16, taking the name Francisco Villa, in honor of his grandfather. In 1910, Villa was lobbied for support by Abraham González, leader of the revolutionary movement. Villa soon raised a fighting force to join the Revolution, which began on November 20, 1910.

During the Mexican Revolution, Pancho Villa's forces took Chihuahua and established his headquarters here. He created various civic projects and became the local hero. Today, his 48-room former mansion has been converted into a museum loaded with Hollywood-style stories of crime and stakeouts.

After his assassination in 1923, 25 of Villa's 'wives' filed claims for his estate. Government investigations determined that Luz Corral de Villa was the *generalísimo's* legal spouse. The mansion was awarded to her and it became known as Quinta Luz. In 1981, it was acquired by the army after

Luz's death and converted into a museum. The National Institute of Anthropology and History spent more than a year restoring it. Opened in 1982, the **Museo Histórico de la Revolución** now has the biggest collection of Villa's personal belongings and photos in the whole of Mexico.

The front section of the museum was Villa's bedroom, kitchen and dining area centered around a Mudejar-style courtyard. His furniture, photos and appliances are all on display inside the various rooms. In the backyard, you'll find the bullet-riddled black Dodge that Villa was driving when he was murdered. The rear section concentrates on Mexican revolutionary history with weapons, other artifacts and detailed signage in Spanish and English.

Marvel at European Mansions

LAVISH ARCHITECTURE

Constructed in 1907 by wealthy mine owner Manuel Gameros as a gift for his wife, the **Quinta Gameros** is one of Mexico's most stunning mansions. Featuring an incredibly elaborate belle époque architectural style, the historic building is decked out in stained glass, ornately carved wood and intricate moldings. Rooms are filled with period furnishings and historical art pieces. It is considered by historians as the best art nouveau-style house built in Mexico.

The mansion is an important part of Chihuahua's history – after Gameros fled the country in 1913 during the Mexican Revolution, the military took over his house. It became the personal residence of Carranza, and then was converted into a military hospital, government offices and now a museum owned by the Autonomous University of Chihuahua.



OTHER MUSEUMS IN CHIHUAHUA

Museo Casa de Juárez

A small museum converted from the residence of President Benito Juárez.

Museo Sebastián

This immaculately restored 1880s gallery stores small-scale versions of sculptures by Chihuahua artist, Sebastián.

Museo Casa Redonda

Once a locomotive repair shop, this renovated warehouse is home to the city's small but excellent modern art museum.



Quinta Gameros

The house consists of four levels, with an extensive garden and quarry fountains in the exterior. The exquisite collection of art nouveau furniture is mainly on the ground floor; scan the QR code provided in the rooms for a self-guided audio tour. On the upper floor, there's a room dedicated to the Paquimé culture, the most important archaeological zone in Northern Mexico.

Explore the Grutas Nombre de Dios

A PORTAL TO THE UNDERWORLD

On the northern edge of town (10km from the center) is an underground network of caves boasting impressive stalagmites, stalactites and rock formations. Forming part of the Sierra de Nombre de Dios, these caves were first discovered in 1896.

A trail has been carved through the **Grutas Nombre de Dios**, including concrete ramps and steps, to take you through the 17 sizable limestone chambers and galleries. Guides will point out distinctive formations, including the Tower of Pisa and the Cascade. The most prominent formation is perhaps the Heart of the Cave, a vault with an entrance shaped like a heart.

Entrance is only allowed on a one-hour guided tour, typically in groups of 15 to 20 people. Tours can be arranged in English, but you need to notify reception when buying tickets. You can get here by taxi for around M\$100. Chihuahua Bárbaro also leads group tours here (M\$300 per person). It can be hot and humid inside the caverns, and those with claustrophobia should avoid entering.



HOP ON A TROLLEYBUS

Chihuahua Bárbaro runs trolleybus tours of Chihuahua's main historic sights (narrated in Spanish) and beyond. A three-hour city tour (M\$130) departs from its ticket office, and brings visitors around the center and to the Pancho Villa museum and Quinta Gameros. The tour operators also offer full-day and overnight trips, with various itineraries that take in Paquimé archaeological site, Mennonite farms in Cuauhtémoc and the adventure park in the Copper Canyon.



GETTING AROUND

Chihuahua has a newish bus system, Vivebús, with air-conditioned, wheelchair-friendly vehicles that run on designated busways. Cash is not accepted; you can buy a card from the machines on the busways and each ride

costs M\$10. Taxis and car shares are readily available from the center to anywhere in town. A journey from the center to the train station costs around M\$50, the bus station is M\$100 and the airport is M\$200.



Beyond Chihuahua

Chihuahua city isn't a particularly attractive destination, but the intriguing Mennonite communities and pre-Hispanic sites in close proximity make good reasons to venture here.

Just as the state license plates proclaim, this is very much the *Tierra del Encuentro* (Land of Discovery). Covering most of the state is the *Desierto Chihuahuense* (Chihuahuan Desert), the largest in North America. The starkly beautiful arid region is peppered with prickly cacti and cowboy ranches. You'll be forgiven for thinking you've wandered into a B-grade Western movie (Durango is where many famous Westerns were filmed).

For a taste of the Chihuahuan Desert, head northwest to Nuevo Casas Grandes, a dusty country town and decent base for exploring the pre-Hispanic ruins of Paquimé and the pottery center of Mata Ortiz. Turn south to visit the small city of Cuauhtémoc, home to the biggest Mennonite community in Mexico, where you can visit the Mennonite museum and explore their *campos* (fields).

Paquimé
Cuauhtémoc Chihuahua

TOP TIP

Chihuahua's main bus station has regular departures to Cuauhtémoc, Nuevo Casas Grandes and Creel. The main bus companies are Rápidos Cuauhtémoc and Autotransportes Noroeste.



JAMES WILLIAM SMITH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Chihuahuan Desert



Museo y Centro Cultural Menonita

Get to Know the Mennonites

MEXICO'S BIGGEST MENNONITE COMMUNITY

The Mennonites have lived in Mexico for over 100 years, and their chief center lies in the small city of **Cuauhtémoc**, 103km west of Chihuahua. Mennonite beliefs puts them at odds with many governments, and thus communities have moved en masse from one country to another. In the 1920s, around 6000 Mennonites left Canada for Northern Mexico and they have continued to live in closely knit communities around Cuauhtémoc.

These days, you can often see blonde-haired and blue-eyed Mennonites in the fields of Cuauhtémoc – men wearing baggy overalls and checked shirts; women in their long dark dresses and headscarves. They speak a dialect of Low German, though most of them also speak Spanish and English. Agriculture is their main livelihood, with most of them caring for their livestock and producing the famous *queso menonita* (Mennonite cheese).

Museo y Centro Cultural Menonita is a well-conceived museum north of town, displaying tools and other paraphernalia from the early years of Mennonite settlement. Essentially a replica of the traditional Mennonite house, the museum gives you the chance to see how they live. After visiting the museum, browse the craft store and step into their in-house cafe to enjoy some homemade Mennonite pastries made with recipes passed down from generations. It's best to book a tour from Chihuahua or Creel to visit the *campos* as you will learn more and get to interact with the Mennonites. Inquire at the museum if you haven't pre-arranged a tour. A taxi from downtown Cuauhtémoc will cost you about M\$200.



PANCHO & PARRAL

At 250km south of Cuauhtémoc, the small town of Hidalgo del Parral has a big place in Mexican history. This was where Pancho Villa was murdered on July 20, 1923. The building from which Pancho Villa was shot and killed houses the **Museo Francisco Villa**. The two-story museum stores black-and-white photos of Villa as well as his guns and memorabilia. If you're near Parral around July 20, don't miss the spectacular celebrations of **Jornadas Villistas** to mark his death.



WHERE TO EAT AND SLEEP IN NUEVO CASAS GRANDES

Quiero Ligero

This modern cafe in the center of town serves affordable and healthy smoothies, sandwiches and salads. **\$**

Pompeii

The smartest spot in town dishes out modern Mexican food with an emphasis on the area's specialty, *pavo* (turkey). **\$\$**

Hotel Hacienda

A Wild West-inspired hotel with a central location and renovated rooms. **\$\$**



MATA ORTIZ POTTERY VILLAGE

This dusty town, 27km south of Paquimé, is a major pottery center. Artisans here use techniques and decorative styles inspired by the Paquimé culture. Many of their pieces are sold worldwide for extravagant prices. Stop by the workshop-showroom of Juan Quezada Celado, who revived the pottery tradition in the 1970s. Strolling around the village, you'll pass numerous potteries and see people working. To get here, take a taxi from Nuevo Casas Grandes (cost around M\$600).



GETTING AROUND

With regular bus departures from Chihuahua's main bus station (Blvd Juan Pablo II), it is relatively easy to explore outside of the city independently. To get to the bus terminal, catch a 'Circunvalación Sur' bus heading northwest on Carranza. Rápidos Cuauhtémoc

has a new station in downtown Chihuahua, but make sure you get there early or book your bus tickets in advance. Trolleybus tours from Chihuahua Bárbaro can be a practical way to explore the region if you're not planning to drive.



Paquimé

Paquimé Ruins

CHIHUAHUA'S LARGEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Located in a broad valley 300km northwest of Chihuahua City, the ruins of **Paquimé** contain the remnants of Northern Mexico's most important trading settlement. The Unesco World Heritage Site is a maze of rose-red adobe walls filled with by narrow walkways and small chambers.

Paquimé was the center of the Casas Grandes culture, which dominated most of Chihuahua and extended north into New Mexico and Arizona. The elites lived in the ancient city of Paquimé, controlling the irrigation systems, agricultural production and trading of resources. The desert, valleys and mountains were all connected through watchtowers and roads. The site was plundered, perhaps by Apaches, around 1340. Excavation and restoration began in the 1950s; Unesco declared it a World Heritage Site in 1998.

Don't miss the meticulously detailed **Museo de las Culturas del Norte** (included in the entrance fee), with explanations about the link between indigenous cultures of Northern Mexico and the southwest USA. The plaques (in Spanish and English) also give fascinating details on the sites, including the pit ovens used to make mezcals for important festivals, the dwelling of a *curandero* (healer), and a house of skulls. The Paquimé people were great potters and produced striking cream-colored earthenware with red or black geometric designs. Some amazing original examples are on display in the museum, and modern reproductions are for sale.

I LIVE HERE: WHERE TO CATCH LIVE MUSIC



David Navas, a dancer and African *djembe* drummer who leads TTMDA Mexico (Tam Tam Mandingue Djembe Academy), recommends some of the best bars and live-music venues in Monterrey.

Café Iguana

An institution in Monterrey showcasing a wide range of music, from ethnic dance to hip-hop.

Almacén 42

A lively hipster joint with 42 types of craft beer on tap, housed in an industrial container-turned-bar.

Nirvana Rock Joint

The original house of rock in San Pedro is a large and open venue for live performances.

TOPAZDeluxe

The best spot for electronic music has a loyal following among local youths.

Saxy Jazz Club

A new joint in town serenading the well-heeled crowd with live jazz and Latin music.



Macroplaza

Explore Monterrey's core

MUSEUMS, MOUNTAINS AND SQUARES

Most of Monterrey's major attractions are concentrated around **Macroplaza**, one of the largest squares in the world. A controversial but successful redevelopment project, this series of interconnected squares was carved out only in the 1980s by the demolition of a prime chunk of real estate. The urban space still feels barren and sterile, with just a few trees and patches of green grass.

Dominating Macroplaza is the 70m brick-red **Faro del Comercio** (Lighthouse of Commerce), designed to resemble a lighthouse. The slim monolithic landmark lights up the night sky with green lasers every evening. Across the road from the Faro is the baroque **Catedral Metropolitana de Monterrey**, which is surprisingly small compared to its counterpart in Mexico City. The religious building has a central nave in the shape of a cross, flanked by niche chapels. To the south of the cathedral is the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (MARCO), one of the best contemporary art museums in the country.

Back at Macroplaza, continue walking north to the **Esplanada de los Héroes** (Esplanade of the Heroes), lined with



BEST CAFES IN MONTERREY

Libros Café Y Detalles

Bibliophiles will adore this cafe-bookstore with its hardcover-filled walls and indulgent menu. \$

Tierra Libre

Another cozy spot to indulge in organic Mexican-grown coffee and a selection of books in Spanish. \$

Trece Lunas

An eclectic multicultural slow-food cafe in Barrio Antiguo with a huge menu focusing on *botanas* (shared platters). \$

monuments dedicated to Mexican heroes such as Miguel Hidalgo and Benito Juárez. It overlooks the 1908 **Palacio de Gobierno**, which features a regal neoclassical facade, blinged up by stained-glass windows.

To the east, **Plaza 400 Años**, graced with fountains and pools, forms an impressive approach to the modernist **Museo de Historia Mexicana** (Mexican History Museum), a multi-level museum showcasing the history of Mexico, from the pre-Hispanic era to the 20th century. Over 1200 artifacts are on display, including Olmec stone heads and a real locomotive. Admission also covers the **Museo del Noreste**, to which it's attached via a glass-enclosed bridge. This museum focuses on the geography, culture and history of north-eastern Mexico.

