

Dive with manatees in Xcalak, climb an ancient pyramid at Muyil, shoot the curl at Puerto Escondido, and eat your way from coast to coast.

MEXICO

Where Nomads Go



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WELCOME

Spanning almost 760,000mi² (2 million km²), with landscapes that range from snow-capped volcanos to dense rainforest, and a cultural mix that's equally diverse, Mexico can't be contained in a handful of pages, so we're not going to try. Think of this guide as a sampler plate, or a series of windows into Mexico – a selection of first-hand accounts from nomads who've danced at the festivals, climbed the pyramids, chased the waves, and connected with the locals.

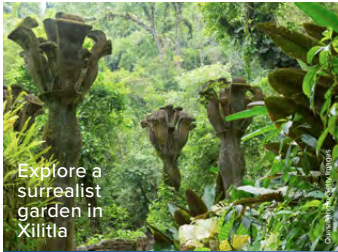
Join our travelers as they kayak with sea turtles and manta rays in Baja, meet the third-gender *muxes* of Juchitán, unravel ancient Maya mysteries in the Yucatán, and take a crash course in *mole*-making in Oaxaca. Whether you're into art, history, food, wildlife, or adventure, you'll find plenty of inspiration and enough practical information to get started planning your own journey.

Discover Mexico, World Nomads' style!



ESSENTIAL MEXICO

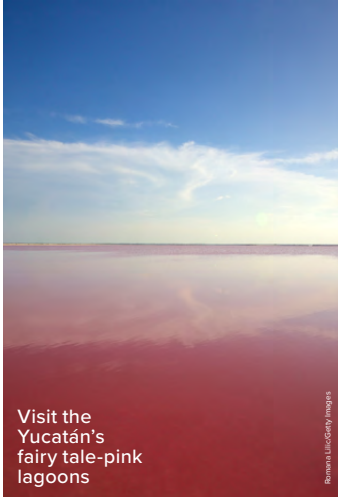
Don't miss out on these uniquely Mexican places, experiences, and adventures.



Explore a surrealist garden in Xilitla



Get your recommended dose of "Vitamin T" – tortillas, tamales, and tacos



Visit the Yucatán's fairy tale-pink lagoons



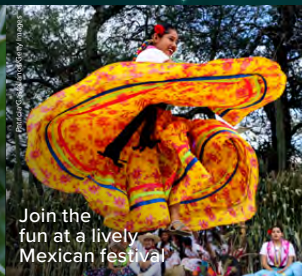
Explore an underwater museum in Isla Mujeres



Commune with gray whales in Magdalena Bay



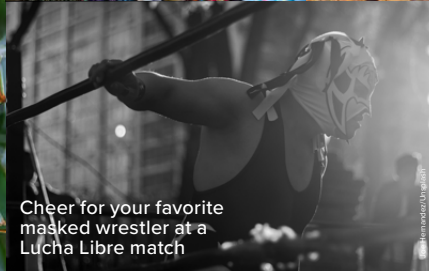
Sample sultry, smoky mezcal in Oaxaca



Join the fun at a lively Mexican festival



Meet Witz, the Mountain Monster, in Campeche



Cheer for your favorite masked wrestler at a Lucha Libre match



Kayak on the Sea of Cortez, the "world's aquarium"



ART & CULTURE

"Parachico" dancers perform during the Fiesta Grande de Enero in Chiapa de Corzo

Mexican culture doesn't stop at margaritas and mariachi. With more than 60 different indigenous groups, global influences from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and civilizations that date back thousands of years, it's a colorful and diverse place that can't be easily defined. From rowdy, weeks-long fiestas to elegant colonial churches, ancient Maya temples and craft-brewing hipsters, Mexico offers endless variety.

HOW TO EAT MEXICO

When it comes to food, Mexico is many cuisines, not just one. Each of its 31 states is proud of its characteristic tastes, ingredients, and traditions, although everyone agrees on the essential “T vitamins” – tortillas, tamales, and tacos. Writer **Kendall Hill** shares some of the highlights.

The chef and author Alejandro Ruiz is giving me a crash course in Oaxacan cuisine. We have an afternoon together but I’d need months, possibly years, to grasp the complex cooking rituals of this southern Mexican state.

Take a simple yellow *mole*, the chili-based sauce found all over Oaxaca but rarely prepared the same way twice.

“On the Pacific Coast it’s made with iguana,” explains Ruiz. “But in Oaxaca City it’s beef or chicken. On the Isthmus (of Tehuantepec), you’d have it with sun-dried shrimps.” And of course, cooks in each region would use a different chili to flavor their sauce.

Mexican food is infinitely more complex than the familiar export version of beans and cheese. In Oaxaca alone there are eight regions differentiated by climate, customs, and ingredients. And Oaxaca is just one of the 31 United Mexican States, each with its own distinctive culture and food.

In fact, traditional Mexican cuisine is so exceptional in scope and heritage that, in 2010, UNESCO named it part of the

“intangible cultural heritage of humanity” – alongside tango, Tibetan opera, and French gastronomy, the only other national cuisine so honored.

The citation mentions Mexico’s unique crop-growing and cooking techniques, its utensils and, crucially, its amazing treasury of native ingredients. Corn, beans and chili all originated here. So did tomatoes, sweet potato, turkey, pumpkin (and its squashy cousins), avocados, and – it’s thought – cacao, which the Maya turned into chocolate to create one of humanity’s favorite foods.

But the strength of Mexican cuisine is in its *mestizo* or mixed roots; the combined bounty of pre-Hispanic Mexico with the foods of its Spanish invaders and, later, those of Lebanese, Korean, Chinese, Italian, and Caribbean immigrants. While researching a book on Mexican food I criss-crossed the country, meeting professional and home cooks, learning regional food traditions, eating grasshoppers and ants and an entire taxonomy of chilis and tortillas. Here are some of the highlights.



In 2010, UNESCO named traditional Mexican food part of the “intangible cultural heritage of humanity”

Yucatán

Preparing *cochinita pibil* is a messy business.

In the little city of Izamal on the Yucatán Peninsula, Hermelinda de la Cruz is up to her elbows in corn dough (*masa*), stuffing it with shredded suckling pig meat and smothering the lot with earthy red *achiote* paste and a garlic- and tomato-spiked *masa* gravy. Then she trusses the hefty, six-pound tamale in banana leaves and lowers it into a hole in the earth lined with stones and embers.

“It’s much better for the flavor in the ground,” de la Cruz assures me. “It’s more smoky, especially with the *achiote*.”

In the Maya homeland of Yucatán, the

custom of cooking *pibil*-style, in the ground, dates back thousands of years. It’s still a popular tradition at weddings and big celebrations such as Day of the Dead, though the tamales are made with chicken or pork these days instead of the hairless dog of much earlier times.

Other typical Maya foods include *chaya*, the spinach-like leaf hailed as a superfood in the West but found here in humble preparations such as a cold “juice” and a hot soup sprinkled with Edam cheese, which Yucatecans adore.

Salbutes are local tortillas stuffed with chicken, onion and lettuce (add refried beans and you have *panuchos*). *Sopa de lima* is lime soup with chicken, coriander →



Hand-made blue corn tortillas



Elotes (grilled corn)

and fried tortilla pieces, and it's wonderfully refreshing in the stifling Caribbean heat.

Pumpkin seeds (or *pepitas*) are another Maya staple, most commonly found in *papadzules*, tortillas dressed with spicy pumpkin seed sauce, boiled egg, and tomato.

Yucatán is also known for its *mestizo* foods that meld not only Spanish influences – such as *bistek yucateca*, slow-cooked beef with achiote – but also Korean and Lebanese (thanks to laborers who came to work on the sisal plantations last century). You can thank the Lebanese for Mexico's love of spit-roasted meats, especially the popular Yucatecan street food *poc chuc*, charcoal-grilled marinated pork.

Michoacán

In the birthplace of the avocado, it's generally agreed the good people of Michoacán state make the country's best guacamole. And also its largest – a 3,788kg monster dip whipped up in Mexico's avocado capital of Tancitaro in 2018. Michoacán's other great gift to world cuisine is *carnitas* – the original pulled pork tortillas that are a staple of Mexican street food (*antojitos*). Carnitas buffs will happily explain the subtle differences between a *costilla* stuffed with rib meat, a *buche* (pork belly) and a *maciza* (white meat). The Pacific state also gives its name to the popular chain of ice-cream parlours La Michoacána, known for their frozen *paleta*

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popsicles that come in exotic flavors such as *guanabana* (soursop) and – my favorite – the caramel custardy *sapote*. You'll find their stores in every Mexican city.

Oaxaca

"This is the dish that takes the most time," Deyaniro Aquino says as she places a pot of *estofado*, a festive beef stew with plantain, apple, and pineapple, various chilis, and cinnamon, on the table at La Teca restaurant. "Sometimes there can be a whole cow cooking for 24 hours. And there's a lot of love that goes into making this stew too. You must be very patient and do it from the heart."

At her tiny restaurant in Oaxaca City, Aquino recreates the food of her homeland in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrow waist of Mexico between the Pacific Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Like all of Oaxaca – and Mexico – on her menu there are tamales, including a creamy, light one filled with tender corn, and various incarnations of tortillas including *garnachas* laden with beef, onion, and chipotle and *totopos* to go with the cumin-scented *mole de camarron* (shrimp).

Oaxacans place great stock in their food being *criollo* – homegrown, endemic – so dishes are rarely prepared the same way across its regions. But tortillas are typical everywhere and always handmade, such as the blue corn version topped with zucchini flowers and mozzarella-like *queso oaxaqueño* in Teotitlan del Valle.

Local markets offer the surest insights into regional tastes. At Oaxaca City's 20 de Noviembre market you'll find salt mined with agave worms and chili, piles of garlic- and chili-coated grasshoppers, and crisp *tlayuda* tortillas layered with beans, avocado, salsa, cheese, and pork lard – so popular they're known as Oaxacan pizzas. As Ruiz assures me, in Oaxaca, "it doesn't matter if you go to a fine restaurant or a market, you are going to eat very well."



Mezcaleria signage

Mezcal Tasting in Oaxaca

The sultry, smoky flavor of mezcal is increasingly found in bars around the world, so it's no surprise travelers are flocking to Mexico to enjoy this liquor straight from the source.

First, a primer. Both mezcal and tequila come from the wondrous agave plant. Tequila is a distinct subset of mezcal, but mezcal is not a type of tequila. If you've ever enjoyed a margarita loaded with Patron or Jose Cuervo, you've already sipped mezcal – just the tequila variety of it. The difference is in the distillation. Think of tequila as the more refined, processed version of mezcal.

The upside of this rougher, less structured manufacturing is a much less consolidated industry (though this is changing, too, as mezcal becomes more popular). Today it's primarily a homespun affair, with small family-run operations in the Mexican state of Oaxaca providing the majority of production.



There are 150+ species of agave plant, and each creates a distinct flavor profile when turned into mezcal. My favorite way to spend an afternoon? Pull up to a local *mezcaleria* (mezcal bar) to taste the different options – my top picks are *espadin añejo* and *tepeztate*. With so many choices, a thorough quest to explore the varieties can extend deep into the night. *Dan Pierson*

UNFORGETTABLE

Lucha Libre

Our first taste of this unique sport was at a huge match in Mexico City. The Arena Mexico holds more than 16,000 guests and the matches are over the top, with elaborate costumes and rivalries between fighters that span weeks.

But our real love for *Lucha Libre* came via a much smaller match in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Compared to the Mexico City match, this one looked like a backyard street fight, but we immediately loved the authentic feel. The arena, normally a bullfighting stadium, was packed with local families and kids running up and down the stairs in *luchador* masks too big for their heads. To fully get into the spirit, we purchased a couple of masks to show which fighter we were supporting.

We stocked up on popcorn and beer and grabbed a spot on the wooden benches. The match was running late and the crowd was getting restless, so my partner looked into the dressing room tent to see what the delay was about. He was greeted by a dozen wrestlers, greasing up their bodies and squeezing themselves into their latex costumes. They were thrilled to have a foreigner backstage, and even included him in some behind-the-scenes photos. But clearly they weren't going to be starting any time soon. Never one to pass up an opportunity to perform, my partner donned his *luchador* mask and entered the ring. The kids playing on the ropes immediately saw this as a challenge. Within minutes, he had a dozen children hanging off each limb, determined to take down the big *gringo* with their merciless karate chops. He played the part of melodramatic villain perfectly, falling theatrically to his knees in defeat as the crowd cheered.

At last, the real show started. The next hour was pure slapstick comedy gold, with clearly missed punches sending the fighters reeling, and ridiculous characters like a fighter whose secret weapon was kissing his opponents into submission. But the memory I'll cherish is of my partner fighting off dozens of kids in his shiny silver mask. *Christine Williams*



The Princess of the Pyramid

Chelsea Gregory makes a one-of-a-kind connection at El Castillo, Muyil's great pyramid.

I'm in the ancient city of Muyil, on the edge of a lagoon in the Sian Ka'an Biosphere in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. I had driven 30 minutes from Tulum down the 307 Highway, pulled into the small dirt parking lot, paid the Maya gatekeeper 50 pesos and found myself wandering here. I'm walking through thick jungle, discovering a civilization that had sown its roots here more than 2,300 years before.

The crunch of my footsteps on the loose, alabaster gravel of *el Sacbe*, the ancient "white road," is the only sound I can hear against the constant buzz of insects. I ask myself for the 10th time, "How on earth I am the only person at these ruins?" It's 3pm on a Saturday and, aside from the group of children leaving as I arrived, I have not seen another visitor.

Swatting at the gnats dancing around my ears, I try to focus on the plaque that stands at the base of El Castillo, one of the tallest pyramids in the Yucatán at 55 ft (17 m). I'm trying to envision the community that once called this place home when the silence is disrupted by a primal roar.

I'm frozen. My stomach lurches. Did I just hear a dinosaur?

If you've never heard the call of a howler monkey, that is the closest comparison I can bring to mind. Though they only grow to be about 3 ft (1 m) tall, their howls can be heard from a mile away.

My heartbeat is thudding in my ears, but something tells me not to be afraid.

I stand still and wait.

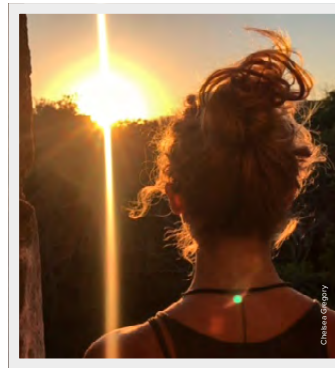
After a few more calls, a furry brown arm reaches through the greenery and behind it, a small brown face looks down at me. After

a few moments she ascends back into the tree, and the jungle is silent again.

I can't wait to share my experience with another human, so I rush back to the entrance and tell the gatekeeper. "*Saraguato! Veo un saraguato!*" (I saw a howler monkey!) Despite my poor Spanish, he nods. I can tell by the smile on his face that my excitement is contagious.

"*Regresar mañana, amiga. Gratis.*" He has invited me back tomorrow, free of charge.

The next morning, I wake up with plans to spend the day by the crisp, cool water of an open cenote. It's my last full day in Mexico and I want to relax, finish my book, and soak up the sun. But sitting at the water's edge, I can't concentrate on the words I'm reading. My mind is back at the Castillo. I remember the palpable feeling of joy shared between the gatekeeper and me, and I decide I must return, if only to thank him for his kindness



Chelsea Gregory

and capture his portrait with my camera. If I leave now, I'll arrive 30 minutes before the site closes at 5pm.

The gatekeeper greets me with a hug, and I ask if I can quickly take his photo and ask a question: "What do you love about this place?" He pauses and answers "This place is sacred. The umbilical cord to the whole world."

It gives me the chills.

To my amazement he asks if I'd like a tour. "Don't you close at five?" I ask.

He smiles. "Not for friends."

As we make our way back to the Castillo, he points out the local flora and fauna. We try to bridge our language barrier with charades, hand gestures, and sound effects. He teaches me about the Maya sacrificial practices that were believed to bring the spring rains, the feathers and gold they used to adorn themselves with, and the arrival of Spanish conquistadors that lead to the downfall of this long-inhabited trade city.

Finally, we arrive at the Castillo. I thank him and think the tour is over, but to my amazement he asks, "Do you want to climb?" I'm speechless. I must have misunderstood him – surely I cannot climb the pyramid.

"Not for many people. But you are only one. You have a good energy – I feel it. You came back after yesterday. You tell the truth. We climb."

I'm still incredulous, but follow as he begins to ascend the stone steps. It takes 10 minutes to climb to the "room" near the top. He explains that he comes up here to meditate sometimes. He invites me to close my eyes and we meditate together. I feel the



El Castillo

Chelsea Gregory

warm breeze cool the sweat on my brow. After a moment he takes a deep breath and says, "*Buena energia.*" (Good energy).

I abandon my flimsy sandals, and leave my camera behind so my hands are free. We scale the remaining rocks and sit atop this structure, and I'm gifted with the most incredible view. The canopy of the jungle hides all evidence of modern civilization – we are the only people in existence. I'm transported through my imagination back 2,000 years.

The gatekeeper and I share the Maya and English words for "breathe" and "happiness." We point out the birds we see in flight and listen for their calls. We talk about our birthdays and families at home.

We watch as the sinking sun paints everything with its golden hue. Overcome with emotion, I say "*Gracias, Señor. Muchas, muchas gracias.*" I will remember this forever." He thanks me in return. "*Un regalo para mi, tambien.* (A gift for me, too) *Gracias, amiga.* Suki, princess of the pyramid with the good heart."

He has gotten my name wrong, but I hardly notice. Words don't matter here, only connection. This connection is what I travel for, and this time I have found it.

"*Buena energia.*"

My heartbeat is thudding in my ears, but something tells me not to be afraid

I remember the palpable feeling of joy shared between the gatekeeper and me, and I decide I must return, if only to thank him for his kindness and capture his portrait with my camera

The Muxes of Juchitán de Zaragoza

Joseph Furey takes us to the Zapotec-majority town where a third gender (muxe) has been a fact of life for centuries.

Some people travel to find themselves, others to lose themselves, and some simply to see what's out there. It's generally agreed, though, that whatever your perspective, to put it to the test is a healthy thing. And there are few places better equipped to challenge your assumptions than Oaxaca, a state in southwest Mexico, where a lot of people have been doing things a little differently for a very long time.

To wax anthropologically for a moment, with 16 distinct ethnolinguistic groups – that is, 16 indigenous peoples with their own customs, traditions, and languages – Oaxaca is one of the most culturally diverse places on the planet. The state largely owes that diversity to its rugged topography – whose exposed peaks, plunging valleys, and dense colonies of cacti kept its communities from mingling for hundreds of years – and considers the richness of its heritage a great boon.

I got to know Oaxaca and its plethora of peoples well in the half-decade I was based in Mexico. Between journalistic assignments, I was a doorman alongside Mixtec boxers at a bar in the state capital; a poor swimmer among the surfing backpackers and Huave fishermen off San Mateo del Mar; and a sort of sorcerer's apprentice in the northern

sierra town of Huautla de Jimenez, where Mazatec shamans taught me how to make ceremonial use of the psychoactive fungi and plants that grow there.

I encountered cultures that were alive, not in the donning-fancy-dress-for-the-sake-of-tourist-pesos sense, nor in the form of a historical hangover, but in ways that continue to shine a light on how we live – and see ourselves – right now.

Which is where the Zapotecs, the largest indigenous group in Oaxaca, come in. The founders of a sophisticated pre-Columbian civilization some 2,500 years ago, with the astonishing feat of engineering that is the ancient city of Monte Albán to show for it, the Zapotecs are still a force to be reckoned with, though this time for something more benevolent than the amassing of power.

The Zapotec muxes: neither male nor female

I had been living for a month in Oaxaca City when I met Carmelita and Elena at the *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*. In that time, though I was and remain a badly lapsed Catholic, the Baroque church had seen more of me than my usual haunts – the mezcals bars – had.

My mother had recently died, and the basilica is dedicated to Our Lady of Solitude, the Virgin Mary in mourning. Above the altar, center-stage, her effigy stands, a look of infinite compassion on her face. I took comfort in her steadying gaze, and placed myself beneath it every other morning.

Grief works on people in disparate ways. It opens them up or closes them down, and Carmelita and Elena rightly saw in my wide eyes a willingness to talk. Always immaculately turned out, dressed like twins in embroidered silk *huipils*, long skirts, and shawls, their hair shining black, they would join me at the back of the church, even though the pews there were rougher-hewn and as hard as railroad ties. They were patient with my halting Spanish as

we talked about everything and nothing, becoming close enough after a few weeks to share confidences. “We need to tell you something,” Carmelita said, “it’s very important, and we hope you won’t feel that we’ve misled you.”

They had chosen the right day for it. The power was off, and the dark had a confessional quality to it, though the caretaker had fashioned a contraption out of a bungee cord, metal coat hangers, and three mismatched flashlights on full beam to pick out the features of Our Lady. It made her look as if she were about to be abducted by B-movie aliens. And by its peculiar light, Elena and Carmelita took my hands.

The story they told me was a remarkable one. They were *muxes* (moo-sheys), a “third gender” born male but living as women. “Which is how we are described by professors anyway,” Elena said. They were from the Zapotec-majority town of Juchitán de Zaragoza, which is a five-hour drive away on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrow waist of land between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. And they were in the Oaxaca City to track down *muxe* friends who they suspected had been taken there by American sex tourists. “These Americans, they call Juchitán ‘Hoochie Town,’” said Elena in disgust.

Now in their early 30s, my friends explained that they had been raised by their grandparents, and had worn their current style of dress from a very early age. “Many *muxes* can’t remember being anything else. There was never any question that I was one,” Elena said. “Everyone knew. And they were pleased. It is considered a blessing if God gives a family a *muxe*.”

How *modern*, I thought. But I was wrong. No surprise there: though I’d been in Mexico long enough for the mosquitoes to lose interest in me, I was far from informed about its southwest corner. The *muxe* has been a fact of Zapotec life since pre-Colonial times. →

Though I’d been in Mexico long enough for the mosquitoes to lose interest in me, I was far from informed about its southwest corner



A *muxe* performance artist

Mac (Photo: Liana Creative Commons, Wikimedia)

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“Local legend has it that St Nicholas Ferrer, the patron saint of Juchitán, was carrying a sack of *muxes*,” Carmelita said. “He was supposed to distribute them evenly across the country. But it tore when he got to Juchitán and they all spilled out.”

Juchitán de Zaragoza: a center of *muxe* culture

The following week, I drove with Elena to Juchitán to see the fabled town for myself. I found it in high spirits. Preparations were under way for a four-day *vela*, a celebration of all things *muxe*, which is equal parts jamboree, pageant, and Mass (*muxes* are allowed to take communion in Juchitán, though it would be denied them elsewhere). The *vela*, which has been held each November since the early '70s, takes its name from its organizers, *Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro* (the Authentic Intrepid Seekers of Danger), a group of *muxe* activists, educators, and entrepreneurs who keep an eye out for their own.

Muxes make up about 5% of Juchitán's population of 80,000, but they are much more visible there than that suggests. Zapotec society is matrifocal. The men are mostly laborers, out of sight, in the fields or on building sites, sometimes fishing boats. Women are the public face of the family, involved in day-to-day commerce, running stores and market stalls. *Muxes* do “women’s work” too, but, free from childcare obligations, they have more freedom to explore their career options. Many Juchitán households run on *muxe* incomes. Perhaps that’s why it’s considered lucky to have one in the family.

Elena introduced me to a few of her friends – some, like her, who looked, to foreign eyes, quintessentially feminine, and others who were more radical in the way they presented themselves (who knew a bare chest, a shaved head, and a double *tutu* would be a winning combination?). All were taller than the average Zapotec man,

and many were broader built, as indeed the women generally are. When Zapotec parents recognize a “feminine” quality in their boy children, they are not just noticing a soft androgyny – a burlier frame can be a factor.

At Elena’s suggestion, I visited Salon Cazorla, a club/dance studio that’s been *muxe*-owned and -operated for 40 years, where I discovered Oscar, its proprietor and one of the founders of *Las Auténticas*, having a sly cigarette outside. But for a blousy *guayabera*, he was soberly dressed and, pointing at himself, he was keen to stress the variety of *muxe* life.

“There isn’t one kind of *muxe*. Some are born *muxe*, others become *muxes*. They are chosen or they choose. Some wear dresses, others just make-up. Some have relationships with men, some with women. But they are not gay or straight, because they are not men or women – they are *muxe*. That is important. *Muxes* are venerated here. They are free to pursue careers: teachers, nurses, hairdressers, party planners. They look after the elderly. Homosexuals who like to dress in ladies’ clothes come to Juchitán because they are persecuted in other towns. The more the merrier, I say, but strictly speaking, they are not *muxes*.”