Wander around Barrio Antiguo

INJECTING NEW LIFE INTO THE HISTORIC DOWNTOWN

In recent years, Barrio Antiguo, Monterrey's historic downtown, has experienced a revival. The violence that besieged the city in the early 2000s was played out in many of this neighborhood's bars and nightclubs, driving out many businesses from the area. But things are looking up as a mélange of third-wave coffee shops, craft-beer stores and indie boutiques return, tempting the crowds back into the old quarter. It is still a work in progress, but there's a spirit of hope in the air.

From the Macroplaza, head east along the pedestrianized Calle Morelos, where hip bars, beer gardens and specialty shops sit side by side. Make your first stop at the **Mercedo Barrio Antiguo**, a lively food hall bursting with street grub and craft beer. Grab an *antojito* (snack) and continue strolling to **Libros Café Y Detalles**, a charismatic bookstore that doubles as a cafe with floor-to-ceiling shelves covered in books and trinkets.

Diagonally across from it is the flamboyant restaurant **Me Muero de Hambre**, splashed in vivid pastel colors. Standing at what is the liveliest cross-junction of the Barrio Antiguo, the eclectic joint has a casual corner for tacos, another for creative Mexican fare, and an open roof terrace with fine views and popular wood-fired pizzas.

Running perpendicular to Calle Morelos is the car-free Calle Mina, which transforms into the **Corredor del Arte** on Sundays with a whimsical collection of antiques, handicrafts and knickknacks. The whole district springs to life, with locals hunting for one-of-a-kind items amid piles of secondhand clothes, vintage records and antique housewares.



MUSIC FESTIVALS IN MONTERREY

Monterrey is home to numerous big-name festivals and stellar live-music venues, making it quite the destination for music lovers. Here are some of the most important events that take place in Monterrey each year:

Pa'l Norte Every spring, this mega-music festival takes over Parque Fundidora with performances from the biggest names, including Carlos Santana.

Hellow Festival Monterrey's longest-running music festival takes the city by storm every August, with a diverse roster of acts in different genres, from hip-hop to EDM.

Beyond Wonderland This multi-staged, Alice-in-Wonderland-themed festival is an extravaganza of electronic dance music, interactive exhibits and a multicolored light show.

Coffee with Aliens

Come for the specialty coffee and gourmet beans and stay for the ambience. \$\$

BreAd Panaderos Artesanales

Breakfast takes on new meaning at this bakery in San Pedro that specializes in European-style bread and pastries. \$\$

Mon Paris – Gomez Morin

Get transported to France at this French cafe in San Pedro with delectable crepes and pain au chocolat. \$\$



SAFETY IN MONTERREY

As recently as 2012, Monterrey battled the drug wars up close, but the violence and crime have reduced substantially in the last five years. Barrio Antiguo to the east of Macroplaza and the bustling Zona Rosa on its west side are both largely considered safe by day and night. It's always advisable to stick to the main roads and avoid walking alone after dark. The main area to steer clear of is the crime-plagued barrio of Colonia Independencia, across the highway from Centro.



GABRIELBAHENA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Paseo Santa Lucía

Walk further south to reach Calle Jardón where the city's antique stores are concentrated. **D'michaus** has a junkyard of metal treasures and an interior bursting at the seams with bronze sculptures, replicas of Victorian-era paintings and aged leather chaise lounges.

In the evening, kick back at the ultra-cool **Almacén 42**, where shipping containers have been converted into an urban hipster bar. Forty-two craft beers from all over Mexico are on tap at any given time, as well as a solid menu of shared platters and tacos. Across the road is **La Oveja Negra Taverna**, a craft tavern slingin' German beers and surprising German grub, including *bratwurst* and *eisbein* (roasted pork knuckle). The nearby **Café Iguana** is an institution where the biggest bands have played, covering different genres of music. The nightclub is the epicenter of Monterrey's alternative scene.

The City's Green Lungs

RIVER WALKS, BIKE RIDES AND MUSEUM WANDERS

An artificial river wends through the heart of industrial Monterrey, with a beautiful 2.3km promenade running alongside it. Only completed in 2008, **Paseo Santa Lucía** is a world-class example of urban regeneration. Take a leisurely stroll down the leafy pathway or hop in the river boats that leave from the dock at Plaza 400 Años (though the waiting time can be long on busy weekends). There are a few restaurants at its western end, as well as 24 bridges and 13 fountains spanning the river.

At the eastern terminus of the Paseo Santa Lucía promenade lies **Parque Fundidora**, the sprawling lungs of the city



OTHER SIGHTS IN PARQUE FUNDIDORA

Parque Expedición Amazonia

A wildlife park with 80 species of birds and other animals, dinosaur figures and thrilling rides.

Papalote Museo del Niño

This kids' museum is a fun spot with dinosaur fossils, interactive hydroponics exhibits and a 3D IMAX theater.

Arena Monterrey

The largest arena in Monterrey, where most concerts and sports events are held.



Cerro de la Silla

transformed from a once-blighted industrial zone. Today, a network of jogging paths and bike lanes crisscross the park, revealing views of the iconic Cerro de la Silla mountain. You can easily spend the day here – rent a bike or paddle around the lake in a rowboat then pop into the various museums and eoparks dotted around.

But if you only have time to see one attraction, make it the **Museo del Acero Horno3**. The former blast furnace has been ingeniously converted into an impressive high-tech, hands-on museum dedicated to Mexico's steel industry. The museum aims to blow your mind the minute you step in: from the steaming rocks at the entrance to the open-air caged elevator that leads to the summit for dramatic views of Monterrey. The highlight is the dramatic furnace show, beamed hourly from the bulk of Horno3. Thrill-seekers should aim to visit during the weekend, when you can do a zip-lining and rappelling tour from the top of the tower. Book online to ensure availability. The museum's contemporary cafe-restaurant, **El Lingote**, is a destination on its own for foodies, serving creative fusion cuisine and craft beer with views over the park.

Panoramic Viewpoints

DRINK IN HISTORY AND VIEWS

In a mountain-ringed city like Monterrey, there's no shortage of peaks and viewpoints offering jaw-dropping views of the surroundings. The most easily accessible one is the **Cerro del Obispo** (Bishop's Hill), 4km west of downtown and reachable by car.

A large round-shaped lookout is perched at the top of the



WHERE TO EAT IN MONTERREY

Mercado Barrio Antiguo

This hip food hall is a buzzing place with communal tables and a dozen street vendors. \$

Palax Linda Vista

Open 24 hours a day, this local favorite dishes out *norteño* favorites like *tacos de lengua* (tongue tacos) and *machaca* (dried beef). \$

El Rey de Cabrito

A bizarre yet entertaining spot to try Monterrey's signature dish *cabrito al pastor* (roast kid goat). \$\$

Madre Oaxaca

Decked out in all kinds of folk art, this charmer of a restaurant serves authentic Oaxacan dishes. \$\$\$



WHERE TO STAY IN MONTERREY

Hoteles Antigua Casona Allende

A stylish boutique hotel in the Barrio Antiguo with mosaic floors and exposed brick walls. \$

Gamma Monterrey Gran Hotel Ancira

Surprisingly affordable rooms in a 1912 neoclassical building in a central location. \$\$

Safi Royal Luxury Metropolitan

An ultra-luxurious contemporary hotel located in the upscale district of San Pedro, with views of the Sierra Madre all around. \$\$\$



MORE VIEWS IN MONTERREY

Cerro de la Silla

Monterrey's emblematic Saddle Hill has an abandoned cable car esplanade that offers spectacular panoramic views (it takes around 90 minutes to hike up).

Cerro del Chupón

A 4.8km loop trail south of downtown takes you up to the top of Sucker Hill for great vistas.



SERGIO MENDOZA HOCHMANN/GETTY IMAGES ©

Cerro del Obispo (p625)

hill (775m), opening up to spectacular 360-degree vistas of the city and the encircling Sierra Madre Oriental mountains. In the center of the **Mirador del Obispo** stands the biggest monumental flag in Mexico, with a pole measuring 100m in height. On Mexico's Independence Day, this is where dance performances, light shows and fireworks take place. There is a parking lot, benches and restrooms at the park entrance.

Right below the mirador is the mustard-yellow **Palacio del Obispo**, originally erected here to house the seat of religious authority in Nuevo León state. In 1902, President Porfirio Díaz converted it into the **Museo Regional de Nuevo León El Obispo** and it eventually opened in 1952, with a collection of artifacts from the building's own religious history.



GETTING AROUND

In a megapolis the size of Monterrey, you can expect traffic – lots of it. Beyond downtown and Barrio Antiguo, the city is very spread out and a car is necessary to navigate the mishmash of highways and flyovers. For those planning to drive, be aware of reckless drivers and pack lots of patience.

Monterrey has a modern metro system but it mainly serves the downtown areas. Metrorrey currently consists of three lines: Linea 1

travels above ground from the northwest to the eastern suburbs; Linea 2 begins underground at Macroplaza and runs to the northern suburbs; Linea 3 connects Zaragoza station with the northeastern areas. Frequent buses will get you to places you can't reach by metro; remember to carry coins with you. Otherwise, car shares and taxis are ubiquitous and reasonably priced.



Beyond Monterrey

Beyond Monterrey's sprawling and seemingly endless suburbs, the majestic Sierra Madre Oriental mountains promise a world of adventure.



In a city where mountaintop wilderness lies within easy reach of urban life, every day is a new adventure. The Sierra Madre Oriental mountains that rise magnificently around Monterrey harbor a trove of hiking trails and climbing routes that are incredibly accessible to locals.

The affluent San Pedro district is just a one-hour hike up to the plateau of the Parque Ecológico Chipinque, where bears still roam freely. To the west of the city, thrill-seekers can challenge themselves by climbing the steep rock faces at the Parque Ecológico La Huasteca. Further outside of the city, the 3.5km-long cave system of Grutas de García will impress any kind of traveler.

With more time on hand, head further west to Coahuila state, replete with rolling vineyards and unique desert ecosystems. Some of its highlights include the idyllic wine mecca of Parras, the stromatolite-rimmed *pozas* (pools) of Cuatro Ciénegas and the desert town of Saltillo.

TOP TIP

Renting a car is the most convenient way to explore Monterrey's mountains, but be prepared to manoeuvre hairpin bends and steep inclines.



Parque Ecológico La Huasteca

LOW-KEY DAY TRIPS FROM MONTERREY

Those seeking soft adventures or a cultural fix will find an abundance of day-trip options near Monterrey.

Villa de Santiago

Monterrey locals flock to this charming town 45km southeast of the big city on weekends for its calm atmosphere, laidback vibes and riverfront dining.

Cascada Cola de Caballo

Monterrey's most impressive waterfall, on the outskirts of Santiago, is a stunning sight, best observed from the bridge that spans across the falls.

Termas San Joaquín

A natural hot spring with Moorish-style baths and resort amenities in the middle of the Coahuila Desert.

Linares This *pueblo mágico* 130km southeast of Monterrey is best known for its *glorias* and *marquesitas*, sweets made with cooked milk and nuts.



Mexican jay, Parque Ecológico Chipinque

Monterrey's Surrounding Wilderness

PEAKS, CANYONS AND CAVES

Looming over the metropolis of Monterrey is a sequence of jagged peaks that form the massive Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey. This park protects over 1770 sq km of craggy canyons, plunging waterfalls and many of the *cerros* (hills) that punctuate Monterrey's skyline. In a city where 1800m-tall mountains are called hills, you can just imagine the sheer scale of the lofty mountains that surround it.

Morning hikes in Chipinque

The most accessible point of the national park is **Parque Ecológico Chipinque** on the southern edge of the city, 19km southwest of downtown. The mountaintop reserve is a 15-minute (steep) drive from the manicured thoroughfares of the plush San Pedro district. This incredibly well-protected northern part of the Sierra Madre Oriental features fantastic hiking up to rocky peaks, including the 2200m-high summit of Copete de las Águilas, and mountain biking trails through deciduous forest.

The visitor center at the entrance provides maps, trail advice and permits. Tread carefully as the area has a population of black bears and sightings are not uncommon. Avoid



ADVENTURE-TOUR OPERATORS IN MONTERREY

Ibo Adventures

Monterrey's biggest adventure company organizes canyoning, bungee jumping and skydiving adventures.

Hiking MTY

Hiking MTY runs regular group hikes around Monterrey, and canyoning and mountaineering expeditions further afield.

Yeti Adventures

This outfitter organizes small-group canyoning and hiking the city limits of Monterrey.

walking alone or veering off the trail. Entrance tickets (M\$70) must be purchased online in advance. Catch bus 130 from the junction of Vasconcelos and Gómez in the San Pedro area; an Uber ride from downtown should cost no more than M\$150.

Climb the Huasteca canyon

Rock climbers and active hikers can get their adrenaline fix at the **Parque Ecológico La Huasteca**, 16km west of the center at the edge of the Santa Catarina district. Also forming part of the Cumbres de Monterrey, La Huasteca presents a starkly different landscape to Chipinque. Colossal spines of karst limestone rise sharply, reaching into the skies, above the vertiginous walls of the Cañón de la Huasteca. Its walls, marked with prehistoric glyphs created thousands of years ago, tell the story of the illusive Huichol people who made annual pilgrimages here for millennia.

These days, the canyon's wide selection of climbing routes – ranging from beginner-friendly to advanced circuits – attracts rock climbers from all over the world. Catch bus 505 from Av Doctor Ignacio Morones Prieto or a car share for around M\$200 each way.

The caves of Grutas de García

One of Mexico's most impressive cave systems, the **Grutas de García** extends for over 3.5km inside the Sierra del Fraile, just 64km northwest of downtown Monterrey. These caves are said to have formed around 60 million years ago, when they were submerged under the sea. If you look close enough, you'll see marine fossils embedded in the cave walls.

A scenic *teleférico* climbs 750m up to the cave in just five minutes. It was closed for repair works at the time of writing; please check before visiting. Otherwise, the 1.5km hike up along a well-paved path is manageable. As you enter the cave, you'll find two routes: one is 2.5km long and passes through 16 different chambers; the other is a shorter option, at 1km long, leading to 11 chambers. Both paths reveal equally impressive, massive chambers full of stalactites and stalagmites. Highlights include La Octava Maravilla (the Eighth Wonder), a huge column formed by a stalagmite and stalactite fused together, and El Mirador de la Mano, a stalagmite that resembles a giant shriveled hand.

Coahuila State

VINEYARDS, DESERTS AND CLOUD FORESTS

Just 50km west of Monterrey lies the serene Coahuila state, far calmer and more relaxed (outside of Torreón) than neighboring states and yet virtually unknown to foreign visitors.



ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES NEAR MONTERREY

Canyoning

The Matacanes Canyon in Sierra de Santiago, just south of Monterrey, offers a 12km route along underground rivers, waterfalls and natural slides every summer.

Rock Climbing

Just 45km northwest of Monterrey is the world-famous Potrero Chico, Mexico's rock-climbing capital.

Via Ferrata

There are two *via ferrata* routes (Rutas Vertigo and Ignis) at Parque Ecológico La Huasteca suitable for experienced hikers and climbers.

Paragliding

Take to the skies with a paragliding instructor in tandem over the mountains of Santiago, 45km southeast of Monterrey.

Gaia Xtreme

Runs popular canyoning, paragliding and hiking tours around Monterrey, as well as activities in other parts of Mexico.

Emoción Extrema

Book mountaineering, canyoning and rappelling tours with this experienced operator based in Monterrey.

GEO Aventuras

Sign up for a *via ferrata* or multi-day canyoning tour and stay at their own lodge in the Sierra Madre Oriental mountains.



BEST PLACES TO STAY IN COAHUILA STATE

Hotel Rancho el Morillo

Built in 1934, this atmospheric hacienda on the edge of Saltillo is set in extensive grounds with trails around its orchard. \$\$

Finca del Rocío

Family-run finca with a lush garden, outdoor pool and well-priced rooms. \$\$

Casona del Banco

A historic bank-turned-hotel in Parras that serves up colonial luxury on a grand scale. \$\$\$

Hacienda 1800

The fanciest hotel in Cuatrociénegas with chic villas and organised activities in the heart of the Coahuila Desert. \$\$\$



Saltillo

ROBERTO GALAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; RIGHT: OLIVER ALEXANDER ANDERSON HIERVA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

This part of Northern Mexico does nature like nowhere else. A standout is the **Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas**, a 843-sq-km nature reserve in the middle of the Desierto Chihuahuense speckled with hundreds of shimmering cerulean *pozas* (natural pools). Cuatrociénegas is home to over 75 endemic species and stromatolites, Earth's oldest living life form.

To get under the skin of the Coahuila desert, head to the **Museo del Desierto** in the town of Saltillo. The no-expense-spared Desert Museum is highly informative and enjoyable (even if you don't speak Spanish). There's also a reptile house, dinosaur figures and a botanical garden with over 400 cactus species. While you're here, take the chance to get acquainted with **Saltillo** (founded in 1577), the oldest town in north-east Mexico, boasting fine colonial buildings and enjoyable cultural surprises.

Some 160km west of Saltillo, the graceful oasis town of **Parras** is the region's main wine-growing area. Thanks to a delightfully temperate climate and natural irrigation (underground streams from the sierra), Parras has been growing grapes since the late 16th century. Its most famous vineyard, **Casa Madero**, is the oldest winery in the Americas. On weekends, Casa Madero offers one-hour tours through the vineyards, either on horseback or by carriage. You can also just come for tastings – M\$300 for three wines, served in the building next to the chapel. Every August, Parras holds a **Feria de la Uva** (Grape Fair) that culminates at Casa Madero.



GETTING AROUND

Buses to the national parks and nearby states all depart from Monterrey's colossal bus station, Central de Autobuses. There are regular departures to Saltillo and Parras (leaving every 45 minutes), but the nature reserves and wilderness areas are best

explored with your own transportation. In Cuatrociénegas, navigating the reserve without a guide is tricky, as the desert tracks are not always signposted. Using the services of a guide is wise also for the trekking and rock-climbing activities.

DURANGO



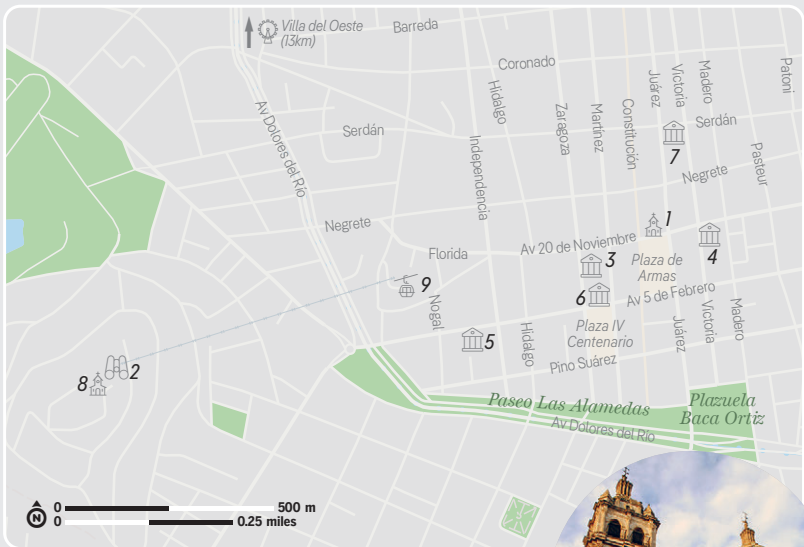
TOP TIP

Durango has a quiet regional airport: Aeropuerto Guadalupe Victoria, 15km northeast of town on Hwy 40D. It has flights to Dallas, Mexico City and Tijuana. A taxi to/from central Durango costs M\$300 to M\$350. Central Camionera de Durango, Durango's main bus terminal, is 5km east of the center, with frequent bus departures to Zacatecas, Mazatlán, Los Mochis and Chihuahua.

Hemmed in by the Sierra Madre mountains and vast desert, the landlocked state of Durango has long been isolated from other parts of the country. This isolation has fostered unique regional traits, such as the distinctive local cuisine and wry humor.

The desert landscape has also put Durango on the world map – it was here where many iconic Western movies were filmed. The movie sets, just a few kilometers from the capital, are now saloon-style theme parks with entertaining gunslingers shooting it out.

The capital of the eponymous desert state is a pleasant surprise for all who visit. Its attractive, beautifully kept city center is chock-a-block with over 70 historic buildings, many of them converted into interesting museums. With a friendly local populace and an abundance of historical and cultural spots, Durango makes for an intriguing destination well off the well-trodden path.



SIGHTS

- 1 Catedral del Basílica Menor
- 2 Mirador de los Remedios
- 3 Museo de Arqueología de Durango Ganot-Peschard
- 4 Museo de la Ciudad 450

- 5 Museo de las Culturas Populares
- 6 Museo Francisco Villa
- 7 Museo Regional de Durango
- 8 Templo de los Remedios
- 9 Paseo Teleférico

Catedral del Basílica Menor (p632)





WHERE TO EAT IN DURANGO

Wallerder

A wonderful deli that sells the homegrown products of the Wallander family farm. \$

Fonda Antigua Usanza Cocina Duranguense

It's easy to miss this simple eatery, but its *pollo pipian verde* (chicken in spicy green sauce) is the best in town. \$

Fonda de la Tía Chona

This Durango institution is a richly atmospheric place dedicated to local dishes such as *caldillo duranguense* (Durango stew). \$\$

Esquilón

High ceilings, arched walls and a grand patio make this restaurant a must-visit for those seeking Duranguense cuisine. \$\$

Ramble around the Historic Center

MUMMIES, LEGENDS AND HOLLYWOOD STARS

The wonderfully laid-back center of Durango is best known for having the most historic buildings in Northern Mexico. The star of the show here is the stunning **Catedral del Basílica Menor** overlooking the fountain-filled, treelined Plaza de Armas. Built between the 17th and 18th centuries, the cathedral is characterized by a baroque exterior and two prominent bell towers on the sides.

In the center of the Plaza de Armas, you can descend to the dark yet intriguing **Paseo Túnel Minería Durango** (Tunnel of Mining), an underground passage with displays and audiovisual presentations that explain the city's mining history and terrifying legends of Durango. One of the most peculiar exhibits is the mummy of a vampire child that supposedly appeared in Nombre de Dios; another is a Chanéque goblin that, according to legend, appears in mines.

Calle Constitución, the street running west of Plaza de Armas, is among Mexico's most appealing traffic-free streets, lined with restaurants and cafes. Heading south along the pedestrianized street, you'll find life-size bronze statues of movie stars who filmed here. Durango's Walk of Fame immortalizes many Hollywood icons including Jack Nicholson (in *Goin' South*), Tony Scott and Kevin Costner (in *Revenge*), and Penélope Cruz (in *Bandidas*). They also pay tribute to the greatest Mexican movie stars, such as María Rojo, Diana Bracho, Felipe Cazals and Dolores del Río (who lived in Durango).

Continue further south to **Paseo Las Alamedas**, a quiet green space perfect for an evening stroll. Wander along the long walkway, stopping to admire the photography exhibition or sculpture, before you reach the dancing water fountain. Cross the Puente de las Alamedas bridge to reach the **Templo de Analco**, a neo-Gothic church built in 1778 featuring a Mudéjar-style facade and a conical roof. Its most striking feature is the large ornate circular clock.

Tour Durango's Museums

REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY AND DURANGO CULTURE

Many of Durango's historical buildings have been transformed into museums and educational institutions. **Museo de la Ciudad 450** is perhaps the most impressive of them all, with interactive exhibits ranging from pre-Hispanic times through colonization to the present day. Housed in a 1901 building, the museum has an entire section dedicated to the film industry, highlighting the 130 films that have been made in and near the city, including *Zorro* (1997) and *Texas Rising* (2015).



WHERE TO STAY IN DURANGO

La Casona Real

Offering great value, this budget hotel has small but new and sparkling clean rooms. \$

Hostal de la Monja

Inside a 19th-century mansion facing the cathedral, with luxurious rooms and a high-ceilinged courtyard. \$\$

Posada de Maria

A heritage hotel with dated but atmospheric rooms, a rooftop pool and terrace views of the cathedral. \$\$\$



Museo Francisco Villa

Two blocks north is the **Museo Regional de Durango**, set within a palatial French-style mansion. The museum has detailed exhibits about Durango state's history and culture, with a special emphasis on Durango-born revolutionary hero Pancho Villa. Villa fans can dig deeper at the **Museo Francisco Villa**, west of Plaza de Armas, where his personal items and displays (mostly in Spanish) tell the story of Durango's most famous native.

To its immediate north is the **Museo de Arqueología de Durango Ganot-Peschard**, a small, dated museum with a collection of artifacts from the different indigenous peoples who've lived in the region since the Paleolithic era. Kids will enjoy the recreation of an archaeological dig, complete with dim lighting, skeletons and pottery.

Continue two blocks west to find the **Museo de las Culturas Populares**, which showcases craftwork from Durango state's indigenous Tepehuans and Huicholes. Look out for the intricately carved masks – they are hauntingly beautiful.



FERIA NACIONAL DURANGO

Arguably the best time to visit Durango is during its annual feria, which lasts for three weeks in July. Durango's big annual party celebrates its agricultural roots with *charreadas* (Mexican rodeos) and a *duranguense* music fest. Amusement park rides and food vendors round out the festivities. Free transportation is typically offered to the fairgrounds, which are 9km from the center; check the website for details.



CHIHUAHUA

Pancho Villa headed the Mexican Revolution and established his headquarters in Chihuahua. One of his mansions has been converted to **Museo Histórico de la Revolución** (pólo), easily the best place in Mexico to learn about Villa.