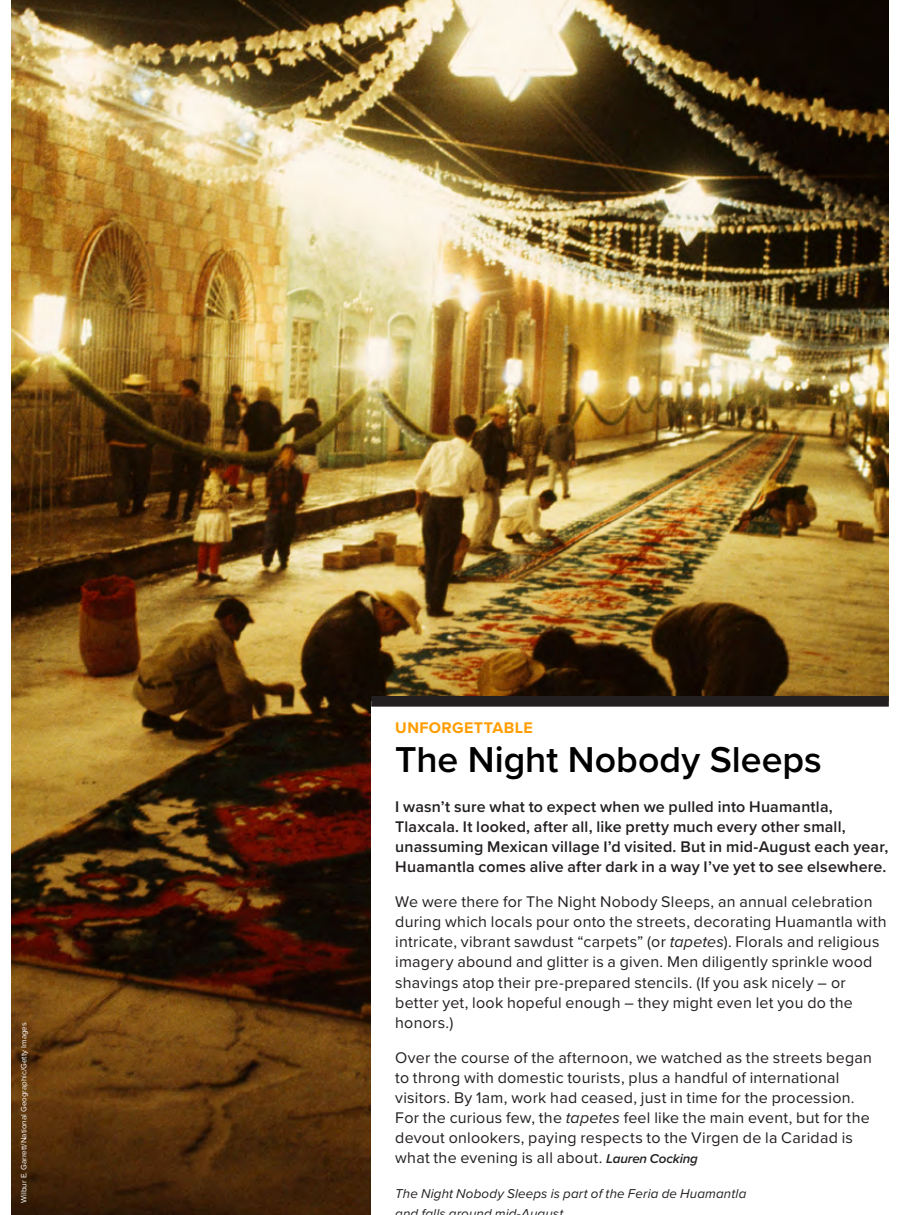
Every day is Pride here, and whatever your sexual orientation or identification, the knowledge that there is a place on earth where all who live there are valued and all who don’t are welcome is enormously heartening.

I was sorry to make my apologies and leave the following morning, but work was calling. I plan to return for this year’s *vela*; to see old friends, of course, but also to toast Juchitán’s resilience. The town was almost leveled by an 8.1-magnitude earthquake – and 10 strong aftershocks – last year. The mayor said the buildings fell “just like dominoes”. But I’m told that it’s business as usual for the *muxes*. “Or unusual, as you would say,” wrote Elena.

TRIP NOTES

You can fly to Oaxaca City from Mexico City with InterJet or Aeromar for under US \$150 (\$3,060 MXN) return. Buses leave Oaxaca City for Juchitán several times a day for as little as US \$15 (\$306 MXN). The *Vela de Las Auténticas Intrepidas Buscadoras del Peligro* happens every year in mid-November.

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UNFORGETTABLE

The Night Nobody Sleeps

I wasn’t sure what to expect when we pulled into Huamantla, Tlaxcala. It looked, after all, like pretty much every other small, unassuming Mexican village I’d visited. But in mid-August each year, Huamantla comes alive after dark in a way I’ve yet to see elsewhere.

We were there for The Night Nobody Sleeps, an annual celebration during which locals pour onto the streets, decorating Huamantla with intricate, vibrant sawdust “carpets” (or *tapetes*). Florals and religious imagery abound and glitter is a given. Men diligently sprinkle wood shavings atop their pre-prepared stencils. (If you ask nicely – or better yet, look hopeful enough – they might even let you do the honors.)

Over the course of the afternoon, we watched as the streets began to throng with domestic tourists, plus a handful of international visitors. By 1am, work had ceased, just in time for the procession. For the curious few, the *tapetes* feel like the main event, but for the devout onlookers, paying respects to the Virgen de la Caridad is what the evening is all about. **Lauren Cocking**

The Night Nobody Sleeps is part of the Feria de Huamantla and falls around mid-August.

BEYOND CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Far from the tourist track, the remote pyramids of the Yucatán Peninsula have ancient secrets to share.

Lydia Jones deciphers their mysteries.

I experience the Maya ruins through touch. I want to climb, swim, row, absorb their energy, ponder and stand in awe in jungle that I have all to myself. For that, it's worth getting off the beaten track.

I have been to Chichén Itzá. It's majestic, but full of vendors and crowds, so I can't feel its power. It took me five years of traveling in southern Mexico (after moving here from England) to begin to feel the energy of the ruins and see the pattern of stone masks and motifs. Now I'm hooked.

The various routes are named for their architectural styles, but I'd like to take you behind that to the mysteries of Maya thought. At first, the masks and motifs all look the same, but they have different tales to tell.

Mountain Monster (Río Bec Route, Campeche)

I first met Witz, the Mountain Monster, at Chichén Itzá, although my guide identified him as Chaac, the Rain God. Through my research, I discovered that Witz was to

be found everywhere among the Río Bec group of sites in southern Campeche. These sites were occupied from around 300 BC – their later pyramids follow the style of Tikal in Guatemala, with mysterious false doorways and mock temples that you can't enter, all built for show, not use.

I choose Balamkú first, the only site where you can actually go inside the temple and meet the monsters. The walk to the pyramid gives me the feeling of being an ancient jungle dweller – superstitious, and rather frightened. I can feel the jungle spirit that the Maya believe in. When I get to the temple, the guard is as delighted to see me as I am to see him, out there in the dense forest with nothing but howler monkeys for company.

Inside the pyramid, I'm alone with the ancient ancestors. Three huge potbellied toads sit on a monster's skull, on a long frieze across a narrow room. From the wide-open maw of each toad emerges a seated, cross-legged ruler. The monster mask has huge eyes and large teeth, and the bottom jaw is buried in the earth. →

Calakmul
in Southern
Campeche





Hormiguero, Campeche

The mask of Witz marks the pyramid as a sacred living mountain. A deceased Maya ruler did not die; he traveled. First he entered, through the Witz's mouth, the waters of the underworld, where he had to defeat its wicked lords before continuing his journey up the mountain into paradise. The toads helped each king complete his journey. Toads are connected to the underworld and their croak heralds rain, leading to the renewal of the earth.

From here, I continue my journey to Hormiguero to face the largest Witz of them all. If Balamkú is spooky, Hormiguero is even more ghostly. I feel suspended in time, although only 12.5mi (20km) off the highway. The tracks through the forest are no more than faint traces, and then suddenly I'm face-to-face with the gigantic Witz gateway to the temple. The rest of the ruins are barely explored, heaps of stone swallowed up by nature. I can feel, in my bones, the ancient Maya fear of death, the desire for rebirth, and the ever-present threat of the jungle.

If you want a similar experience, but conveniently on the highway, try Chicanná. The other sites have smaller Witz masks.

Calakmul is vast and remote and you'll need all day. In Xpujil, the Tikal-style towers are impressive, but you can't climb the only pyramid, while at Becán you can climb a number of them.

Cosmic Bird (Puuc Route, Yucatán)

"Puuc" in Maya describes the range of low hills south of Mérida, a dramatic contrast with the level limestone plain of the rest of the Yucatán peninsula. These sites are notable for ornate mosaics from 700 to 900 AD. I'm standing on top of the Great Pyramid of Uxmal, the most elegant of Maya sites. I'm admiring the view of the jungle, but my real focus is the intriguing masks, just behind me. I'm curious, and I want to get to the bottom of these stone faces.

I have already greeted with a smile my old friend Witz, who presides on top of the Magician's Pyramid. But how about the other masks? They can't be Chaac the Rain God, because he has a down-curling nose, while most of these masks have up-curling noses instead.

Some researchers claim they could be the Cosmic Bird called Itzam Yeh, with a "long lip," rather than a snout. I think of it as a beak. The Cosmic Bird sits on top of the World Tree, a manifestation of the sky god Itzamná. Could he be waiting there to welcome the deceased king to the Upper World? I settle on that story of divinity and immortality.

From here I'll continue along the Puuc Route to the charming, smaller sites of Kabáh, Sayil, Xlapak, and Labná, quietly checking whether the noses curl up or down and staring into the manic eyes of the Cosmic Bird. If you have ever looked a bird in the eye, you'll know what I mean. Then I'll make a detour to Kulubá, east of Tizimín. It's not on the Puuc route, but it has the same masks of the Cosmic Bird. Although it's set among the cattle ranches of northern Yucatán, it still has that jungle magic I found on the Río Bec route. It breathes the ancient Maya message of eternal life.

TRIP NOTES

Mountain Monster

Balamkú, Calakmul, Hormiguero, Chicanná, Becán, Xpujil, Dzibanché, Kinichná

The Río Bec route is in the jungle of the Calakmul Biosphere (along its only highway), in the state of Campeche. Dzibanché and Kinichná are off the same highway in the state of Quintana Roo. For remote Hormiguero and Calakmul, both in the jungle off the highway, you'll need a car.

The entry fee to most of the ruins is US \$2.70 (\$55 MXN). Hormiguero is free. Calakmul has a set of fees, US \$2.45 (\$50 MXN) per person for the first 32mi (20km) of the dirt road, which is private land, US \$3.45 (\$70 MXN) to enter the Calakmul biosphere and US \$2.45 (\$50 MXN) for the ruins.

The village of Xpujil is best for accommodation for all the sites. Avoid the rainy season (August–October) when the jungle is very humid and full of mosquitoes.

Cosmic Bird Route

Uxmal, Kabáh, Sayil, Xlapak, Labná, Kulubá

These sites are mainly on the Puuc Route in Yucatán, about an hour south of Mérida. Kulubá is hidden in the jungle of Tizimín, north of Valladolid.

The entry fee for Uxmal is US \$11 (\$223 MXN); for Kabáh, Labná, and Xlapak, US \$2.45 (\$50 MXN). Sayil and Kulubá are free. Uxmal offers a few hacienda hotels and Santa Elena cheaper eco cabañas.



UNFORGETTABLE

Fiesta Grande de Enero

During the first few weeks of January, the sleepy town of Chiapa de Corzo bursts into life.

Nominally a Catholic event in honour of the patron saints of the town, in practice the dances, costumes, and rituals have their roots in the pre-Christian indigenous culture of the local Zoque people.

Walking into town, I passed a steady trickle of *parachicos* – the dancers who make the festival such a vibrant event. Wrapped in colorfully striped ponchos, they wore strange wooden masks depicting the pale-skinned faces of the Spanish colonial governors, and distinctive, mushroom-like hats to imitate their blonde hair.

By the time I reached the town square, the trickle had become a flood of several thousand, and I was soon swept along by it. Accompanied by brass bands and mariachis, the *parachicos* danced energetically. Women in traditional dress walked alongside them throwing confetti, and fireworks were set off alarmingly close to the crowds.

Every so often, they would charge into one of the handsome colonial buildings which line the streets. The smaller the space, it seemed, the more intense the dancing. *Max Serjeant*

Meeting the World's Authority on Mexican Folk Art

Maxine Rose Schur tells us about the remarkable woman who single-handedly collected 10,000 works of art.

While traveling in Mexico City, I heard about a woman named Ruth Lechuga who was the world's authority on Mexican folk art and had an astonishing collection of 10,000 objects in her apartment.

I knew I had to see her.

Though she was elderly and ill, when I called her, she invited me right over. I was greeted by her caregiver, served delicious Mexican coffee, and asked to wait a few moments. When Ms. Lechuga arrived, she greeted me in perfect English and told me a bit about herself. Her name had been Ruth Deutsch and she came to Mexico in 1939 at the age of 18 with her family, Jewish refugees from Nazi Austria.

"I knew nothing of Mexico nor the Spanish language," she said, "but when I saw a mural by Jose Clemente Orozco in the city's Palace of Fine Arts, it sparked a lifelong curiosity about Mexican culture. It was not so much the subject matter as the colors. That night I dreamt in yellows and reds. Such an intense emotion made me realize that this was a completely different culture that could not be understood through European eyes."

From that moment on, Ruth began a quest to learn about Mexican culture. This was no easy task, as Mexico has dozens of

native tribes who speak myriad languages. With her father, she traipsed through the most remote parts of Mexico with her camera slung in front of her. She visited villages where Spanish was never heard and foreigners never seen, and she took astonishing photos of celebrations and rituals, 20,000 in all, which today serve as an invaluable document of native culture, religion, and daily life.

In one village, she became intrigued by a blouse embroidered with brilliant flowers. She bought it, and later she told me, "That blouse had me asking many questions. Who made it? How did they make it and why?" It was followed by thousands more purchases — objects people had made by hand and that held great meaning for them.

10,000 Objects = 10,000 Stories

I was feeling somewhat guilty asking so many questions of Ruth. She looked frail as a feather and had to walk with an oxygen tank rolling beside her. But my questions seemed to energize her and her voice grew stronger with the passion she felt for the beautiful things in her apartment. And, indeed, there were many. Her collection spread out on every possible inch — along the floors, the walls, the closets, and on every conceivable surface.