BEST CAFES AND BARS IN DURANGO

Wirikuta Cafe

One of the few places in Northern Mexico that takes coffee culture seriously. \$

Luum Coffee Bar

Well-trained baristas concoct mind-blowingly good coffee at this third-wave coffee shop. \$\$

Cantina Tradicional Juan Matador

A long-time local favorite, this modern cantina is lively and boisterous on weekend nights. \$\$



HIGHEST BRIDGE IN THE AMERICAS

Soaring an incredible 402m above the Río Baluarte, the **Puente Baluarte** is an incredible feat of engineering. It's one of many incredible bridges on the Durango–Mazatlán Hwy, a magnificent toll road that boasts some of Mexico's most incredible scenery, with epic tunnels through mountains, hairpin bends and jaw-dropping views all the way. If you only drive one road in Mexico, make it this one.



PIXELS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Puente Baluarte

Western Theme Parks

HOLLYWOOD FILM SETS

From the 1950s to the 1990s, Durango's untamed deserts and ragged mountains were locations for the Hollywood and Mexican film industries. John Wayne, Steve McQueen and Clark Gable all spent time filming here. The 2006 Western blockbuster *Bandidas*, starring Salma Hayek and Penélope Cruz, was also made in the state.

Just 12km outside of Durango city, **Paseo del Viejo Oeste** is a former film set where many of the big-screen cowboys left their mark. Today, the set is a souvenir-drenched theme park where gunslinging cowboys gallop around the saloon and battle it out at weekends (shows are at 1.30pm and 3.30pm on Saturdays and Sundays). There are restaurants, souvenir shops, horse rentals and wagon rides to keep you entertained for a whole day. It's a great spot for both kids and adults.

On weekends, a bus leaves from Durango's Plaza de Armas a half-hour before each show and returns two hours later (though visitors are welcome to stay longer). To get there on weekdays, take any northbound bus and let the driver know where you're going. During holidays, there's an additional show at 5.30pm. A taxi from the center costs around M\$200, not including waiting time.



NATURE PARKS NEAR DURANGO

Parque Natural Mexiquillo Durango

A haven of great waterfalls, forests and ravines offering rappelling and mountaineering.

Parque Ecológico El Tecuán

Hike in pine forests and spot elk at this glorious wilderness area just 67km southwest of Durango.

Providencia Sierra Durango

This massive ecopark of ravines, plateaus and oak forests has excellent trekking, biking and zip-lining opportunities.



Mirador de los Remedios

Ride the Cable Car

UP AND AWAY!

For a bird's-eye view of Durango, hop onto the **Paseo Teleférico** at Cerro del Calvario, a small hill in the center of city. The modern cable car takes you up to a viewpoint just 680m away, the **Mirador de los Remedios**. Inaugurated on November 6, 2010, the cable car stations and gondolas are shiny, newish and well-maintained.

Perched on the hilltop is the **Templo de los Remedios**, a church built in 1640 on what was a sacred site for the indigenous Tepehuan people. Featuring an all-white bare-bones exterior, the temple welcomes visitors with turquoise walls and beautiful images of the Virgen de los Remedios.

Head to the viewpoint for dazzling views of the city – it's a popular spot for young couples to catch sunset views and watch the golden glow of the night lights (the cable car runs from 10am to 9pm daily). There's also a cafeteria and gift shop. Many cultural events such as open-air cinema and dance shows are held here regularly.



DURANGO'S ANCIENT PYRAMIDS

La Ferrería, the most northerly ancient pyramids in the Americas, lies just 9km south of Durango's center. In truth, the site requires some imagination, as not much has survived. But based on the foundations of circular temples, ball game courts and pyramids, archaeologists believe that this was the largest and most populated site in the Guadiana Valley.



GETTING AROUND

The Central Camionera de Durango is the main bus terminal in the city – buses serving other destinations in Durango state or next-door Zacatecas and Sinaloa all leave from here. Catch the 'Centro' or 'ISSSTE' buses from the

parking lot to get to Plaza de Armas. Taxicost between M\$50 and M\$70 to the center. To get to the bus station from downtown, catch a 'Camionera' bus on Calle Negrete, one block south of the Museo Regional.



TOOLKIT

The chapters in this section cover the most important topics you'll need to know about in Mexico. They're full of nuts-and-bolts information and valuable insights to help you understand and navigate Mexico and get the most out of your trip.



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Accommodations
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Travel**
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**Food, Drink
& Nightlife**
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**Responsible
Travel**
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**LGBTIQ+
Travelers**
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Arriving



Most visitors arrive at the Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juárez (aka Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México), not to be confused with Aeropuerto Internacional Felipe Ángeles, the capital's smaller airport. Connections to more than 75 cities throughout Mexico allow you to get nearly anywhere by air. Airport taxis and rideshare apps Uber and Didi provide the most convenient transportation into town.



Visas

US, Canadian and EU nationals and citizens from dozens of other countries do not need visas to enter Mexico. However, all tourists are required to obtain tourist permits that must be shown to exit the country.



SIM Cards

If you have an unlocked phone, purchase a SIM card in Oxxo convenience stores; airport locations sell both the 'chips' and pre-paid data packages. Telcel has the widest coverage in Mexico.



Border Crossing

US citizens traveling by land or sea can enter Mexico and return to the US with a passport card, but visitors arriving by air need a passport book.



Wi-Fi

The airport's two main terminal buildings provide free wi-fi service should you need to download a rideshare app or search for your hotel's location. Elsewhere, wi-fi access is widespread.

Public Transportation From the Airport

Mexico City



TAXI

20mins
M\$270



BUS

40mins
M\$30



METRO

35mins
M\$5



RIDESHARE

20mins
M\$140

Cancún



TAXI

30mins
M\$600



BUS

55mins
M\$110



SHUTTLE

45mins
from
M\$270

SAFETY FIRST

Official airport taxis and rideshare services such as Uber and Didi provide the safest and most convenient transportation into the city. Do not hail streets cabs outside the airport. The Metro, with a stop near Terminal I, is the cheapest ride in town but it can be cumbersome when arriving with suitcases, especially during peak hours. While riding the oft-crowded Metro watch out for pickpockets and always keep your bags in sight. Metrobús, a rapid transit bus line serving the airport's two terminals, is a safe and affordable option for reaching the Historic Center.



Getting Around

Rental car rates and airfares spike in the peak travel periods of *Semana Santa* (the week before Easter), the Mexican vacation season of July and August and the Christmas–New Year weeks.

TRAVEL COSTS



Rental car
From **M\$700**
per day



Gas
approx. **M\$23/liter**



Bus from Mexico City
to Puerto Vallarta
M\$1400



Round-trip flight from
Mexico City to Cancún
From M\$2000



Bus

Mexico has an efficient network of comfortable and affordable buses. Most major bus lines sell tickets online, some with discounted fares for advance purchases. Deluxe, executive and 1st-class services have reclining seats with plenty of legroom, air-con and video screens. The slower 2nd-class lines lack any amenities.

Renting a Car

Most rental car rates include unlimited kilometers and liability coverage (*daños a terceros* in Spanish). Major credit cards usually provide some form of collision coverage. To rent a vehicle, you need a valid driver's license from your home country, a passport and credit card.

On the Road

Driving at night is best avoided due to hard-to-see speed bumps, poorly lit roads and potential highway robberies. For long drives, stick to the better-maintained toll roads. Drivers often flash their bright lights or use their left-turn signal to indicate they want to pass your vehicle.

DRIVING IN MEXICO

When you get behind the wheel in Mexico, consider this: most motorists have never taken a driver's test! So, if driving seems like a free-for-all, that's because it is. Drivers might view red lights and speed limits as mere suggestions, while a left turn from a middle lane is par for the course. Stay alert, especially when driving on poorly maintained roads, and always be wary of nighttime carjackings and holdups in cities and on non-toll roads.



Plane

In the off-season, it's possible to find discounted domestic airfares that may make it cheaper to fly than take a bus. Low-cost carriers such as VivaAerobus and Volaris usually have the best deals. Occasionally you'll find bargains on Aeromexico, Mexico's flagship airline.



Colectivos, Combi & Passenger Vans

Passenger vans, combis and *colectivos* provide shared transportation service along fixed routes. Most have more frequent service than buses and they're usually cheaper. Hail them on any corner, then tell the driver where you want to hop off: *La próxima esquina, por favor* (next corner, please).



TIP

For free emergency road assistance and towing service while on federal highways, call the reliable Angeles Verdes at 078.



DRIVING ESSENTIALS



Drive on the right.



Speed limit is 110km/h on highways; carry cash for toll roads.

0.8

Blood alcohol limit is 0.8g/L in most states.

Money

CURRENCY: MEXICAN PESO (M\$)



ATMs

ATMs are plentiful in large and midsize cities, while it's hit or miss in rural areas. In small towns with a couple ATMs, the machines may run out of money.



Credit Cards

Credit cards are widely accepted in large urban centers, especially in midrange and top-end restaurants, stores and hotels. When visiting small towns always carry plenty of cash. Most gas stations accept Visa and Mastercard. Some businesses tack on so-called 'commission' fees for credit-card payments.

Tipping

Hotels Leave about 5% to 10% of the room cost.

Restaurants Tip 10% to 15%.

Taxis Drivers generally don't expect tips but they're always welcome.

Gas station and parking attendants M\$5 to M\$10 is the norm.

Porters M\$25 per bag.

Tour guides 10% to 20%.



Bargaining

Most prices in stores are fixed; however, it's okay to bargain with street and market vendors. Always agree on a fare before hopping into unmetered taxis.

HOW MUCH FOR...



midrange hotel
M\$800-1200



short taxi ride
M\$35-50



guided tour
M\$2000-3000



two-hour bus trip
M\$250-300

HOW TO...

Stretch Your Pesos

In an attempt to get tourists to tip twice, some unscrupulous restaurants and bars may tack on a hidden 'service fee' or 'mandatory' gratuity to a bill without informing customers of the charge. Tips are voluntary in Mexico and this practice is considered illegal. To get the most bang for your buck, pay with a major credit card to avoid exorbitant ATM transaction fees or poor currency exchange rates.



LOCAL TIP

Always carry cash in Mexico; even in large urban centers credit-card terminals may not work. Having said that, carry only what you need for your daily expenses.

MINDFUL TRAVEL

Many workers in Mexico's service sector depend on tips to supplement miserable wages. It's customary to leave gratuities for grocery baggers as well as

parking and gas station attendants. Also, keep in mind that a decent tip can go a long way for hotel and restaurant employees who are struggling to make

ends meet. And while it's okay to haggle with vendors working in the informal economy, be aware that they rely on your support for their livelihood.



Accommodations

B&Bs & Luxury Stays

Mexico overflows with top-flight accommodations ranging from private villas with stunning vistas and elegant B&Bs in striking historic mansions to family-friendly all-inclusive resorts and adults-only luxury hotels catering to couples. Most put a premium on attractive design concepts, quality gastronomic offerings and above-and-beyond service. Keep in mind that Mexico's top-end establishments hike rates significantly during busy periods.

Welcoming Guesthouses & Cabañas

For a fine midrange alternative to boxy hotel rooms, book a stay in a spacious *cabaña* (cabin), many of which come equipped with full kitchens, dining areas and balconies or porches. *Casas de huéspedes* (guesthouses) provide plenty of opportunities to mingle with other guests, and in some, you'll find yourself socializing with the hosts over breakfast or afternoon drinks.

Sleep on the Cheap

In the budget category, you get a mixed bag of hostels with dirt-cheap dorms and bare-bones private rooms to impeccable digs with modern furnishings and activities galore. Take advantage of the convivial vibe to meet other travelers over breakfast or while on organized tours arranged by the hosts. Ask about discounts for cash payments and multiday stays.

HOW MUCH FOR A NIGHT IN...



a hostel dorm
M\$200-500



a guesthouse
M\$800-2500



a high-end B&B or resort
M\$2000-5000



Camp Under the Stars

Hostels, budget hotels and various trailer parks sometimes provide affordable camping sites where you can sleep under the starry skies while enjoying warm weather throughout most of the year. Another budget-oriented sleeping option, mostly for low-key beach destinations, is hammocks, but bring plenty of mosquito repellent. If it's too buggy or chilly, some of these spots also rent no-frills cabins.

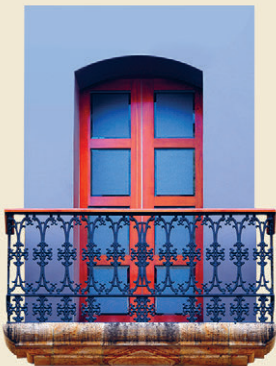
Budget Bliss

You'll come across plenty of good-value *posadas* (inns often run by families). Some setups are similar to *casas de huéspedes*, but while guesthouses cover all budgets, *posada* offerings typically fall under budget or midrange categories. *Posadas* in remote locations with no phone service often use apps such as Whatsapp or Messenger for reservations and information.