I was enchanted by everything: a row of pretty little dolls made from corn husks, tortoise and horn combs in fanciful shapes (mermaid, mariachi, owl and bird), metal trays and boxes painted with conquistadors, and masks of angels, devils, animals, and smiling surreal creatures. Pottery bowls and urns of every size and shape were lined up like a small army. I felt I had entered a dreamlike realm where the humblest object was witty, surprising, and possessed its own unique spirit.

"I have never bought an item without insisting on meeting its maker and learning its purpose." Ruth declared, "For example, if I bought a mask, I wanted to meet the dancer who had worn it in the sacred

I felt I had entered a dreamlike realm where the humblest object possessed its own unique spirit



Bull-horn comb and toy carousel carved from a gourd



Dr. Ruth Lechuga in her bedroom

ceremony. Once I had to wear the mask and dance with it as a condition of my purchase. The mask was smelly with sweat from the previous dancer, but putting it on made me understand in a visceral way that the mask was not merely a work of art but an instrument for expressing aspects of the human spirit."

Reflections on life and death

Ruth guided me through her vast collection, even the curious little figurines fashioned from chewing gum. In one room, she introduced me to her teenage grandson, who was busy cataloging her enormous collection of regional embroideries. But after two hours, I worried about tiring her and so began to make my farewell.

"You cannot go yet," she exclaimed, "You must see my bedroom!"

So I followed Ruth slowly down a long hallway and when we reached her bedroom, I stood in bewilderment. The

walls were painted a deep rose pink and at first, I thought they were decorated with white lace. But upon entering, I saw they were covered floor to ceiling with Day of the Dead skeletons in a wide variety of dress: tuxedos, Marilyn Monroe costumes. At the back of the room, Ruth pointed out a shelf of tiny dioramas showing how death comes as murder. She picked up a small box depicting a tiny man being shot at an ATM window. "Amusing," she said.

Then, she looked at me with a sly grin. "You know, Death thinks it's laughing at me but when I lie in bed here and look about my room — I laugh at Death."

Ruth died less than a year later. Today her collection is housed in Mexico City's Franz Mayer Museum. It's the perfect space, granting Dr. Lechuga the wish she had confided in me:

"I want the collection to be useful, to demonstrate this country's many roots. This is the real Mexico."

Folk art is never anonymous but rather, always made by an artist, simply one whose name we do not know.

Dr. Ruth Lechuga

TRIP NOTES

Visit the Ruth Lechuga Folk Art Collection at the Franz Mayer Museum in Mexico City, which holds Latin America's largest collection of decorative arts.

Address: Av. Hidalgo 45, Centro Histórico, Guerrero, 06300

Hours: Tuesday to Friday 10-5, Saturday and Sunday 10-7. Closed Monday.



CITIES & TOWNS

Guanajuato

Mexico's interior is dotted with *pueblos mágicos* (magic towns) recognized for their historical and cultural significance. Rustic fishing villages and laid-back surfer communities edge its coasts. Along the US border, towns with dubious but often undeserved reputations offer a unique mix of American and Mexican culture. And the vibrant sprawl of Mexico City is an adventure in itself.

MEXICO CITY: A CAPITAL WITH CHARISMA

With a population of nine million people (add in Greater Mexico City, and we're talking 21.2 million), Mexico City's vastness can feel overwhelming. Where should a traveler even begin? Local **Lauren Cocking** shares her tips.

Ask 10 different people for their thoughts on Mexico City and you'll get 10 different answers, so impossible is it to put together a cohesive, comprehensive overview of the massive megalopolis that is the Mexican capital. I didn't take to it instantly. It's big, it's chaotic, and it can all be, honestly, a bit much. But it grows on you, getting under your skin until one day you look up and realize that, actually, it feels like home.

First-timers, with no connections in the city, typically beeline for the well-established, central neighborhoods of Roma and Condesa. It's understandable. They're overflowing with amenities and accommodation, and offer proximity to some of the best art galleries, restaurants, and bars in the capital. They're fun and photogenic places to be, replete with Art Deco architecture and some of the best street art in the capital. I always send people there if it's their inaugural visit, although I also gently suggest they venture into the nearby Juárez neighbourhood for hot chocolate and tamales, too.

If there's one thing I quickly learned in my

There's no way you can do everything in one trip, or even one lifetime. But you can try

time in Mexico City though, it's that there's no way you can do everything in one trip, or even one lifetime. But you can try.

Start with the food

It's the main attraction in the capital and while the Polanco, Roma, and Condesa neighborhoods are known for some of the best restaurants in the country, skip the "elevated" dining scene and instead eat street-side, perched on plastic stools. Tacos, tlacoyos, tortas, tamales (and a few dishes that don't start with "T") are sold morning, noon, and night, right across the city. Eating unites, so just look for the stands with a long line of locals waiting to be served and you're good to go.

Move on to the art

The Coyoacán neighborhood is an obvious bet, famed for being the one-time home of Frida Kahlo, and it was always my favourite place to escape of an afternoon. Skip Sundays though, when it gets busy as hell, and go midweek instead. That way you can enjoy your churros, coffee, or mayo-and-cheese-smothered *elotes* in the relative



Coyoacán district

peace and quiet of the central plaza. And while you're in the vicinity, hop from Coyoacán to neighbouring Xoco, to take advantage of a daytime screening of [insert arthouse film that takes your fancy here] at the Cineteca Nacional.

I always like to namedrop the UNAM Campus to potential visitors too, because what better way to make myself seem cultured. But in all seriousness, it's a place with a fascinating, revolutionary reputation (be sure to check out the Central Library and its Juan O'Gorman murals, as well as the sculpture park), as well as being something of a hotspot for urban murals. For

photo ops that go beyond Roma, this is the (quieter) place to be.

I can't *not* mention the *trajineras* in the floating gardens of Xochimilco. You've probably heard of them, and taking a ride through the canals of the capital does make for a fun afternoon. Don't believe the hype about the *Isla de las Muñecas* (Island of Dolls) though – it sounds creepy-cool but in reality you won't get to see much.

Avoid the tourists

If you'd rather go somewhere with fewer tourists, then Santa María la Ribera should be next up. While there's generally little →

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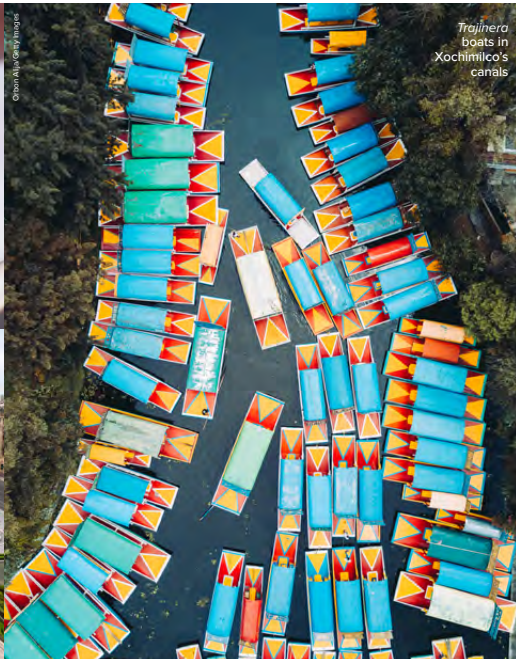




Street tacos



Palacio de Bellas Artes



Trajinera boats in Xochimilco's canals

appeal to the northern neighborhoods of Mexico City, this is the exception which proves the rule, and became my go-to *barrio* when I fancied something different. (Full disclosure: that something different usually involved hanging out at the Biblioteca Vasconcelos, whose shelves – like a space-age Harry Potter set – seem to float in mid-air. My *other* go-to library is the little-visited, mural-tastic Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada in the *centro histórico*.)

Don't miss the historic center

Give yourself an afternoon in the historic center. While rough and ready at times, you can't leave without having stopped by the sinking cathedral and the cluster of

impressive buildings which fan out from the central square, aka the *zocalo*. It also means you can mosey over to Parque Alameda, the most peaceful people-watching spot you're going to get right in the heart of Latin America's most densely populated capital city. While away a few hours doing not very much, and then pay a visit to my two favorite buildings in Mexico City: the Palacio de Bellas Artes and the Torre Latino Americana skyscraper. Whiz up to the glass-walled, 41st-floor bar of the latter for an impressive view out over the shimmering tiled roof of the former.

There's really nothing that compares to living in Mexico City. Like I said, it gets under your skin.

You can't leave without having stopped by the sinking cathedral near the central square, aka the *zocalo*



UNFORGETTABLE

Learning to Make Mezcal

Thanks to the coordinating efforts of Oaxaca Food Walks, we slid from the bed of a pick-up at Lalocura Mezcal Distillery in Santa Catrina Minas for a tour of the property. In the driveway, a leather-skinned man under a tattered Stetson hacked towards an agave's heart, the *piña*.

The pale yellow cores piled up, awaiting a slow cook beneath super-heated rocks. A Oaxacan distiller herded us towards agave burning in a stone-lined pit. The heat processes the starch within the agave and produces sugars. Reaching for a roasted piece cooling at the edge, I sampled it. I thought of leafed tobacco: vegetal, chewy, and sweet. Next, we approached three wooden fermentation vessels where microscopic yeast ate the sugar, converting it to alcohol and carbon dioxide. The bubbling liquid released a fruity, bubble gum aroma. The liquid tasted boozy, with hints of molasses and nutmeg.

Fire raged beneath a small, copper still boiling *pachuga* (fermented agave juice) and vaporizing the alcohol. There was no electricity. There was no stainless steel. Cool spring water in a copper bowl sat atop the still, condensing the rising alcohol vapor and directing it into a wooden chute. Clear spirit dripped into a clay pot: the mezcal was born. To the west, blue leaves of agave spiked up from the ground, which gradually rose towards the mountain ridge awaiting the sinking sun. Smoke-shattered sunlight upon horse-turned mills, earthenware jugs, and oxidized copper: the place and process remained pleasantly entrenched in a time long gone. *Sam Kazmer*

COLONIAL STANDOUTS

All over Mexico, you'll find towns with gorgeous historic centers filled with ornate Baroque buildings and elegant plazas. Our nomads share a few of their favorites.

Guanajuato

If you're considering travel to Central Mexico, you've almost certainly added San Miguel de Allende to your itinerary. It's a great little town – but allow me to make the case for Guanajuato, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and hidden gem tucked away in San Miguel's shadow. It's largely devoid of the crowds of international tourists you'll find in other, more popular Mexican cities, yet still packed with a full slate of interesting opportunities ripe for exploration. Set up on a hill is its most famous attraction: the largest collection of mummies in the Western Hemisphere. The Museo de Las Momias features more than 100 entombed specimens, and is well worth a visit, especially if you use it as an excuse to fortify yourself with a *michelada* (beer and tomato juice cocktail) beforehand.

Less ghoulishly, Guanajuato is also home to Cervantino, one of Mexico's premier cultural festivals. Even if you miss the main event itself, held every October, that creative, youthful vibe extends daily into the central Jardín de la Unión, where students sip coffee by day and *cerveza* by night. Music will follow your every step, leading you past the famous Teatro Juárez, where on a near-nightly basis

Music will follow your every step, leading you past the famous Teatro Juárez, where on a near-nightly basis you can expect world-class performances across dance, drama, puppetry, and more

you can expect world-class performances across dance, drama, puppetry, and more. Across the city, colonial architecture abounds, and other wonderful examples of 17th, 18th, and 19th-century masterpieces include the Teatro Principal, Plaza de la Paz, and the iconic yellow Basílica cathedral.

Guanajuato's streets are perfectly strollable, and right upon your arrival by car or bus, you'll understand why; much of the traffic is routed through the cavernous tunnels running under the city, which leaves the streets largely empty of vehicles.

On my first visit, that kind of aimless exploring brought me to my favorite place in Guanajuato: the local baseball stadium, a short 20-minute walk from downtown. Head here on a sunny afternoon for a game, complete with cold beer and *chicharon* (fried pig skin, it's delicious, trust me) sandwiches filled with avocado, hard-boiled egg, and hot sauce. Colorful houses rise on a hill above the outfield, making a dramatic backdrop to the sporting action.

A five-hour bus ride from Mexico City, Guanajuato is my favorite city in Mexico. For a taste of bohemian, laid-back university life, this is the place to go. **Dan Pierson**



Street scene, San Cristóbal de las Casas

Xilitla

In Mexico, nature is very much a part of the architecture, and nowhere is that more evident than Xilitla's Las Pozas.

Located in San Luis Potosí's share of the Sierra Gorda mountain range, Xilitla is a *pueblo mágico* (magic town) that served as a hub of Augustine missionary activity in the mid-1500s, but the pride of Xilitla lies just the city limits.

Las Pozas attracts visitors from all over the country who come to marvel at its whimsical fusion of nature and art. In the 1940s, British poet Edward James went to Mexico in search of a place to build his own "Garden of Eden" where he could pay tribute to his love of surreal art. Having fallen in love with the fantastical work of surrealist Salvador Dalí while living in Spain, I knew I had to see this grand homage for myself. The wild mountain rain forest, stunning waterfalls, and crystalline natural pools around Xilitla were

the perfect setting for the Edward James Sculpture Garden.

With more than 30 structures across 20 acres of jungle, deciding where to focus is, at first, overwhelming. To fully experience Las Pozas, I had to let go and let myself be transported to another world. The jungle has started to reclaim some of the sculptures, but the moss and vines only enhance the illusion. Inspired by fantasy works like *Alice in Wonderland*, the garden is home to sculptures such as Hands of a Giant, the House on Three Floors, and, my personal favorite, Stairway to the Sky. Between the gorgeous natural setting and my happiness at being immersed in surreal art, I didn't even care when the staircase wound me around several stories only to lead absolutely nowhere. **Alex Wittman**

Campeche

Standing on the thick fortified walls that →

CONNECT LOCALLY

surround Campeche's historic center, gazing out into the Gulf of Mexico, I can almost feel myself into seeing the British pirate ships that once laid siege to the city. The walls – and a pair of nearby forts – did their job, and today the heart of Campeche is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's home to wonderfully preserved Baroque churches, shady plazas where time appears to stand still, and 18th and 19th-century pastel-shaded houses that look like they've been plucked from the pages of a Gabriel García Márquez novel. Despite its history, Campeche, the capital of the state of the same name and located on the western flank of the Yucatán Peninsula, is not stuck in the past. Modern sculptures line many of the narrow, cobbled streets and lively seafood joints are strung along the *malecón*, the city's waterfront promenade.

Shafik Meghji

Querétaro

Officially named Santiago de Querétaro, but called simply "Querétaro," this town is proof the original spirit of Mexico thrives in its geographic heart. I moved here because I wanted to experience the real Mexico, unlike the version cultivated for tourists in other parts of the country. While researching potential cities to live in, I failed to find much information about Querétaro. That lack of guidebooks and blog posts only made me want to move here more.

Querétaro's relative anonymity is a bonus to visitors, too. In the rush of tourism to nearby San Miguel de Allende, travelers somehow overlook Querétaro. It's surprising, since Querétaro's historic city center is a prime example of the magnificent colonial architecture that made its neighbor a must-see destination. Every day, I walk out my front door and into the shadow of Templo de la Merced. If I'm ever lost in the city, I simply look for the crimson dome – freshly painted the week I moved in – and follow it home.

Querétaro is often referred to as the "pride of Mexico" for its high quality of life, strong

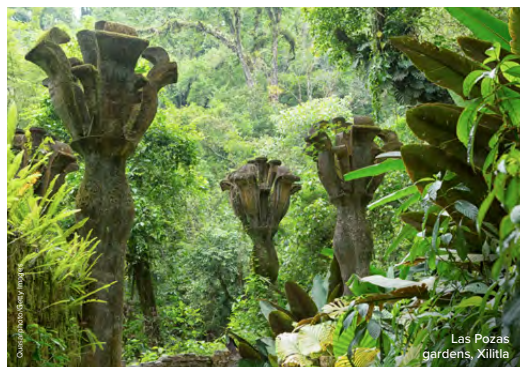
economy, and overall safety. Despite having more than a million residents, the historic center of the city still has a small-town feel. You can drink in traditional *cantinas*, shop in working markets like Mercado La Cruz, and engage with hospitable *queretanos* who still find foreigners a relative novelty. My first week in Querétaro, I managed two of the three when, after realizing I was a foreigner, the chicken stall owner gifted me four coffee cups for my new home. I drink coffee in my mug every morning, buy chicken from Fernando every week, and am grateful to live in Querétaro every day. *Alex Wittman*

Taxco de Alarcón

Taxco is blessed with both magnificent colonial architecture and stunning natural geography. The two combine to make it one of the most picturesque cities in Mexico, yet surprisingly it does not yet draw huge numbers of tourists.

Built with the wealth of the local silver mines, its inhabitants used their riches to build opulent whitewashed mansions for themselves. These weave around the steep contours of the hillside on which the city is built, before stopping abruptly at the cliff-edge of the valley below.

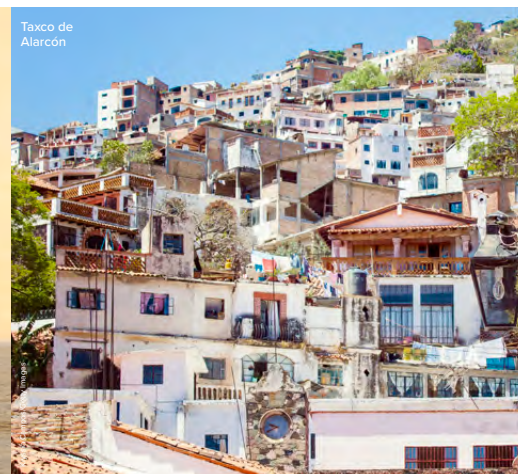
To fully appreciate the city's grandeur,



Indigenous woman selling crafts in San Cristóbal de las Casas



Taxco de Alarcón



I head uphill to the El Cristo statue. The spectacular views begin as soon as I emerge from of the warren of narrow streets, and as I climb they get better and better. Most eye-catching is the Santa Prisca church, with its ornate towers and colorful dome. Framed by the folds of the surrounding hills, it looms dramatically over Taxco's historic streets.

Max Serjeant

San Cristóbal de las Casas

Set at 7,200ft (2,200m) above sea level and surrounded by misty, pine-covered hills, San Cristóbal de las Casas is one of Mexico's most attractive cities. Its historic center is filled with cobbled streets, mansions with red-tiled roofs, and ornate churches, some dating back to the 1500s.

Among the highlights is the Baroque, pale pink Santo Domingo de Guzmán church, whose candle-lit interior is an evocative place, regardless of your religious beliefs. Beyond its colonial architecture, San Cristóbal is the cultural hub of the southern state of Chiapas, and its bustling markets offer an array of local crafts, most notably some exquisite textiles. Much of the center is pedestrianized, and there are scores of vaguely bohemian cafes and bars in which

to while away the hours. Known to locals as Jovel, the city is also an ideal base for exploring the nearby indigenous Totztil Maya villages of San Juan Chamula and San Lorenzo Zinacantan. *Shafik Meghji*

Mérida

Mérida's position on the Yucatán Peninsula gives it a tropical Caribbean atmosphere which contrasts with most of Mexico's colonial cities. With its palm trees and humidity, it reminds me more of Havana or San Juan than Mexico City.

In many ways, Mérida symbolises the hybrid nature of Mexico. On the one hand, the Maya population of the region has ensured that its people's dress and food have a clear indigenous influence. On the other, the architecture of its center feels very Spanish and it has firmly embraced European culture. Its streets are lined with sculptures, and it's home to museums, art galleries and even an opera house.

Being the closest colonial city to the resorts of Cancún, it does attract large groups of visitors. The crowds are smallest between June and September, making this a good time to visit – as long as you don't mind the increased humidity. *Max Serjeant*

THE REAL STORY: BORDER TOWNS

The towns and states along the US-Mexico border have a reputation for danger. Former drug-war correspondent **Joseph Furey** exposes the truth behind the hype.

Given the scaremongering that has accompanied recent calls for The Wall to be built along the US-Mexico border, one might be forgiven for thinking that the towns south of that line must be no-go zones, with nothing to offer the traveler but villainy and violence. But the truth is a more complicated beast.

Take a peek behind “the tortilla curtain” and you’ll encounter a wealth of food, art, and culture that it’s hard to believe you tried living without. But as a former drug-war correspondent, whose patch was all 1,954mi (3,145km) of the border, I know only too well the area has its challenges. With that in mind, I can recommend the following destinations in good conscience, but with a caveat – if you break the law in Mexico, the law may not prove to be your biggest problem.

Tijuana, Baja California

Popular with American debauchees during the Prohibition era, and recently blighted by drug-cartel violence, Tijuana, like a lot of Mexican border towns, has been roundly used and abused. But its search for a new identity, as part of a bilingual

cross-border tech hub with serious cultural cred, has paid off. On the southern side of “the busiest border crossing in the world”, it sees itself as San Diego’s strategic partner, not its poor relation. Its downtown *pasajes*, once boarded-up, now teem with murals, studios, galleries, and independent stores; and I guarantee that there’s no city of remotely comparable charm where you can eat and drink so well for less.

My perfect Tijuana day would involve: a “Black Harder” tostada (a local specialty made with sole marinated in squid ink), washed down with a mezcaval cocktail; catching a Latin American arthouse flick at Cine Tonalá; getting ringside for a little *Lucha Libre* wrestling at the Auditorio Municipal de Tijuana; and then cheering on the Zonkeys, the local basketball team (which take their name from the donkeys painted like zebras that still mournfully line the city’s streets, waiting for someone from 20 years earlier to ask to be photographed with them as a souvenir).

Sun, surf, and seafood, Baja Norte
Just outside the spring-break hot spot



Popotla

Tijuana, like a lot of Mexican border towns, has been roundly used and abused

of Rosarito, a 35-minute drive south of Tijuana, is Popotla, a cheerfully anarchic fishing village that sits in the shadow of Baja Studios, the oceanside movie lot that was built by Twentieth Century Fox for the filming of *Titanic*. Seafood stands and raw bars pepper the beach. Don’t leave until you’ve eaten your bodyweight in *pismo* and *pata de mula* clams, kumiai oysters, and live sea urchin. A nudge further south is K-38, aka El Morro, a year-round surf spot, one of the more testing and most consistent waves around. A few more miles on from there is Puerto Nuevo, or “Lobster Village”, where a dozen or more restaurants serve pan-fried *langosta* with beans, rice, and flour tortillas.

Sonora state

Mexico’s second-largest state, Sonora is also its least explored – and its border area is where the merely undiscovered takes a startling turn for the peculiar, if not downright alien. Covering close to 2,760mi² (7,150km²), and one of the driest places on earth, the El Pinacate and Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site is a place of high – and low – drama, a combination of dormant volcanic landscape and active sand dunes with peaks and craters that are home to a remarkable variety of fauna and flora, including the pronghorn antelope and the elephant tree.

They’re also home to lots of stories. →



When I was last there, based in Puerto Peñasco on the north shore of the Sea of Cortez, I was told that, in January 1969, locals had partied with the Apollo 11 crew, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins, and the astronauts had sampled bootleg *bacanora*, a mezcal-like liquor. A late friend, Gustavo Menéndez, a cornettist who played at the party, carried a fading photo of the occasion in his wallet, like an icon. NASA has confirmed that the reserve, on account of its otherworldly appearance, has been used several times for moon-landing training, but wouldn't give specifics.

It's always worth keeping an eye on the weather in Sonora, for when the rains do come, the reserve erupts with color: verbenas, poppies, lilies, and the parasitic plant sandfood (*Pholisma sonorae*), an important part of the diet of the Hia C-ed O'dham people living in the region.

Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua

Reporting on the drug war in 2010, I was based in Juárez for three months at the height of its cartel violence, when it was declared "the murder capital of the world".

It was heartbreaking to see the city that was once considered El Paso's better half brought to its knees. Just as it's been enormously gratifying to watch it piece itself back together over the last 10 years, tackling corruption and extortion, so journalists no longer have to live in fear of doing their job properly, and children can play in the streets.

Juárez's patient rebuild can't hold a votive candle to Tijuana's reinvention of itself, but the city has had enough upheaval in recent years, and slow and steady suits it better. The Historic Downtown Urban Development Master Plan has done much to restore historic buildings and revitalize the tourist and business districts that were ravaged by the violence. For many, the appeal of visiting Juárez is to be able to say that you have; its bad reputation has its own perverse credibility. But, as long as you stay away from the more troubled *colonias*, it's now possible to do so without putting yourself at risk. If you're still in doubt, let The Curious Mexican or Juárez Walking Tour lead the way.

It was heartbreaking to see the city that was once considered El Paso's better half brought to its knees



UNFORGETTABLE

Fiestas de Octubre

Sandwiched as it is between September – the month of Mexican Independence Day – and November, when Day of the Dead famously descends on Mexico, October could seem like a comparatively disappointing month to drop by.

That's far from the case in Guadalajara, the western city which rings in this transition month with, appropriately, four weeks of festivities. Welcome to the *Fiestas de Octubre*.

I'd only lived in Guadalajara, Jalisco for a month when the festivities – which are kicked off each year by family-friendly parades and over-the-top firework displays – began in earnest. I was just barely getting to grips with the language, never mind the culture, but Guadalajara clearly didn't have time to ease me in.

Instead, I was thrust into a month-long introduction to many of Mexico's most traditional events: mariachi concerts and *charreadas* (Mexican rodeos) spring to mind, as do traditional dance recitals, film screenings, and free concerts from big name Mexican bands and singers.

Tequila and beer flowed far too easily and I'd go back in a heartbeat. *Lauren Cocking*

The Fiestas de Octubre attractions can be found across the city throughout the month of October.

UNDERRATED MEXICO

Overshadowed by more famous places, these towns may be off your radar, but they've earned a special place in the hearts of our nomads.

Chihuahua

For many people, the word "Chihuahua" brings to mind a tiny dog rather than Mexico's biggest state. But while the dog breed did originate there, Chihuahua offers something much better: its capital, Chihuahua City.