RENTALS & AIRBNB

Vacation rentals for short- and long-term stays abound in Mexico and with giants like Airbnb and Vrbo in the picture, it's never been easier to find accommodations. But not everyone in Mexico sees the rapidly expanding homestay market as a good thing. In Tulum, locals blame Airbnb in part for

overtourism, while in Mexico City, residents say an influx of deep-pocketed digital nomads are driving rents up and forcing locals out of their neighborhoods. It's a thorny issue but a simple Google search still brings up plenty of alternatives to the big homestay platforms.





Family Travel

Family-oriented Mexico is a very welcoming place to travel with children. Kids dig the fun-filled parks, the colorful plazas with amusing street performers, the interactive museums, and the thrilling water activities and wildlife-watching. And because children are well received at almost any restaurant or hotel, the family-friendly vibe makes it a pleasant experience for parents as well.

Best Spots for Families

Cancún, the Riviera Maya and several nearby islands are tailor-made for traveling with children thanks to their family-friendly resorts, water parks, natural swimming holes and outstanding snorkeling. Meanwhile, along the Pacific coast, boat outings provide fascinating opportunities to spot enormous whales, wild dolphins and sea turtles. In the nation's capital, your children will never want to leave activities-packed Chapultepec park.

Accommodations

Before booking a stay in a resort hotel, verify that it accepts children. All-inclusive hotels are perfect for families seeking safe environments with plenty of activities for kids. Many establishments will bring cots or extra beds into the room at no extra cost. Apartments and vacation rentals usually come equipped with full kitchens and many have swimming pools.



Discounts

Museums, archaeological sites, water parks and even some hotels offer discounts for children. You'll also find family-ticket deals at some child-friendly attractions. When purchasing bus or airline tickets, look for half-off deals for kids aged 5 to 12.



Eating

Mexico's varied cuisine pleases even the most finicky of eaters. Tacos and other corn-based snacks are perfect for introducing kids to local flavors, or when all else fails there's no shortage of familiar fast-food options such as burgers and pizza.

KID-FRIENDLY PICKS

Copper Canyon train (p602)

All aboard the world-famous choo-choo that stops in fun-filled mountain towns.

Cobá (p257)

This ancient Maya site has a zip line and bikes for pedaling along jungle-flanked trails.

Bosque de Chapultepec (p111)

Mexico City's Chapultepec park is home to an interactive children's museum and a wow-inducing castle.

Playa Escobilla (p380)

Observe thousands of sea turtles come ashore in Oaxaca during the summer nesting season.

CARING FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Children tend to be more affected than adults by disrupted sleeping patterns and heat, so they may need time to acclimatize and require extra care for sunburn. Pack long-sleeve shirts, pants and insect repellent to protect your children against the sun and mosquitoes. Always pay close attention to your kids at the beach, some of which

have deadly riptides. Also, be especially careful when crossing streets in Mexico, as cars don't always stop for pedestrians. Some of the large resort hotels have reliable babysitter services if you're itching for a night out with grownups. Never leave your kids unattended in public spaces.





Health & Safe Travel

IS MEXICO SAFE?

Despite widespread news surrounding its brutal drug war, Mexico remains a relatively safe place to visit. Tourists have been largely spared from decades of violence occurring mostly between rival drug gangs. Sadly, the turf wars have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and the government has had limited success in its battle against organized crime. Visitors should avoid purchasing drugs.



Earthquakes

Mexico sits in a seismically active region and is prone to frequent and potentially powerful earthquakes, especially in Oaxaca and Mexico City. Some cities have alert systems that sound when a quake is coming. If you hear the warning, remain calm and move to open spaces away from tall buildings and power lines. If you're on the coast, head for high ground.



Stings & Infectious Diseases

Viral diseases such as dengue and zika are transmitted by infected Aedes mosquitos and can cause fever, joint pain and extreme fatigue. There are no treatments for them other than getting plenty of rest and water. Most cases occur in Mexico's rainy southern region. Always check shoes and bedding for scorpions. Apply ice to stings and seek medical attention immediately.



AVAILABLE HEALTHCARE

Private healthcare is relatively affordable and there's a whole medical tourism industry built around it in Mexico City, Guadalajara and Mérida.

INFOGRAPHIC HEADER



Green flag
Safe to swim



Yellow flag
Swim with caution;
watch for riptides



Red flag
Use extreme caution;
experienced swimmers
only



Black flag
Do not swim.



Altitude Sickness

Feeling loopy? Altitude sickness symptoms may include dizziness, fatigue, headaches, vomiting, loss of appetite and nausea. It often occurs when people ascend rapidly to altitudes higher than 2500m (8200ft). When visiting high-elevation cities such as Mexico City and San Cristóbal de las Casas, keep in mind that overexertion and drinking alcohol in excess can make the symptoms worse.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

Mexico has no required vaccinations, however, the CDC website (www.cdc.gov) recommends the following:

- **Diphtheria** Travelers visiting rural areas
- **Hepatitis A** Travelers except children under the age of one
- **Hepatitis B** Long-term travelers
- **Measles** Infants six to 11 months old
- **Rabies** Visitors who may come into contact with animals
- **Tetanus All travelers**
- **Tuberculosis** All travelers
- **Typhoid** All travelers

Food, Drink & Nightlife



When to Eat

Desayuno (breakfast) Usually available from 8am to 11am. Classic fare includes *chilaquiles* (salsa-bathed tortillas) and egg dishes like *huevos rancheros*.

Comida (lunch) Main meal served between 1:30pm and 4:30pm. The *comida corrida*, aka *menú del día*, is a three-course meal in inexpensive restaurants.

Cena (dinner) Mexicans eat light dinners or snacks like tamales and *pan dulce* (pastries), normally between 7pm and 10pm.

Where to Eat

Cantinas Traditional bars with snacky grub. Some bring free appetizers to the table with each round of drinks.

Fondas & comedores Casual restaurants serving homestyle fare and affordable three-course meals.

Mercados Tasty, inexpensive market fare; comfort food at its best.

Puestos Street and market stalls slinging an array of tantalizing eats.

Taquerías Wrap your fingers around Mexico's most iconic snack in atmospheric taco joints.

Restaurantes Restaurant options range from budget eateries to high-end establishments preparing elaborate *mole* dishes.



MENU DECODER

| | |
|--|--|
| A la parrilla Cooked over wood or charcoal | Michelada Beer cocktail |
| Al pastor Spit-cooked pork | Mole Rich sauces poured over meat and veggie dishes; sometime made from chocolate or nuts |
| Aves Poultry | Pan Bread |
| Barbacoa Slow-cooked beef, goat or lamb | Pescado Fish |
| Bebida Drink | Para llevar To go |
| Botanas Snacks; often free and served in bars | Plato fuerte Main dish |
| Bien cocida Cooked well-done | Puerco, cerdo Pork |
| Cóctel Cocktail | Postre Dessert |
| Casi cruda Rare | Propina Tip |
| Carne Meat | Salsa picante Spicy sauce |
| Cerveza Beer | Sopa Soup |
| Empanada Turnover | Término medio Cooked medium |
| Ensalada Salad | Vegano Vegan |
| Entrada Appetizer | Vegetariano Vegetarian |
| Fruta Fruit | Verduras Vegetables |
| Jugo Juice | Zarandeado Grilled fish |
| La cuenta The check | |
| Mariscos Seafood | |
| Menú degustación Tasting menu | |

HOW TO...

Keep it Cordial

Mexicans are hardly sticklers for etiquette but there are things you can do to make eating and drinking experiences go more smoothly. As a general rule, be patient with the staff, especially in rural areas where service tends to move at a slower pace. While dining, if vendors approach your table and you have no desire to purchase their wares, remember that they're just trying to make a living and kindly say '*Gracias, ahorita no*' (Thank you, not now). In restaurants and some bars, other diners may wish you a '*Buen provecho*' (Enjoy your meal), to which '*Gracias, igualmente*' (Thank you, same to you) is a respectful reply. Lastly, bear in mind that in Mexico you usually need to ask the waiter to bring the check ('*la cuenta, por favor*'), as most places consider it rude to leave the bill before customers have finished their meal or drinks.

HOW MUCH FOR...



cappuccino
M\$40-80



cocktail
from M\$150



dinner at a gourmet restaurant
M\$500-1000



main dish in a market
M\$50-80



mezcal or tequila
M\$70-150



taco
M\$15-40



three-course comida corrida
M\$60-100

HOW TO...

Eat & Drink Like a Local

Looking for genuine local flavor? Here are some tips for maximizing your experiences in one of the world's most dynamic culinary destinations. When hitting a *taqueria*, if available, order a *campechano*, an off-menu taco that combines several meats such as beef and *chorizo* (Mexican sausage). It's pure artery-choking joy! For affordable homestyle fare, ask any local where to find the best cheap eats in town and they'll invariably point you to the *mercado* (market). Hearty three-course meals served in markets and inexpensive restaurants will fill your belly for less than US\$5 and it's some of the most authentic cooking you'll ever try, plus it often comes with handmade tortillas and *agua fresca* (refreshing fruit drinks). When visiting so-called *botana* (snack) bars, take advantage of the free appetizers often served with drink orders. If you order enough rounds, you can make a meal out of it, and the food can be surprisingly tasty in some of the old-fashioned cantinas. Most importantly, don't be afraid to experiment with Mexico's vast and varied cuisine: munch on crunchy grasshoppers, delight in savory *moles* and exquisite *chiles en nogada* (stuffed poblano peppers) and get your fix of addictive *tacos al pastor* (spit-cooked pork tacos). And for more daring eaters (because nothing goes



Fast Fact

Did you know that traditional Mexican cuisine is so good that it made its way onto UNESCO's cultural heritage list? UNESCO calls it an 'elaborate and symbol-laden' cuisine that implements ancient techniques while using native ingredients.

to waste in Mexico), indulge in everything from *escamoles* (caviar-like ant larvae) and *gusanos de maguey* (edible agave worms) to *sesos* (beef brains) and *lengua* (tongue) tacos.

PAINTING THE TOWN ROJO

A night out in the big city may begin around 7pm with a light dinner at a sit-down restaurant or informal eatery serving anything from tacos and *tortas* (sandwiches) to a variety of corn-based snacks like tamales and *tostadas*. This is usually a convenient hour to hang with recently befriended travelers or meet others in your group. After the meal, duck into a cantina or intimate mezcal bar to get the party started. Pace yourself, though, as Mexico's potent agave spirits such as mezcal and tequila pack a punch. Mezcalerías tend to stay open later than traditional cantinas, most of which close around midnight. After some cantina carousing, it's time to move on to a vibrant dance club, live-music venue or chic

cocktail bar, all of which keep later hours. In fact, many of these places don't start jumping until after 11pm, so it's best to arrive fashionably late to soak up a more festive atmosphere. You can, however, show up early in some salsa clubs like Mexico City's Mama Rumba or Playa del Carmen's Bodeguita del Medio to take free dance classes before the crowds roll in. After an eventful evening of partying and shaking your booty, things often come full circle as you find yourself noshing once again, usually in a packed late-night taco joint. All of this, of course, applies to big-city life – try a late-night munchies run in a sleepy mountain town and you'll probably go to bed hungry.



Responsible Travel

Climate Change & Travel

It's impossible to ignore the impact we have when traveling, and the importance of making changes where we can. Lonely Planet urges all travelers to engage with their travel carbon footprint. There are many carbon calculators online that allow travelers to estimate the carbon emissions generated by their journey; try resurgence.org/resources/carbon-calculator.html. Many airlines and booking sites offer travelers the option of offsetting the impact of greenhouse gas emissions by contributing to climate-friendly initiatives around the world. We continue to offset the carbon footprint of all Lonely Planet staff travel, while recognizing this is a mitigation more than a solution.

Authentic Eco-Friendly Digs

Consider staying in legit ecolodges that focus on key issues in Mexico such as waste management and sustainable development practices. In some fashionable destinations like Tulum, self-proclaimed 'eco-chic' spots may be nothing more than greenwashing.

Responsible Whale-Watching

Marvel at the blue whale, the largest animal on the planet, on a boat outing with Loreto-based Sea & Land Tours, a reputable Baja operator that prohibits snorkeling with whales to mitigate stress for the gentle giants.



Turtle Sanctuaries

See what's being done to protect our flippered friends at the Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm and other sanctuaries in the Riviera Maya, Nayarit and Michoacán. Ongoing conservation efforts throughout Mexico have allowed some endangered turtle species to make a comeback.

Numerous non-profit organizations are looking for short- and long-term volunteers to help with wildlife conservation programs. At Centro Ecológico Akumal, Campamento Majahua and Pronatura, volunteers assist biologists in their fieldwork.

When visiting Mexico City's floating gardens of Xochimilco, take a gondola ride out to the artificial islands to purchase locally grown food from small producers, many of which play a key role in supplying the growing farm-to-table movement.

Purchase arts and crafts directly from the artisans who make them in order to empower local economies and assure that the actual producers get their fair share. This holds especially true in rural indigenous communities.



Hike and bike in remote Zapotec villages amid sublime forested highlands. The Pueblos Manccomunados (sierranorte.org.mx), a commonwealth of eight mountain villages, is one of Mexico's most successful ecotourism projects.

Conserve Agua

Mexico is facing a severe water shortage, especially in the drought-stricken northern region. When visiting large cities like Monterrey and Mexico City, where the situation is worsening, visitors can do their part by taking shorter and less-frequent showers.

Go Green

Learn about Mexico's rich flora, then take a dip in a jungle-fringed river at the Jardín Botánico de Vallarta, one of numerous botanical gardens in the country carrying out important nature preservation and community outreach programs.



Carbon Calculator

As you plan for your trip, you can calculate your carbon footprint by plane, car or boat at Sustainable Travel International (sustainabletravel.org), where you can also make contributions to environmental organizations to offset the impact of emissions.



With 67 national parks and 40 Unesco-protected biosphere reserves ecotourism options abound in Mexico.



Deforestation, pollution, overdevelopment and oil dependency rank among some of Mexico's most pressing ecological concerns.

Thanks to its location straddling temperate and tropical regions, Mexico is one of the most biologically diverse countries on earth and yet it also ranks among the world's top 15 countries that produce the most carbon emissions.

RESOURCES

goabroad.com

For environmental and conservation projects



transitionsabroad.com

Lists study and work opportunities



florafauyacultura.org

Help protect sea turtles on the Caribbean coast



Looking to make a contribution that has a social impact? Mexico City-based Casa de los Amigos accepts volunteers to assist migrants and refugees from Central America, while Junax does important work with indigenous communities in Chiapas.



LGBTIQ+ Travelers

Perceptions about sexuality and gender identity vary significantly in Mexico from one region to another. The conservative influence of the Catholic Church remains strong but the country is also becoming increasingly tolerant, especially in tourist resorts and left-leaning urban centers. The bulk of Mexico's 32 states have approved same-sex marriage, yet homophobia and hate crimes persist.

Top Gay-Friendly Destinations

Mexico City has thriving LGBTIQ+ scenes in the centrally located Zona Rosa district and along República de Cuba, a downtown street dotted with some of the capital's most iconic gay bars. Meanwhile, the city's fashionable Roma and Condesa neighborhoods are home to a slew of gay-friendly hotels. In Oaxaca's bohemian beach destination Zipolite, Playa del Amor is a famous spot for gay men, as is the Blue Chairs Resort in Puerto Vallarta and Mimitas Beach in Playa del Carmen. Other popular gay destinations include Guadalajara, Cancún, Tulum and Mérida.



THE MOTHER OF ALL PRIDE PARADES

Various cities throughout Mexico host festive pride parades with colorful floats, dance performances and parallel events in bars and clubs. But the biggest one of them all rolls along Mexico City's broad, tree-lined Avenida Paseo de la Reforma, and the late-night parties that come afterward are legendary.

THIRD-GENDER MUXES

In Zapotec culture, a third-gender system recognizing AMAB (assigned male at birth) people who identify as women, known as *muxes* (moo-shays), has been depicted in numerous documentaries and films. In Juchitán, Oaxaca, you'll find some of Mexico's most tolerant attitudes toward assuming female roles. In November, the city hosts a vigil that celebrates all things *muxe* with parades, dancing and a 'crowning-of-the-queen' ceremony.

Gay Beach Capital

Puerto Vallarta's Zona Romántica quarter (p423) is bursting with gay-friendly hotels, restaurants and bars staging amusing drag shows. In late May, thousands of visitors descend on the Pacific coast resort for Vallarta Pride, a weeklong event with spirited parades and famously wild fiestas. Accommodations in the Zona Romántica are often booked months in advance for the celebration, so plan accordingly.

TOURISM RESOURCES

For information focused on LGBTIQ+ travel, check out online resources www.gaymexicomap.com and www.gaycities.com. You can also consult Out Adventures (www.outadventures.com), which has listings of tours, hotel recommendations and general info about traveling to Mexico City, Guadalajara, Mérida and other gay-friendly Mexican destinations.



Medical Attention

Mexico City's Clínica Condesa is a government-run center specializing in sexual health (especially for LGBTIQ+ issues) and it treats foreigners at no charge. For free HIV rapid testing (*prueba rápida de VIH*), AHF Mexico (www.pruebadevih.com.mx) has facilities in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Oaxaca, Mérida, Cuernavaca and Tijuana.



Accessible Travel

Many parts of Mexico are sorely lacking accessibility, but a growing number of hotels, restaurants, archaeological sites and beaches provide wheelchair access and other services. Sidewalks with ramps are still uncommon, as are acoustic street lights for the visually impaired, but some progress has been made in large-scale resorts and big cities.

Buses

Some, but not all, city buses in Mexico have wheelchair access; modern rapid transit systems such as Mexico City's *Metrobús* are generally more accessible. For the visually impaired, Mexico City and Guadalajara's metros have tactile paving.



Airport

Airports in Mexico City and Cancún, Mexico's main points of entry, provide wheelchair service and transportation for passengers with reduced mobility. Some of the larger airports have similar services for people with special needs.



Accommodations

Chain hotels and modern resorts in large urban and tourist centers tend to have the best facilities for accessible travel. Even at establishments lacking in ramps and elevators, Mexicans' helpful disposition usually goes a long way.

RESTROOMS

One might think that in Mexico's large cities you would come across a fair share of wheelchair accessible restrooms but that's not always the case. Hotels, museums and chain restaurants are often the best options.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

If you're in the Oaxaca beach town of Zipolite, drop by Piña Palmera, a rehabilitation and social integration center for disabled people from rural communities. There you can do volunteer work, participate in crafts workshops and purchase items made by people with disabilities.

RESOURCES

Wheelchair Traveling (www.wheelchairtraveling.com) has a wealth of information about tours, transportation and hotels in Mexico for people with physical disabilities.

Wheel the World (www.wheeltheworld.com) is a booking service that lists hotels, multiday tour packages and accessible activities available in top Mexican destinations such as Los Cabos, Puerto Vallarta and Riviera Maya.

Mobility International USA (www.miusa.org) provides useful information about studying and volunteering abroad in exchange programs.

In Cancún, Puerto Vallarta and Los Cabos you'll find a mix of shuttles and wheelchair-accessible vans available for transportation and tours. All three destinations also have companies renting amphibious beach wheelchairs and other mobility equipment.



Language

There are variations in spoken Spanish across Mexico, the most notable being the pronunciation of the letters *ll* and *y*. In some places, they are pronounced like the 'll' in 'million', but in most areas they are pronounced like the 'y' in 'yes'.



Basics

Hello. *Hola. o-la*

Goodbye. *Adiós. a-dyos*

Yes. *Sí. see*

No. *No. no*

Please. *Por favor. por fa-vor*

Thank you. *Gracias. gra-syas*

Excuse me. *Perdón. per-don*

Sorry. *Lo siento. lo syen-to*

What's your name? *¿Cómo se llama usted? ko-mo se ya-ma oo-ste*

My name is ... *Me llamo ... me ya-mo*

Do you speak English? *¿Habla inglés? a-bla een-gles*

I don't understand. *Yo no entiendo. yo no en-tyen-do*



Directions

Where's (the station)?

¿Dónde está (la estación)? don-de es-ta (la es-ta-syon)

What's the address?

¿Cuál es la dirección? kwal es la dee-rek-syon

Could you please write it down?

¿Puede escribirlo, por favor? pwe-de es-kree-beer-lo por fa-vor

Can you show me (on the map)?

¿Me lo puede indicar (en el mapa)? me lo pwe-de een-dee-kar (en el ma-pa)



Signs

Abierto *Open*

Cerrado *Closed*

Entrada *Entrance*

Prohibido *Prohibited*

Salida *Exit*

Servicios/Baños *Toilets*



Time

What time is it? *¿Qué hora es? ke o-ra es*

It's (10) o'clock. *Son (las diez). son (las dyes)*

Half past (one). *Es (la una) y media. es (la oo-na) ee me-dya*

morning *mañana ma-ny-a-na*

afternoon *tarde tar-de*

evening *noche no-che*

yesterday *ayer a-yer*

today *hoy oy*

tomorrow *mañana ma-ny-a-na*



Emergencies

Help! *¡Socorro! so-ko-ro*

Go away! *¡Vete! ve-te*

I'm ill. *Estoy enfermo/a. es-toy en-fer-mo/a (m/f)*

Call ...! *¡Llame a ...! ya-me a ...*

a doctor *un médico oon me-dee-ko*

the police *la policía la po-lee-see-a*



Eating & Drinking

I'd like a table for (two) people.

Quisiera una mesa para (dos) personas. kee-sye-ra oo-na me-sa pa-ra (dos) per-so-nas

I don't eat (meat). *No como (carne). no ko-mo (kar-ne)*

What would you recommend?

¿Qué recomienda? ke re-ko-myen-da

Cheers! *¡Salud! sa-loo*

That was delicious! *¡Estaba buenísimo! s-ta-ba bwe-nee-see-mo*

The bill, please. *La cuenta, por favor. la kwen-ta por fa-vor*

NUMBERS

1

uno *oo-no*

2

dos *dos*

3

tres *tres*

4

cuatro *kwa-tro*

5

cinco *seen-ko*

6

seis *seys*

7

siete *sye-te*

8

ocho *o-cho*

9

nueve *nwe-ve*

10

diez *dyes*



Nuts & Bolts

OPENING HOURS

Business hours vary throughout the country. Some stores and restaurants in tourist centers close for shoulder and low seasons.

Banks 9am–4pm Monday to Friday; some on Saturday

Bars 1pm–midnight

Restaurants 9am–11pm

Stores 9am–8pm

Toilets

Public toilets usually cost M\$5; it's always wise to pack hand sanitizer and a roll of toilet paper for long trips.

Smoking

Mexico has a law making it illegal to smoke in all public places, including hotels and open-air spaces such as beaches and parks. Violators face stiff fines.



Internet Access

Wi-fi is available in most places, though it remains difficult to connect in some remote rural areas.



Don't Drink the Water

Avoid drinking Mexico's tap water and only consume ice made with *agua purificada* (purified water).

GOOD TO KNOW



Time Zone
GMT-6 in winter;
GMT-5 in summer



Country Code
52



Emergency number
911



Population
129 million

STATUTORY HOLIDAYS

Año Nuevo (New Year's Day) January 1

Día de la Constitución (Constitution Day)
First Monday of February

Natalicio de Benito Juárez (Benito Juárez' birthday)
Third Monday of March

Día del Trabajo (Labor Day) May 1

Día de la Independencia (Independence Day)
September 16

Día de la Revolución (Revolution Day)
Third Monday of November

Día de Navidad (Christmas Day)
December 25

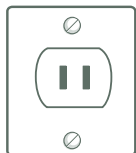
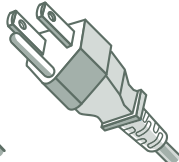
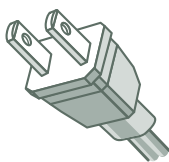
CIVIC HOLIDAYS

Día de los Santos Reyes (Three Kings' Day) January 6

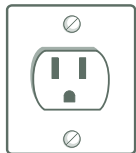
Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead)
November 1 and 2

Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Day of our Lady of Guadalupe)
December 12

Electricity 120V/60Hz



Type A
120V/60Hz



Type B
120V/60Hz



THE MEXICO STORYBOOK

Our writers delve deep into different aspects of Mexican life.

History of Mexico in 15 Places

Mexico has seen it all: the Maya, the Aztecs, the Spanish conquistadors, plus rebellions, revolution and democracy.

Liza Prado

p654

Meet the Mexicans

A diverse, welcoming and proud people, Mexicans love their families, their faith and their country, in equal and joyful measure.

Liza Prado

p658

Mexican Folk Art

Ceramics and textiles to yarn 'paintings' – the best of Mexican artesanía.

Anna Kaminski

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Landscapes & Wildlife

Mexico's stunning topography and its creatures feathered, finned and furred make it a remarkable place to explore.

Anna Kaminski

p662

A HISTORY OF MEXICO IN 15 PLACES

Mexico's history is vibrant and complex. It has seen sophisticated civilizations rise and fall, its lands and people ravaged by outsiders, and endured power struggles from within. And yet, through it all, Mexico has continued to thrive. Ultimately, the country's story is not one of survival but one of nuance, adaptation and growth.

TRAVELING THROUGH MEXICO, reminders of its long and circuitous history are visible everywhere. In the prehistoric period, what is now Mexico was a place of vast bodies of water and primitive life, examples of which can still be glimpsed in certain areas. Ancient human history is evident here too, manifest in countless archaeological sites, whispers of once-thriving societies, of the people who walked these lands long ago. Mexico's cities and towns are often marvels of colonial architecture, impressive to behold yet reminiscent of darker times, when Spanish conquistadors toppled the Aztec empire and dominated millions through disease, terror and religion. Today, independence from Spain is celebrated every September 16 with the recreation of El Grito, the call to arms, in every town, large and small. Echoes of the 20th-century Mexican Revolution abound, in art and everyday life: from street names and political parties to cultural references and mustachioed icons. Even cliff divers tell a story of modern Mexico – one of the world's top beach destinations – and of the country's constant evolution. While the violence of drug cartels remains a grim reality, the Mexican people continue to overcome and move forward.