My connection to this city is personal – it's the site of many of my cherished memories, as well as my mom's childhood home (now a cool bar on Avenida Bolivar, a nexus of Chihuahua nightlife). But, I also just think it's incredibly cool: a thriving industrial hub in the middle of a cattle-ranching state, where Mennonites, indigenous Tarahumaras, and Chihuahueros mingle, where this small-town girl got to go to the theater, take painting classes, and see baroque architecture for the first time.

If I was a new visitor to Chihuahua, I'd be sure to visit one of its most important historical sites, the Historical Museum of the Mexican Revolution (located in Pancho Villa's house). Chihuahua boasts the best beef in Mexico, so I'd be sure to try it in any form (from taco joints to steakhouses). And I'd make a stop at a Chihuahua

institution, Elotes El Socio, to buy corn prepared the Mexican way: with cream, lime, cheese, chili powder, and love.

Vanessa Nielsen

Xcalak

Xcalak (pronounced *ish-ca-lack*) is so underrated, it's hardly even fair to say it's rated at all. A town of 400 permanent residents, Xcalak is on the southern border with Belize. This is a completely off-the-grid kind of place that forces visitors to disconnect for a while (no cell service!). I truly feel like I'm at the end of the world. And I am, at least, at the end of the highway.

The majority of residents are fishermen, as their grandparents were before them, and the pace of life is very slow. The connection with the ocean here is strong, and many of the available activities center on the water through diving, snorkeling, paddle boarding/kayaking, or sport fishing. People come for the world-class sport fishing or scuba diving and stay for the simple way of life. I find myself looking forward to the twice-weekly arrival of →

People come for world-class sport fishing or scuba diving and stay for the simple way of life



LEARN SOMETHING NEW

the “veggie truck,” the only way to get fresh fruits and veggies, which is announced by the loud honking of the driver.

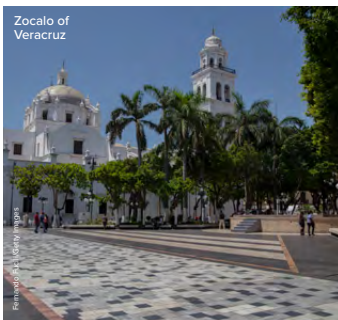
My favorite memories of Xcalak are just simple things, like the nights spent with friends cooking up fish for dinner that we caught earlier that day. Although not a big fisherman myself, there is something very satisfying in catching your own dinner. That’s the way of life here: eat, sleep, fish, repeat. *Sara Walton*

Veracruz

A city of grit and faded glamour, Veracruz’s sultry atmosphere and love for music and dance is hard to resist.

I spend my first hour or so in Veracruz shading from the tropical sun under the leafy canopy of the *zócalo* (town square). People sip coffee beneath the colonial-era porticos, vendors hawk snacks and cigars, and worshippers slip into the cathedral. On Saturday evenings, the *zócalo* transforms into a dance floor. It’s flooded with locals, sporting crisp white dresses and *guayabera* shirts, who come to *danzón*.

Everything in Veracruz shines brighter on Saturday nights. A salty breeze cools the streets, and live music and dance take center stage in plazas across the city. As a visitor, it’s impossible not to become tangled up in Veracruz’s rhythm.



Zocalo of Veracruz

People sip coffee beneath the colonial-era porticos, vendors hawk snacks and cigars, and worshippers slip into the cathedral



Along the vast *malecón* (esplanade), the grittier side of Veracruz springs to life. This is home to one of Mexico’s busiest ports and the 16th-century fort of San Juan de Ulua. In the distance, cranes unload cargo while at the shore, divers swoop into the sea seeking colorful shells. It’s the ideal spot to watch the sun sink into the Gulf of Mexico, preferably with an ice cream from Güero Güera; Veracruz’s finest, and loudest, purveyor of ice cream. *Souad Msallem*

Zacatecas

Zacatecas, a high-altitude city where the air is crisp and the nights are chilly, is not a place of immediate appeal, unlike,

say, nearby Guanajuato, with its colorful buildings, or culturally-rich Guadalajara, which is home to some of the country’s best food.

And yet, Zacatecas possesses so much of what makes those destinations attractive: like Guanajuato, it’s smattered with spectacular colonial edifices, which you can see from above if you ride the *teleférico* (cable car) up into the mountains. The cathedral, in particular, struck me as impressively ornate, and later reading confirmed that its dusky pink façade is one of Mexico’s most elaborate examples of Baroque art.

Zacatecas is nothing if not full of

surprises. For example, did you know that it’s also home to a mine bar called La Mina? Yes, a literal bar in a mine. Which you can reach by catching a tiny train from the entrance. Honestly.

However, the surprise I most revelled in was the sampling of Zacatecas’ regional specialty: *tacos envenenados*, aka “venomous tacos”. Giant, deep-fried, and stuffed with meat, chili, beans, and potato, they’re not for the faint-hearted or the grease-averse.

Sure, Zacatecas isn’t a place I’d dedicate a week to exploring, but it’s well worth a weekend. For those tacos alone.

Lauren Cocking

Find out how to donate to our **Footprints** projects



Blue whale,
Loreto Bay National
Marine Park,
Sea of Cortez

NATURE & WILDLIFE

Humpbacks, manatees, and dolphins. Sea turtles, marlins, and manta rays. Howler monkeys and jaguars. Flamingos and macaws. From the jungles of Tabasco to the depths of Baja's Magdalena Bay, Mexico is heaven for wildlife lovers. Join our nomads as they pet friendly gray whales, witness a bat volcano, and paddle down a river called "place of monkeys."

FROM SELVA TO SIERRA:

EXPLORING MEXICO'S MEGADIVERSITY

Mexico is ranked fifth in the world for its “megadiverse” ecosystems, encompassing rainforests, mountain ranges, and astounding coastlines. Harriet Wood shares four key areas for spotting wildlife.

Usumacinta

Triumphantly brushing the last few fire ants off my feet, I turn to adjust my balance in the boat and catch my breath as a flock of white egrets takes off and flutters across the river with a few papery beats of their wings. It's just past dawn on a November morning, and I'm in a canoe on the Usumacinta River in Mexico's Tabasco state, approaching the edge of the vast wetlands that make up the Pantanos de Centla biosphere reserve.

I'm part of an interdisciplinary team of 10, brought together by non-profit organization Ninth Wave Global, to undertake a 16-day project of open exploration and environmental study. And, though we range from artists and musicians to scientists and architects, we've bonded quickly over expedition prep; fixing poorly rigged hammocks in the lashing rain of a midnight storm where every attempt at communication brings a fresh mouthful of mosquitos is, it turns out, an effective team-building exercise.

As we move along, I spot countless ospreys, brought here, like me, by the promise of a warmer winter

Those desperate moments of the night before feel distant now, and we're all hushed as we feel the swell of still water beneath us and take in the golden landscape, cut through with a line of trees embroidered green along the horizon.

As we move along, I spot countless ospreys, brought here, like me, by the promise of a warmer winter; vultures circling above us (as if they know something we don't); tiny, vibrant kingfishers darting along the bank. A jabiru picks among the weeds discerningly, stealthy in spite of its massive size – at almost 5ft (1.5m) tall, it's the biggest bird I've ever seen. Traveling downstream, northward, towards the Gulf of Mexico, the night herons, woodpeckers, and bright-pink roseate spoonbills are gradually joined by cormorants, pelicans, and frigates. There's a clue in the river's name as to its ruling inhabitant – the root of “Usumacinta” meaning “place of monkeys” in Nahuatl – but even so, the deep roars of the howlers come as a surprise, creating an echo that's almost prehistoric. →



Bats emerge from their daytime roost, Calakmul Biosphere Reserve

TRIP NOTES

Usumacinta: There are several options for tours and activities on the upper stretch of river in Chiapas, where Frontera Corozal offers the incredible Maya riverside ruins of Yaxchilan to those who put in the effort to get there. The lower regions are less visited and require a little more asking around. Palizada is charming and fairly well-served by public transport, with accommodations available at the family-run local guest house.

Sierra Potosina: The easiest entry points are Querétaro and San Luis Potosí. Interesting places to stay abound.

Calakmul: The crossroads town of Xpujil is easily reached by *colectivo* or (slightly pricier) ADO buses from Escarcega, and serves as base for most tourists visiting the area, with options ranging from decent hotels to cheap cabañas. For a more offbeat experience, stay in nearby Zoh-Laguna, where you'll find distinctive wooden architecture and artisanal workshops in a former logging community.

Bacalar: Chetumal and Cancun are the closest airports to the lake, with lots of ADO buses and *colectivos* passing through from Tulum and Playa del Carmen in the north, and Belize to the south. There's accommodation in Bacalar to suit every budget, and campsites are available at several points around the lake. Renting a bike is your best option for exploring and finding hidden gems along the water.



Roseate Spoonbill

In this ancient atmosphere, it's hard to believe that we're so close to the single-lane tarmac road which bisects the biosphere and has caused such great gulfs to open up between the communities living alongside the river. There are reminders of the Usumacinta's history as an international trading route in the beautiful French roof tiles topping the houses of Palizada, a small *pueblo mágico* a few miles from the river. But, with the community now hosting progressive reforestation projects, and tiny eco-tourism initiatives springing up and offering new sources of income, many locals are looking ahead to a sustainable future.

Sierra Potosina

Another treasure trove for birdwatchers, the Sierra Potosina is located in the very heart of the country, spanning parts of

Querétaro, Puebla, Veracruz, and San Luis Potosí and offering everything from low, humid forest and turquoise waterfalls to high, arid desert. Great for adventurers, it's best explored by vehicle. Las Pozas, an enormous sculpture garden designed by surrealist writer and art collector Edward James near the village of Xilitla, reframed my perspective on the *cascadas* of the subtropical rainforest entirely.

Calakmul

Most famous – and rightly so – for its eponymous archaeological site and giant pyramids, Calakmul is the biggest of the ancient Maya cities and, nowadays, the most remote. For wildlife enthusiasts it's worth the journey for the amazing variety of bats, which are at



Firefly Sanctuary, Nanacamiloa, Tlaxcala

Huasteca Potosina

their most spectacular at the Volcán de los Muñecos (literally, Bat Volcano). Monkeys, spiders, and peccaries are in abundance, but only the very luckiest will catch a glimpse of a jaguar.

Lake Bacalar

The breathtaking "lake of seven colors" has, almost unbelievably, thus far stayed off the radar of the major tourism companies that ferry busloads of holidaymakers across the Yucatán Peninsula, and it's all the better for it. The area surrounding the 26-mi-long (42-km) lake is made even more interesting by the huge variety of migratory birds which stop there on their journey south, providing a cross-section of North- and Central-American wildlife in one unique ecosystem.

Mexico's Butterflies and Fireflies

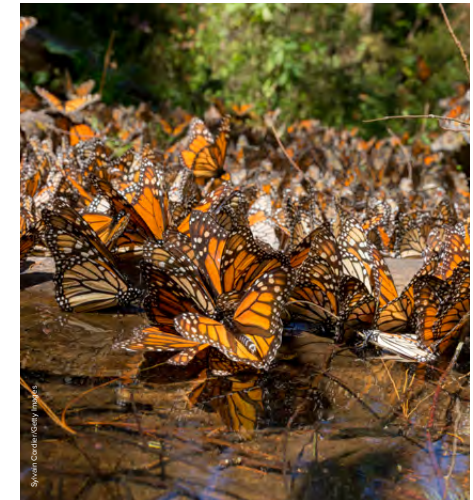
The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve

Every year, millions of bright-orange monarch butterflies migrate from the US and Canada to the mountains of Mexico and Michoacán states, where they fill the air, carpet the ground, and hang in great clusters from the trees. Visitors can witness this phenomenon at the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site that covers more than 200mi² (518km²). The reserve is open mid-November through March, with peak season in January and February. It's best to go on weekdays to avoid the crowds.

There are four public access points to the reserve: Piedra Herrada and Cerro Pelon (Mexico state), and El Rosaria and Sierra Chincua (Michoacán). Cerro Pelon is the most remote, while El Rosaria is the most popular. All require an uphill hike of a mile or more at up to 10,000ft (3,048m) of elevation, though you can rent a horse to take you part of the way.

Nanacamilpa Firefly Sanctuary

In July and August, hundreds of thousands of fireflies put on a glorious light show in the forests of Tlaxcala, about two hours from Mexico City. The females are flightless, so it's important not to step on them. No flashlights or flash photography allowed. Ideal viewing time is between 8:30 and 9:30 pm.



Sierra Potosina, Mexico

Whale Bays & Turtle Beaches

From Magdalena Bay to Puerto Escondido, **Johanna Read** tells you how to get up close and personal with the ocean's gentle giants.

Where the whales come to be petted

The gray whale swims slowly toward our boat, her baby following closely. She sinks under the baby, then gently lifts him onto her back so he's almost fully out of the water. Is this so we can admire him, or so the baby can get a good view of us?

Introductions done, what happens next is even more surreal. The 50ft-long (15m) mother floats over to our boat and stops, her nose partially underneath us. Leaning over the gunwale, I reach out and pet her head. It's slippery smooth, except where it's covered in barnacles. Soon the baby noses his way over, wanting some love too.