1. Area de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas

THE BEGINNING OF LIFE

Hundreds of turquoise *pozas* (pools) glitter across Cuatrociénegas valley, offering a glimpse into what Mexico once looked like: a warm shallow sea filled with stromatolites, primitive rock-like organisms linked to the creation of Earth's oxygen-rich atmosphere, and the beginning of microbial life. Stromatolites still line many of those *pozas* today, most estimated to be over 3.5 billion years old. The surrounding Chihuahuan Desert, meanwhile, has become one of most biodiverse places on the planet. Studied since the 1960s, this reserve remains an invaluable place of evolutionary research for scientists at NASA and UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; National Autonomous University of Mexico).

For more on Area de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas, see p628

2. Parque Museo La Venta

THE START OF CIVILIZATION

A winding trail in Villahermosa's Parque Museo La Venta (pictured) leads past impressive sculptures, stelae and colossal stone

heads moved from La Venta Archaeological Zone, an important Olmec city 130km away. Flourishing from 1200 to 400 BCE along Mexico's Gulf Coast, the Olmecs created the first known Mesoamerican civilization, with large cities, a writing system, polytheistic religious beliefs, impressive artistry and more. Considered the 'mother culture,' the Olmecs profoundly influenced later indigenous civilizations in Mexico and beyond. The reasons for their decline are still unknown, though archaeologists believe climatic changes and warfare were the likely causes.

For more on Parque Museo La Venta, see p340.

3. Cobá

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MAYA

The Maya civilization peaked between 250 and 900 CE and was comprised of independent city-states stretching from the Yucatán Peninsula to Chiapas and into Central America. Collectively, the Maya attained heights of artistic and architectural expression, and of learning in astronomy and mathematics, that were unsurpassed by any other pre-Columbian society. Cobá was one of the largest Maya cities, with some 40,000 people. It's best known for its extensive network of *sacbeob* (raised roads) and its 42m-high pyramid, among the tallest in the Maya world. Like many other Maya cities, Cobá was abandoned in the 10th century, its population decimated by drought and conflict.

For more on Cobá, see p257.

4. Templo Mayor

THE CENTER OF THE AZTEC UNIVERSE

The Aztecs rose to power between the 14th and 16th centuries, dominating over five million people across Mexico using a complex tribute system. Tenochtitlán was their capital, a sophisticated society of 400,000 people, built where Mexico City stands today. Its greatest temple – Templo Mayor – occupied the center of the Aztec universe, serving as the focal point of religious, political and social life. In 1521 Spanish conquistadors joined forces with disgruntled indigenous rivals and laid siege to the city, destroying Templo Mayor. It marked the end of Aztec rule and the beginning of Spanish colonization.

For more on Templo Mayor, see p66.

5. Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó

COLONIZATION THROUGH RELIGION

Built in 1697, the Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó was the first permanent mission in the Californias and was the base for the expansion of Jesuit and Dominican missions in the Baja Peninsula. Like missions built in other parts of Mexico throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the church's work in Loreto helped extend Spanish control over its vast colony, converting millions of indigenous people to Catholicism while simultaneously forcing them to abandon their traditional ways of life. The monks' presence also introduced European diseases to indigenous communities, drastically reducing their once-thriving populations.

For more on Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó, see p579.

6. The Walled City

PIRATE ATTACKS

During the colonial period, many Mexican ports endured repeated attacks by pirates, many of whom were supported by Spain's arch rivals France and England. Campeche, a wealthy port city known for exporting tropical woods, gold and silver, was a frequent target. After a particularly blistering pirate assault in 1663, Campeche's inhabitants set about erecting a protective wall. Built using indigenous labor and limestone



extracted from nearby caves, it stretched 2.5km around the urban core, rising to a height of 8m. It took more than 50 years to complete, but proved effective. Today, the walled city of Campeche is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

For more on The Walled City, see p290.

7. Real de Catorce

SILVER TREASURE

Spain's primary interest in the New World was natural resources. In Mexico, the Spanish exploited the abundance of silver, establishing mines and using indigenous labor to extract it. In the late 1700s the mines surrounding the town of Real de Catorce (pictured) became among the most productive in Mexico, most of the silver sent back to Spain to finance its wars, churches, palaces and the luxurious lives of its nobility. The mines kept producing well after Mexican independence, and Real de Catorce flourished until the early 20th century when the silver market crashed, leaving it a virtual ghost town.

For more on Real de Catorce, see p535.

8. Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores

THE CALL FOR INDEPENDENCE

Though grumbings of discontent with Spanish rule began in the late 1700s, the catalyst for rebellion came in 1808 when France occupied Spain, and direct Spanish control over Mexico evaporated. On September 16 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rang the bells of Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores to summon people to his parish. There, he issued the famous Grito de Dolores (referred to today as El Grito, literally, 'The Call'), officially beginning Mexico's War of Independence. In 1821, after heavy losses on both sides, a treaty was signed recognizing Mexican sovereignty. Three hundred years of Spanish rule were over.

For more on the Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores, see p519.

9. Castillo de Chapultepec

WAR WITH THE UNITED STATES

The Castillo de Chapultepec was a former military academy and the site of a pivotal 1847 battle during the Mexican-American War. Outnumbered by advancing American troops, a contingent of Mexican sol-

diers and cadets were ordered to retreat. Six young cadets refused to leave, fighting to their deaths. Known as the Niños Héroes (literally, Boy Heroes), they remain celebrated symbols of Mexican patriotism. Notwithstanding this heroism, the loss at Chapultepec led to the fall of Mexico City and, ultimately, Mexico's surrender. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded 55% of its territory, including much of what is today the western US.

For more on the Castillo de Chapultepec, see p114.

10. Museo Histórico de la Revolución

VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN

The Museo Histórico de la Revolución in Chihuahua tells the tortured story of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), which succeeded in ending the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Motivated by the profound inequalities and exploitation suffered by Mexico's masses, the Revolution was led by several charismatic leaders, each with different visions for the future of Mexico, prolonging the conflict. Important and lasting reforms were won, especially in land rights, but nearly one in eight Mexicans lost their lives in the war. The museum is housed in the one-time revolutionary headquarters and home of Pancho Villa, a general, guerrilla leader and folk hero.

For more on the Museo Histórico de la Revolución, see p616.

11. Palacio Nacional

ONE PARTY RULE

The grand Palacio Nacional has served as a palace and seat of government since the fall of the Aztec Empire. And no political party has exerted more influence in that building than the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Founded after the Revolution and originally committed to genuine social equality, the PRI grew steadily more insular and oppressive. It maintained an iron grip on power through a combination of economic patronage and repression of opposition voices. Despite widespread corruption and allegations of human rights abuses, the PRI remained in power for nearly 70 years, losing the presidential election for the first time in 2000.

For more on the Palacio Nacional, see p70.





12. Hospicio Cabañas

MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE

For 30 years after the Revolution, the government commissioned artists to paint murals to educate the masses on Mexican history and the need for social change. Hospicio Cabañas is among the most famous locales from that era, known as the Mexican Mural Renaissance. An orphanage-turned-art-museum, its chapel was covered in 57 murals by Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco. In the murals, he channeled the archetypal struggle for freedom, depicting pre-Hispanic Jalisco and the Spanish conquest through dark, unnerving images. These and other murals around the country had a profound impact on the art world, establishing Mexico as a leader in the modernist art movement.

For more on Hospicio Cabañas, see p476.

13. Acapulco

THE BIRTH OF BEACH RESORTS

Acapulco was Mexico's first major resort town, a favorite spot for Mexican vacationers beginning in the 1920s. Its famous cliff divers (*clavadistas de la Quebrada*) were showcased in Hollywood films and helped put Acapulco on the international map, attracting wealthy Americans in the 1950s and '60s. Vacation resorts began popping up in other towns along the Pacific coast, solidifying Mexico's reputation as a prime beach destination. The rise of affordable air travel brought new waves of tourists, eventually leading to the development of Cancún and resorts on the country's Caribbean coast.

For more on clavadistas de la Quebrada, see p460.

14. Plaza de la Paz

THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

San Cristóbal de las Casas' striking yellow cathedral opens onto Plaza de la Paz, a square popular for anti-government demonstrations since 1994. That year the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, aka the Zapatistas), a leftist indigenous-led group, launched an uprising in Chiapas to protest the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and longstanding threats to their rights and livelihood. The uprising quickly gained international attention and support for indigenous rights; the San Andrés Peace Accords were signed two years later. Today, the balaclava-wearing Zapatistas remain a symbol of resistance, and peaceful protests in San Cristóbal and elsewhere continue.

For more on Plaza de la Paz, see p315.

15. Barrio Antiguo

CHANGING SCENES

Monterrey's Barrio Antiguo is an atmospheric neighborhood, its cobblestone roads leading to craft beer gardens and whimsical boutiques. It's a popular and safe destination today, but wasn't always that way. Like other parts of Mexico, especially in the north, it was once plagued by fighting between drug cartels. Mexican cartels have been major players in the global drug trade since the 1980s, but cartel-related violence peaked in the early 2000s, prompting mobilization of the Mexican military. Violence has ebbed and flowed since and rarely involves tourists. Efforts to stem the conflict, including high-profile arrests, are on-going.

For more on Barrio Antiguo, see p623.

MEET THE MEXICANS

A diverse, welcoming and proud people, Mexicans love their families, their faith and their country, in equal and joyful measure. LIZA PRADO introduces her people.

WALKING MEXICO'S STREETS, there's no doubt we're a diverse people. The majority, around 60%, are mestizos, people of mixed indigenous and white ancestry. Most mestizos feel a deep pride in their indigenous roots, pointing to this great grandmother or that great uncle who was, say, Purépecha or Rarámuri (Tarahumara). Ironically, the 30% of Mexicans who are fully indigenous are among the poorest in the country, with limited access to public services, and are often relegated to the margins of society. Nonetheless, indigenous communities are found in virtually every state, collectively speaking 63 different languages and maintaining unique customs, dress and belief systems. The remaining 10% of Mexicans are white or of African or Asian descent.

Regardless of what we look like, family is paramount in Mexico. Gatherings, which are frequent, mean inviting everyone and having plenty of food and drink, even if it's just *frijoles de olla* (bean soup) and *horchata* (a rice-based drink). Family is always welcome and friends often become like family. And the hospitality is genuine; I have second and third cousins, even those I don't see regularly, who I can call and stay with for a day, a week, a year, no questions asked. Likewise, the drive to support one's family is the force behind the 10% of Mexicans who leave the country, the

vast majority going to the United States. About 12 million Mexicans live in the US, sending back around US\$52 billion to their families every year – 4% of Mexico's GDP – for food, clothing and health-care needs.

Religion is another common thread among Mexicans. About 82% are Roman Catholics; the prevalence of cathedrals and churches, even in the most modest of villages, is easy proof. Even people who don't consider themselves particularly religious are sure to baptize their children, to get married in a church and have last rites read by a priest. It's just what you do. Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, the tawny-skinned

manifestation of the Virgin Mary, is Mexico's most important saint. She's virtually everywhere, from key chains to billboards; most homes have her image featured in a prominent spot. That said, a small but growing number of Mexicans, especially in indigenous communities, belong to Protestant and evangelical churches. In typical Mexican fashion, most of these Christian congregations co-exist comfortably with majority Catholics.

Above all, as a people, we Mexicans are deeply proud. Proud of our country, our history, our art and music and our food. Our verve for life is genuine and hard won, an essential – some say the best – part of being Mexican.

THE WEALTH GAP

Mexico's wealth gap yawns as wide as ever. Telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim Helú, the country's richest man, has a fortune worth over US\$82 billion. Meanwhile, 44% of Mexico's population lives in poverty, some surviving on as little as \$2 a day.



ACROSS THE BORDER

Like millions of Mexicans, I live in the United States. In fact, I'm the first in my family to be born outside of Mexico. It was a source of pride for me as a little girl to be the first with this bi-national identity - *la gringuita*, my grandfather, *abuelito* Felipe, called me endearingly.

Growing up, I spent summers in Monterrey and Mazatlán, surrounded by cousins, riding janky city buses, spending sun-up-to-sun-down on the beach, running to the *depósito* for orange-flavored soda and fresh tortillas. I'd come home to western New York, seamlessly stepping back into my suburban American life but always dreaming of Mexico.

I eventually became a dual citizen and, soon afterwards, moved there, bouncing around the Yucatán and Chiapas with my then-boyfriend, landing in Guadalajara where we married in a tequila hacienda, mariachis leading us from the chapel to the dance floor.

We live in Colorado now, but not a week passes that I don't feel Mexico's pull.



MEXICAN FOLK ART

From colorful ceramics and textiles to vibrant yarn paintings, Mexican *artesanía* showcases traditional crafts with flair. By ANNA KAMINSKI

MEXICO IS REMARKABLY rich when it comes to *artesanía* (folk art). Born of ancient traditions and practices, it's produced both for ornamental and utilitarian purposes using a variety of materials sourced from the country's natural resources: leather, clay, silver, copper, wood and a variety of fibers. The resulting ceramics, textiles, masks, wood carvings, paintings and yarn art are often infused with an abundance of color that reflects Mexico's chaotic, playful, joyful spirit. Many craft techniques and designs in use today have pre-Hispanic origins, and it's Mexico's indigenous peoples, the direct inheritors of pre-Hispanic culture, who lead the way in *artesanías* production.

CLOTHING AND OTHER TEXTILES

Materials made of yucca, maguey, palm and cotton have been produced in Mexico since at least 1400 BCE using the backstrap loom, with the cloth livened up using natural dyes. The Spanish introduced silk, wool and the foot treadle loom. They banned some pre-Hispanic forms of dress as 'uncivilized' and introduced European-style clothing, including women's blouses, now available in a beautiful, hand-embroidered form.

Today, surviving textile industries are concentrated largely in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Mexico states. The primary materials of indigenous weaving are cotton and

wool, though synthetic fibers are now also common. Natural dyes have been revived – deep blues from the indigo plant, reds and browns from various woods, and reds and purples from the cochineal insect.

The basic indigenous weavers' tool, used only by women, is the backstrap loom (*telar de cintura*) on which the warp (long) threads are stretched between two horizontal bars, one of which is fixed to a post or tree, while the other is attached to a strap around the weaver's lower back; the weft (cross) threads are then intricately woven in, producing some amazing patterns. Backstrap-loom *huipiles* (long, sleeveless tunics) from the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas are among Mexico's most eye-catching items of clothing.

Three women's garments in use since long before the Spanish conquest that survive to this day include the huipil (found mainly in the southern half of the country), *quechquémitl* (shoulder cape with an opening for the head, worn largely in central and northern Mexico) and *enredo* (wraparound skirt).

Treadle looms, operated by foot pedals (usually by men) can weave wider cloth than the backstrap loom and tend to be used for rugs (pictured top right), *rebozos* (shawls), *sarapes* (blankets with an opening for the head) and skirt material.

EVOLUTION OF CERAMICS

Mexico has been producing ceramics for thousands of years, but after the Spanish conquest European techniques and design motifs largely superseded indigenous ones. The comal (flat tortilla griddle) is an example of surviving indigenous design, while the exquisite, highly elaborate earthenware creations produced by villagers in Mata Ortiz (Chihuahua) draw on the techniques and designs of pre-Hispanic Paquimé. The practice was started by self-taught ceramicist Juan Quezada Celado in the 1970s; some of the finest Mata Ortiz ceramics are now displayed in museums.

Other attractive pottery to look out for include the Spanish- and Italian-influenced Talavera, made chiefly in Puebla and characterized by bright colors (blue and yellow are prominent) and floral designs. Guajuato majolica (tin-glazed pottery depicting historical and mythical scenes) is also popular, as is the *barro negro* (black clay) pottery unique to Oaxaca, distinguished by its metallic sheen, unique designs and color.

Another distinctive Mexican ceramic form is the *árbol de la vida* (tree of life). These elaborate, candelabra-like objects are molded by hand. While pre-Hispanic Metepec artisans originally made trees, post-Spanish conquest *árboles* came to depict biblical scenes of creation, and later other themes such as Día de Muertos.

THE ART OF MASK-MAKING

Mexicans have worn masks in dances, ceremonies and shamanistic rites for millennia: the wearer temporarily becomes the creature, person or deity represented by the mask. Even today, masks are widely worn during festivals, particularly for celebrations of patron saint days, Carnaval and Christmas. Besides viewing Mexico's largest mask collection at the Museo Rafael Coronel in Zacatecas, you can admire mask artistry at museums in cities such as San Luis Potosí and Colima, as well as in towns renowned for their mask-making traditions, such as Tocuaro (Michoacán), San Francisco Ozomatlán (Guerrero) and Suchitlán (Colima).

Wood is the basic material of most masks but papier-mâché, clay, wax and leather are also used. Makers often paint or embellish their work with real teeth, hair, feathers or other adornments. Traditional masks worn during dances include devils, *pascola* (old

man of the ceremony), giants, jaguars, Aztec ruler Cuauhtémoc and jaguar warriors, with pharisees, Moors and Christians introduced after the Spanish conquest. Most bird and animal masks are typically whimsical and decorative rather than ceremonial. Contemporary producers sometimes put a modern spin on age-old themes; steampunk devil masks are one such example.

The Huichol people of Jalisco, Durango, Zacatecas and Nayarit cover masks and wooden sculptures (of animals and birds) with psychedelic patterns consisting of colorful beads attached with wax and resin. The beading tradition was born mid-20th century, but the symbols and designs date back centuries. Another unique Huichol art form is the yarn 'painting', created by spreading a thin layer of beeswax over wood and then meticulously pressing thin strands of yarn onto it to create elaborate tableaux of human, animal and plant figures that often have a dreamlike, psychedelic quality to them. Originally derived from a nierika (ceremonial tablet), they capture visions experienced during peyote (hallucinogenic cactus) ceremonies.

SCULPTING & DECORATION

Gourds have been used in Mexico since antiquity as bowls, cups and storage vessels. The most eye-catching decoration technique is lacquering, in which the gourd is coated with paste or paint and then varnished. Lacquering is also used to decorate wooden boxes, trays and furniture, with a lot of the most appealing ware coming from remote Olinalá in Guerrero. Here artisans create patterns using the *rayado* method of scraping off part of the top coat of paint to expose a different-colored layer below.

The Seri people of Sonora work hard ironwood into human, animal and sea-creature shapes, polished till completely smooth. Villagers around Oaxaca city produce brightly painted imaginary beasts carved from copal wood, known as *alebrijes* (pictured top left; p367).

Linares is also credited with the mass popularity of modern *calacas* (skeleton) figurines, central to Mexican identity and associated with the Día de Muertos. The most famous *calaca* is the iconic La Catrina – a female skeletal figure in a dress and feather boa, accompanied by the equally skeletal dandy El Catrín.



LANDSCAPES & WILDLIFE

Mexico's stunning topography and its creatures feathered, finned and furred make it a remarkable place to explore. By ANNA KAMINSKI

MEXICO'S SCENERY IS incredible. From the cactus-strewn northern deserts and the snowcapped volcanoes of central Mexico to the tropical forests and wildlife-rich lagoons of the south, the country never fails to surprise and delight. Nearly 2 million sq km in area, Mexico is the world's 13th-biggest country. With 10,000km of coastline and half its land above 1000m in elevation, it has a tremendous range of natural habitats that shelter 500 mammal species, over a thousand bird species, over 30,000 species of plants and more reptile species (700+) than any other country, many of them endemic. While conservation challenges are ever-present, almost half of Mexico falls within national parks, biosphere reserves and other protected areas.

THE CORDILLERA NEOVOLCÁNICA

This spectacular belt running east-west across the middle of Mexico includes the classic active cones of Popocatepetl (5452m), 70km southeast of Mexico City, and Volcán de Fuego de Colima (3820m), 30km north of Colima. Popocatepetl's eruptions (at low to intermediate intensity) have been ongoing since 2005; over 30 million people live within the area that could be directly affected should smoking 'Popo' erupt in a big way. Along with volcanic activity, the country is frequently rocked by earthquakes of various magnitudes too.

Also in the volcanic belt, but dormant, is Mexico's highest peak, Pico de Orizaba (5636m), while the fertile upland valleys,

where Mexico City sits ringed by volcanic ranges, have attracted and supported human habitation for millennia.

THE ALTIPLANO CENTRAL

This string of broad plateaus runs down the middle of the northern half of Mexico, fringed by two long mountain chains that border the Cordillera Neovolcánica – the Sierra Madre Occidental in the west and Sierra Madre Oriental in the east – both of which are home to small jaguar populations. The Sierra Madre Occidental is fissured by spectacularly deep canyons, including the famous Copper Canyon (Barrancas del Cobre) and its 1870m-deep continuation, the Cañón de Urique.

The sparsely vegetated Desierto Chihuahuense (Chihuahuan Desert) covers most of the northern altiplano and extends north into the US states of Texas and New Mexico. Besides featuring over a third of the world's 1500 species of cactus, the desert is where you'll find the largest prairie dog colony in the Americas, Mexican wolves, pumas and black bears. The landscape here is one of long-distance vistas across dusty brown plains to distant mountains, with eagles, vultures and the colorful aplomado falcons wheeling in the skies. The southern altiplano is mostly rolling hills, with some of the best Mexican farming and ranching land in El Bajío encroaching on native grasslands. You can observe an unforgettable spectacle at the Reserva de la Biósfera Santuario Mariposa Monarca, between Morelia and Mexico City, where the trees and earth turn orange when millions of monarch butterflies arrive every winter.

BAJA CALIFORNIA

One of the world's longest peninsulas, Baja is an arid, saguaro-studded finger of land jutting out into the Pacific. It consists of 1300km of starkly beautiful deserts, volcanic mesas, palm-filled canyons, coniferous woodlands and beaches, bisected by the mountainous spine of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir. Gray whales swim 10,000km from the Arctic to calve in Baja's coastal waters, while the Sea of Cortez hosts more than a third of all the world's marine mammal species, including sea lions, fur and elephant seals, and minke, sperm, orca and blue whales. Humpback whales follow plankton-bearing currents down Mexico's Pacific coast between December and March, and, like dolphins and sea turtles, can be seen on boat trips.

COASTAL PLAINS

These flat, low-lying lands stretch stretch all along Mexico's Pacific coast and as far south as the Tabasco lowlands on the Gulf coast. Both coasts are strung with hundreds of lagoons, estuaries and wetlands – vital habitats for crocodiles and a vast number of bird species. The Teacapán estuary south of Mazatlán and the lagoons around San Blas are particularly rich in endemic wading and migratory birds. The coasts from Baja to Chiapas and from the northeast to the Yucatán Peninsula are also among the world's chief nesting grounds for sea turtles, frequented by seven of the world's eight species. Veracruz state is a route of passage for a 'river of raptors' over 4.5 million strong every fall, while conservation areas within the tropical rainforest southeast of Veracruz, such as Los Tuxtlas, still provide sanctuary to ocelot, jaguarundi, brocket deer and howler monkeys.

THE SIERRA MADRE DEL SUR

This iconic mountain range stretches across the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, ending at the low-lying, hot and humid Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico's 220km-wide 'waist'. South of the isthmus lie the tropical-rainforest-covered lowlands of Chiapas, backed by the cloud-forested Sierra Madre de Chiapas, home to the quetzal and the endangered horned guan. Other spectacular examples of feathered life, including the lesser yellow-headed vulture, are found around Palenque, where you might also see see howler monkeys – or at least hear their eerie growls – while tapir and jaguar still dwell in Parque Nacional Lagos de Montebello. Behind the Chiapas highlands, the land sinks to the lowlands of the Lacandón Jungle and the flat expanses of the huge limestone shelf that is the Yucatán Peninsula, with its many underground rivers and more than 6000 sinkholes, known as cenotes, many of which make fantastic swimming holes. An estimated three billion migrating birds pass over the Yucatán Peninsula each year; in south Yucatán's tropical and subtropical forest you may spot all three species of Mexican toucan and the Aztec parakeet, while Río Lagartos and Celestún welcome migratory flamingoes. The Yucatán's Caribbean coast is flanked by the world's second-largest barrier reef, home to over 400 species of fish, while Isla Holbox sees an annual gathering of whale sharks, making Yucatán one of the world's top diving and snorkeling destinations.

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'Horses trot along Tapalpa's (p484) cobblestone streets as visitors swarm to its picturesque plaza to shop for hand-woven clothing and wooden crafts, or have a steak at a second-floor restaurant.'



'Even from the air, La Paz (p570) is breathtaking, with its long sweeping coastlines of powder-white sand abutting green-blue-azure bays perfect for exploring.'

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THIS BOOK

Design Development
Marc Backwell

Content Development
Mark Jones, Sandie Kestell, Anne Mason, Joana Taborda

Cartography Development
Katerina Pavkova

Production Development
Sandie Kestell, Fergal Condon

Series Development Leadership
Darren O'Connell, Piers Pickard, Chris Zeiher

Destination Editor
Daniel Bolger

Production Editor
Kate Chapman

Book Designer
Catalina Aragón

Cartographer
Anthony Phelan

Editors
Andrew Bain, Imogen Bannister, Bruce Evans, Andrea Dobbin, Michael Mackenzie, Jenna Myers

Assisting Editors
Melanie Dankel, Anne Mulvaney, Katie Connolly, Graham O'Neill, Fionnuala Twomey, Clifton Wilkinson

Cover Researcher
Gwen Cotter

Thanks Karen Henderson



Paper in this book is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council™ standards. FSC™ promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

Published by Lonely Planet Global Limited
CRN 554153
18th edition - September 2023
ISBN 978 1 83869 188 2
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in Singapore