I'm told Magdalena Bay is one of only three bays in the world – all off Baja – where this phenomenon is known to happen. Usually, petting or otherwise touching wild animals is to be strictly avoided, but here the whales themselves seek it out.



After the sun has set, I carry my hatchling in a coconut shell, careful not to touch her



A gray whale approaches a boat in Magdalena Bay

Three mothers with babies repeat this whale-led interaction before our onboard naturalist says, "Time's up," and we head back to Bahía Magdalena's Puerto San Carlos and our bus to La Paz.

Cetacean lovers, rejoice: along with grays, Mexico is home to humpbacks, minke, fins, blue whales, and several dolphin species.

Saving endangered baby sea turtles

The sunset view is simply too gorgeous to keep my eyes closed during our beach yoga lesson. I watch Playa Palmarito's immense summertime waves rise higher and higher, then slowly curl before they fall with a crash. Then, something catches

my eye. There's a huge turtle floating two-thirds of the way up the wall of the wave. She's scoping out the beach – where she herself was hatched 15 years ago – to choose the perfect spot to lay her eggs tonight.

This Puerto Escondido beach is ideal for turtles. It's 15mi (24km) long and empty save for a fenced-in area where turtle eggs are buried to protect them from predators, and the local resort which sponsors the Palmarito Sea Turtle Camp. A few times nightly, patrols search the beach for freshly-laid eggs. They dig them up, count them, and then rebury them, marking the date they're expected to hatch. About two months later, hotel guests can help release

the adorable babies. They protect and release 40,000 to 60,000 turtle hatchlings annually.

After the sun has set, I carry my hatchling in a coconut shell, careful not to touch her. When her flippers feel the sand, she pauses before starting her 100ft (30m) scramble into the waves, imprinting the location in her brain as she goes. With luck, she'll be one of the 5% which survives and returns in 15 years to lay her own eggs. Without the assistance of the turtle project, turtles only have a 1-2% chance of survival.

Mexico has six of the world's seven sea turtle species – green, olive ridley, hawksbill, loggerhead, kemp's ridley, and leatherback.

TRIP NOTES

International flights land in most of these cities, with domestic flights connecting to smaller La Paz and Puerto Escondido.

La Paz, Baja California Sur
Laidback La Paz is on the Sea of Cortez, 125mi (200km) north of Cabo. Several species, even giant blue whales, feed here. You can also snorkel with turtles, rays, sea lions, and whale sharks. Bus tours go to Magdalena Bay for the day for gray whale watching.

Cabo, Baja California Sur
The southern tip of Baja peninsula, where the Pacific meets the Sea of Cortez, is a favorite spot of whales. Humpbacks are often seen from shore in winter. Five turtle species nest from August to December.

Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca
Find six turtle species, five dolphin species, and, from November to April, humpback whales. They're even seen from the beach.

Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco
The largest gathering of Pacific humpbacks in Mexico is in Vallarta's Bahía de Banderas from December to March.

Cancún and the Riviera Maya, Quintana Roo
Turtles lay eggs on Riviera Maya beaches from May to October. Isla Mujeres, off Cancún, is turtle-mating central from May to July. (Note: Isla Mujeres now charges a small tourist tax upon arrival.) Dolphins are occasionally seen nearby, and whale sharks visit in summer.

Cozumel,
Quintana Roo



ADVENTURE

With 5,800mi (9,330km) of coastline along waters both chilly and tropical, Mexico's shores offer a multitude of outdoor activities. Explore an underwater museum, paddle the Sea of Cortez, or tackle the mighty waves of the famed "Mexican Pipeline".

Into the Blue: Kayaking in Baja's Loreto Bay

Jacques Cousteau called Mexico's Sea of Cortez "the world's aquarium." To writer **Tim Neville**, that sounds about right.

We haven't been paddling for long when a large creature appears in the water under my kayak. It's an odd, primordial moment to see something big and alive finning below my soft and fleshy bits. How exciting, I think. Please don't eat me.

At first, it's just a hunch, then a long, slender bill waves through the water like a fencer feeling out a sword. The body glides by, slender and sleek and designed for speed. Seven feet of fish. It rolls to the left, and sunlight fires off its sides in electric bolts.

"A marlin!" I stammer. A blue marlin. I can't imagine what it would have been like had it been a whale.

Close encounters like this with charismatic fauna were the reason I'd come to Mexico's Loreto Bay National Marine Park. The 800 mi² (2,072 km²) reserve, off the coast of southern Baja in the Sea of Cortez, was first established in 1996, and is now part of a 244-island UNESCO World Heritage Site. More than 800 species of aquatic critters call these waters home, including blue whales – the world's largest animal – that migrate into the bay every spring. Dolphins, manta rays, humpbacks, and fin whales cruise the channels, too, while frigate birds patrol the skies like

"Magnifico!" booms my friend Javi González, a writer from Spain, as a turtle rears its knobby head between our boats



Sea kayaking in southern Baja

feathery drones. Jacques Cousteau called this place the world's aquarium, and if you go by the number of sea turtles I've already seen, there is no doubt he was right.

Any trip here is special, but kayakers have it particularly good. Loreto must count among Mexico's most charming seaside towns, a laidback community of 18,000 people with leafy boulevards, a sparkling waterfront, and one of the oldest Jesuit missions in the country. It's also the jumping off point for five uninhabited islands that rise just off shore within easy paddling distance. Exploring by kayak makes it easy to draw close to rocky shores and probe for secluded coves. There are white sand beaches to laze on, and trails weave around towering cacti to reach sweeping ridges with spectacular views.

Then night falls – time to build a campfire on the beach, sleep in the light of the moon, and think that life is pretty great.

Dirtbag exclusivity on the Sea of Cortez

A few days earlier, three friends and I land at La Paz on the southern end of Baja and pile into a van for a bumpy five-hour drive north to Loreto. It's December, the temperature cool but comfortable, and a strong wind whips the bay into a stiff meringue. Conditions like those can make paddling tough for inexperienced boaters like us, but by mid-morning things have settled down enough for us to give it a go.

One of our guides, Axel Herrera Hernández, a marine biologist with a scruffy goat and love for dolphin songs,

slides into the cockpit of his boat and leads us into the bay. Another guide, Luli Noriega, brings up the rear while a safety boat motors behind us, out of ear shot, with tables, chairs, and a fully stocked kitchen. The plan is to spend two nights camping on the islands. Other than that, our itinerary is open. I fall in behind Axel and let the kayak lurch with each paddle stroke.

"Magnifico!" booms my friend Javi González, a writer from Spain, as a turtle rears its knobby head between our boats. Annie Young, a friend from Panama, pulls up to see it, while Michael Cook, a salesman from Oregon, hollers he's seen one, too. Luli hoots when a manta ray swims by, flapping its wings like a prehistoric bird.

I hadn't been to Mexico in years, and →

Where else to sea kayak in Mexico:

Near La Paz, the turquoise waters of Balandra Bay make a great day trip. Or do a multi-day excursion out to Isla Espiritu Santo, where you can snorkel with playful sea lions.

On the Caribbean coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, you can paddle through the mangroves of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere reserve, watching for manatees, monkeys, and tropical birds.

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Loreto



Camping on Isla del Carmen



Frigate Birds

now I'm kicking myself for it. There had been the all-inclusive trip to Cancún with my parents when I was 14, my first trip abroad. In college, my '74 Ford pickup broke down on a very short-lived trip through northern Baja, and I literally had to push it back into the United States. The last trip was to Akumal, in 2008, when my wife and I scuba dived in a cave filled with water so clear it looked like air, a "cenote," as they say. This trip to Loreto has a dirtbag exclusivity about it, like our salt-stained selves have been allowed behind the velvet rope into a party for nature's beauty queens.

Connected on Isla del Carmen

Early afternoon rolls around and we set up camp on Isla del Carmen, an uninhabited island about six miles off shore. The Sierra Giganta mountains tower to the west in purple lumps. Axel reminds us to beware of scorpions wandering into our sleeping bags. "You don't want a surprise like that!" he says.

We hike along the island's shore, then

stay up late playing word games around a modest campfire. We put a dent in the beer and let the conversation turn personal. Luli, who is in her early 30s, tells us about how she barely survived a cancer that left her hollow and desperate. Trips like these heal the scars that no one sees.

The rest of the trip seems to blow by in a blur. We stay put on Isla del Carmen for another night and snorkel with jacks and sea horses. I nap in the warm sand and marvel at the loneliness of it all while feeling as connected as ever.

On the final morning, we point the boats west and head for home. An hour into the crossing, the marlin swims under my boat. We snorkel until we are pickled in a hidden cove on Isla Danzante, three miles away, and hike to an overlook called Coyote Point. There, I sit on a rock and watch a pair of kayakers coming our way, their trip just beginning.

Lucky them, I think. I hope they don't get eaten.

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Alaska Airlines flies into Loreto from Los Angeles but you can often find cheaper tickets into La Paz or Cabo San Lucas. From there, catch a bus north to Loreto, about five hours from La Paz and nine hours from Cabo.

Best time to go: Whales arrive early in the year and stay into April. Summers are hot. Winters are pleasant, potentially cool, and sometimes windy (but still probably much better than the weather where you're at).

Guides: Several local companies offer overnight trips on the islands. Some US-based companies offer packaged sea kayaking tours that include transfers, hotels, and meals as well as guides and equipment.



UNFORGETTABLE

The Yucatán's Pink Lagoons

We all love a bit of pink sky reflected in blue waters. But have you experienced it the other way round?

I learned about the pink lagoons of Yucatán's Gulf Coast from a friend's photos, which looked utterly otherworldly. When I reached the dusty little village of Las Coloradas, I was initially disappointed. The nearest lagoon looked blue from a distance, flanked by gleaming white hills of the salt they extract here. But at close encounter, the lake is fairy tale pink, as if nature tricked my eyes. It felt like being wrapped in cotton candy. I absorbed the surreal scenery, took pictures, and strolled around to see the flamingos in the outer lagoons.

The world has very few pink lakes. The pink colour is not an optical illusion – it comes naturally from brine shrimp and algae called *Dunaliella salina*. The colors can be seen at any time of year, but the pigment is more concentrated in the afternoons, and the best photo op is at sunset.

My curiosity aroused, I later checked out Xtampú Salinas, which has ponds that are fifty shades of pink, from spiky, purplish Mexican to soft cherry blossom. This feels more like a working site, with small pyramids of white salt dotted everywhere. Your only companions will be flamingos, woodpeckers, and herons.

Both lake areas are protected, patrolled by the locals, but there's no fee. You won't be able to swim or walk in them – just absorb that eccentric scenery. It will forever stay in your mind. *Lydia Jones*

Chasing Waves on the West Coast

From Baja to Oaxaca, Mexico's surf breaks are renowned for a reason.

Dane Faurschou takes an epic road trip in search of the best.

Since I was 12 years old, I've been watching surfing movies filmed in Mexico, and now I'm going to experience it for myself. Heading into Tijuana from the US, I know two things: Mexico has a crazy amount of amazing, right-hand point breaks, and really, really big waves once the season turns on.

Our first goal is to get off the beaten path. Mexico is famous for this – if you're willing to put in the hours of driving, you're almost certain to find some incredible waves all to yourself. The other goal is to surf all the famous spots Mexico's west coast is known for.

Northern Baja: San Junico

As we head south through Baja, we have a few spots marked on our map, but we also want to just explore and see where the roads take us. At first, we're met with nothing but strong winds and an ungodly amount of flies, but eventually we stumble on a right-hand point that quickly becomes one of my favorite places ever. It's near a sleepy little town called San Junico. We follow the coast down point after point, eventually stopping on a small headland.

I see two heads bobbing around in the →



Matti Kazian/Getty Images

Baja Pacific coast



Puerto Escondido

water. One of them takes off on a wave – he pulls off almost a minute later. I'm in shock. Minute-long waves and only two people riding them? I can't get in fast enough.

What's meant to be three days turns into weeks, living in our van parked on the bluff and surfing three to four times a day. The desert is harsh here – an array of cactus and sand broken up by a series of mesas jutting straight out of the earth. Though we don't see any animals, vultures circle overhead constantly. The winds are strong, the days hot, and the nights cold – it's the quintessential Baja experience. My girlfriend goes from barely standing up to riding waves for a full minute in a few short weeks. But finally, after some of the longest rides of my life, it's time to move on.

Southern Baja: San Jose del Cabo

We continue down the peninsula to San Jose del Cabo, at the southern tip. The cacti are replaced by palm trees, the water becomes warmer, and the color changes from a deep blue to a tropical light blue,

perfect for snorkeling and fishing. East of San Jose Del Cabo, the population diminishes – one road winding round the cliffs that hug the ocean, and a handful of tiny villages where we're lucky to buy more than packets of biscuits, onions, and a few carrots. But desolate as it is, we almost always find one or two surfers camped on the beaches, all with stockpiles of food and water to avoid the long, pot-holed road back to the closest town.

The coast is littered with a dozen different surfing spots for all levels and suitable for anything from a short board to a nine-footer. Two particular highlights here are Shipwrecks (better for a short board) and Nine Palms (if you want something more relaxed).

We spend a couple of weeks here and surf from dawn to dusk – the conditions are perfect and there's swell every day thanks to a small tropical storm sitting just off the coast. But eventually we take the ferry to Mazatlan, where the mainland section of the trip begins.

Mainland Mexico: Pascuales

Our first stop is Boca de Pascuales, 435mi (700km) south of Mazatlan. The town is not beautiful, just one street of small, poorly-thrown-together buildings and barking dogs. The black sand beach isn't particularly attractive, and the locals aren't overly friendly, but I'm looking to throw my body into some big, heavy, waves with few crowds, and this is the place to do it.

There are waves almost daily during the season (spring and summer). At first, I'm a little nervous about the size of the swell, but after a few days of double-overhead waves I settle in and am hungry for anything. The wave can be overwhelming at times – some days it's so big that we stand on the shore with a handful of other surfers, debating whether or not to paddle out. This place draws big-wave people from all over, a mix of reclusive types that just want to be left alone to surf.

The road to Oaxaca

Our next destination is Mexico's most famous surfing spot, Puerto Escondido, in the state of Oaxaca. It takes a few weeks to get there, and as we drive down the coast it's consistently hot and humid – tropical rainforest and plantations of bananas and coconut trees continually surround us.

We stop at a dozen or more places. Rio Nexpa stands out in for its amazing right-hand break and for the river that flows out of the mountains and into the surf. We constantly hear stories of crocodiles up the river, and the thought of what lies beneath is forever in our minds. Fortunately, we never see one, but almost every day, we're met in the water by ever-curious sea turtles that poke their heads up just meters away from us and then disappear again.

Puerto Escondido and beyond

Puerto Escondido is a different world, and I had been wanting to surf here for more than 10 years. With some of the biggest waves you're ever likely to see, it attracts the best surfers and professionals from around the globe. As a result, the town is well developed for surf tourism: the restaurants are trendy, the food is delicious (everything from traditional *pollo asado* to vegan) and the vibe is relaxed. But that ends at water's edge as waves tower above the horizon, stirring up a potent mix of fear and excitement.

Next, we head south to the land of long, right-point breaks, some of the best in the world. We wake before the sun every morning, surrounded by golden sand and crystal-clear water, gazing out on perfect points and just a handful of people. Fishermen pass occasionally on their way to their secret fishing spots – on the way back they often stop to talk and offer us their catch.

It's surfer heaven, but the mountains are calling. After a few months and some of the most incredible waves of my life, it's time to go.



Cabo San Lucas, Baja Sur

UNDER THE SEA:

MEXICO'S BEST DIVING AND SNORKELING

Sara Walton reveals her top dive spots, from the aquamarine Caribbean waters around the Yucatán Peninsula to Cabo Pulmo Reserve, considered one of the most successful marine parks in the world.

As I back-roll off the boat and take my first breaths below the surface, I feel the familiar peace of being underwater settle in. I'm in my instructor training certification class in Xcalak, Mexico, and we all descend to begin practicing our skills. Suddenly, I see a shadowy figure appear. Is it...? Yes – a manatee! As one by one we notice it, the practicing ceases; there is no training anymore, there is only us and this graceful creature. Often referred to as sea cows due to their large size, these slow plant eaters have a wide snout, flippers, round body, and a flat tail that helps them move through the water with surprising ease.

Careful not to get too close and startle her, I watch as she glides over the reef, the sun streaming down behind her, casting a very mermaid-like silhouette. We watch her for a few magical minutes before she slips away, into the great blue beyond.

An encounter with a manatee is just one

I watch as she glides over the reef, the sun streaming down behind her, casting a very mermaid-like silhouette

of many possible adventures when diving in Mexico.

Cozumel: The jewel of Mexican diving

Cozumel, a world-renowned diving destination off the northeastern edge of the Yucatán Peninsula, is the most popular location in Mexico for scuba diving. The water is generally crystal clear and warm, and the life is plentiful, including idyllic, waving fan corals, eels, turtles, sharks, rays and all kinds of colorful fish. While there are beginner dive sites in Cozumel, the advanced drift dives (where divers let the current carry them) are more common. The currents here make a sharp curve around the island and can be pretty strong, adding to the adventure.

Banco Chinchorro: Into the unknown

If Cozumel is the crown jewel of diving →



Underwater Museum of Art



Pacific Cownose Rays

to grow on.

Many different artists were involved in the sculpture creation, and the subjects for the statues range from houses to cars to unexploded mines. One of the most evocative exhibits is a large group of standing figures, reminiscent of the terracotta warriors of Xi'an, China, with statues stretching as far as you can see. This unique intersection of art and science has been a success for the region. As divers, we're more aware of the environmental impact that humans are having on the reefs and underwater life, and the museum is a shining example that we can still have a positive impact on our environment. MUSA's a must-see for eco-conscious divers.

Isla Holbox: Gentle giants

Off the northern coast of Quintana Roo is Isla Holbox, a calm-water paradise that's the essence of island living. There are no reefs in Isla Holbox, but there is a special phenomenon that happens every year from May to September – the whale shark migration. Whale sharks are filter feeders (aka not human eaters) and are the biggest fish known to man – they can reach 40 feet (12m) in length and up to 22 tons. Their mouth alone can be 5 feet (1.5m) wide. Unfortunately, I missed whale shark season, but I hope to return soon to snorkel with these amazing behemoths (scuba diving is prohibited, one of many rules in place to protect the sharks).

Isla Mujeres: An eco-conscious experience

Somewhere between the popularity of Cozumel and the remoteness of Banco Chinchorro, there is Isla Mujeres, just off the shore of Cancún. One of the exceptional dive spots here is the *Museo Subacuático de Arte* (MUSA) or the Underwater Museum of Art. MUSA is an artificial reef structure made up of more than 500 statues placed underwater as building blocks for coral

Cabo Pulmo: The great blue

The Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park is located on the Pacific side of Mexico, a world away from the warm, Caribbean waters of the Yucatán. The Pacific Ocean is the big, deep blue – the waters are colder, rougher, and more challenging, and the sea life is equal to the environment. The pelagic life here is famous, featuring sea lions, whales, sharks, schooling rays, and dramatic wall drop-offs.

TRIP NOTES

Cozumel has a small airport or can be reached via ferry from Playa del Carmen, about an hour from the major airport in Cancún. There are a multitude of dive shops catering to different preferences (group size vs. price). Dive trips can be arranged once on the island or prior. I recommend reading reviews on the operator's experience and safety before booking. Expect to spend around US \$100 (\$2,028 MXN) for a two-tank dive.

Banco Chinchorro is only accessible via boat, from Mahahual or Xcalak. Rent a car or take a public bus from the Cancún airport to reach the region. There are only a few dive operators in the area, so it's best to contact in advance. Diving trips start at around US \$150 (\$3,048 MXN) and increase for overnight trips.

Isla Mujeres is a ferry ride away from the major airport in Cancún. There are quite a few dive operators, and I recommend researching beforehand to find an operator that suits your needs. Prices are around US \$100 (\$2,028 MXN) for a two-tank dive.

Isla Holbox can be reached by a ferry from Chiquilá, a two-hour bus ride from the nearest airport in Cancún. Snorkeling with whale sharks costs around US \$150 (\$3,048 MXN) per person.

Cabo Pulmo is a 90-min drive northeast from San Jose del Cabo international airport. There are quite a few dive operators so trips can be arranged on site or prior. Expect to pay around US \$100 (\$2,028 MXN) per two-tank dive.



UNFORGETTABLE

Oaxaca Craft Beer Festival

Opposite the Templo de San Matias Jalatlaco, I watched an old man weave marigolds into a trellis above the door leading to Oaxaca's Craft Beer festival, *Muerteada Cervecera*.

It was early November at the climax of *Día de Muertos*. Walking through the atrium, we rotated clockwise through the courtyard sampling the hand-crafted beer from more than 20 local brewers. In its infancy, the Mexican craft beer industry looks north to the United States for inspiration; informing the brewers that we came from the US to Oaxaca specifically to explore the craft beer scene elicited glowing eyes and smiles of appreciation. They seemed surprised anyone would travel to Oaxaca for craft beer.

With half the stands behind us, no beer truly stood out. That soon changed with the Rey-Oh-Baby Pale Ale: fruity esters under a malt backbone with a clean, refreshing, bitter finish. The next stand presented a mole-flavored stout: spicy chili pepper and creamy chocolate added complexity to the dark, roasted flavors. Center-stage, the band's trumpets accelerated their tempo with our discovery of new flavors. On the dance floor, brimming with liquid courage, our bodies obeyed the Mexican rhythm under clear, starry skies. *Sam Kazmer*

Oaxaca's Craft Beer Festival is held either the first week in November or the first week in December.

Cenotes, the Jewels of the Yucatán

Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula is known for its cenotes – limestone sinkholes filled with fresh, crystalline water. **Chelsea Gregory** shares two of her favorites.

Cenotes, to me, are the enchanting gems of the Yucatán Peninsula. The mysticism and history of these geologic masterpieces cast a spell on me at once. The Maya built civilizations around “xenotes” as their link to the underworld and a vital water source. The clarity of the aquamarine water that appears to glow, the calcified rock formations adorned with vines, and the greenery of the surrounding jungle create an experience that’s all-encompassing.

Dos Ojos

I feel weightless, suspended in the dark, cool cavern. As I study the intricate stalactites and stalagmites around me, it occurs to me that this may be the closest I’ll ever come to space exploration. With an air tank strapped to my back, listening to the steady stream of bubbles through the regulator, I follow the cylindrical beam of light coming from my underwater torch. Slowly and steadily, I sweep it through the darkness to illuminate the delicate calcium deposits, and decide I don’t feel like I’m on planet Earth anymore. Not the Earth I’ve experienced so far, anyway.

Earlier that day, as we pulled off the highway and made our way down the dirt

The feeling of exploring a part of the world I had never dreamt of leaves me full of wonder. It’s worth every penny



Dos Ojos cenote, Yucatán Peninsula

road to the dive site, I was a little nervous to try cavern diving – it’s not to be taken lightly. But as soon as I hopped out of the truck belonging to Alex, my dive guide, I knew I’d made the right decision. I stood in the early morning sun, pulling my wetsuit over my shoulders, and noticed an iguana larger than my arm lazily crossing the dirt parking lot. I waved hello and giggled to myself. This was going to be a good day.

I had been a little hesitant to pay the diving fee of US \$150 (\$3,048 MXN). It’s pricey for a backpacker, and I hadn’t expected to pay that in Mexico, but a friend assured me that it would be an experience I wouldn’t forget.

Now, suspended in the cave, it makes perfect sense as to why this experience came at a price. The feeling of exploring a part of the world I had never dreamt of

leaves me full of wonder. It’s worth every penny.

I’ve been diving all over the world in many different landscapes of varying difficulty, but cavern diving is a completely foreign experience. If you’re looking for a more extreme adventure and want to explore the pitch black of underwater caverns in the Yucatán Peninsula, this is a dive to awaken all the senses.

Sac Actun

Found near Dos Ojos but a bit further into the jungle, San Actun is a captivating experience that’s available to people of all levels and all ages. Like Dos Ojos, this is a cavernous cenote, but this site offers a 20-minute float along the tunnel system without being submerged.

Wearing a life jacket, I descend a

vine-draped stairway and wade into the crystalline water for a leisurely float through the caves, taking in the ornate rock surrounding me. A local guide (in both Spanish and English) gives a mind-boggling explanation of the prehistoric formation of these geological wonders. I let myself drift through the glowing blue water, looking up at the ancient ceiling of the cavern and hearing nothing but the quiet drip of the water (and the occasional squeaking bat).

Thinking about the time it took to create the beauty around me makes me feel expansive, yet small at the same time – another ingredient in a “primordial soup” that has been here far longer than I can comprehend, and will be here long after I’m gone. It sharpens my connection with nature and reminds me that our natural world is to be protected.

TRIP NOTES

Dos Ojos

A 30-minute drive north of Tulum. Dive guides can be hired in Tulum and are essential if you want to do the fully-submerged cavern dive. There’s a small area near the cave opening where you can simply snorkel and play in the water, but this particular cenote offers far more for certified divers. The dive is challenging, but worth the effort. I’d recommend it for moderate to advanced divers with an excellent command of buoyancy control – the rock formations are delicate, ancient, and not to be touched.

San Actun

10 minutes past Dos Ojos. An entry fee of US \$19 (\$400 MXN) provides a life jacket, a snorkel, and a guide.

Getting there

Renting a car provides the most flexibility. However, there are a number of local tours leaving from both Tulum and Playa del Carmen if you’re interested in the snorkeling option. They’ll take care of transportation, equipment, and entrance fees.

Not all World Nomads travel insurance plans cover scuba diving, cave diving, or cavern diving – be sure to select the right plan for the type of activity you’re doing. See pg. 79 for more details.



Dennis Weber/Getty Images

TRAVEL SMARTER

NEED TO KNOW

Ready to explore your boundaries and plan your own Mexican adventure? First, check out our expert tips to help you travel smarter and protect yourself against weather, crime, and scams. Get advice on how to be a respectful and responsible visitor. What should women and LGBTQ travelers expect? What's the best way to get around? Learn all that and more.

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Climate & Weather

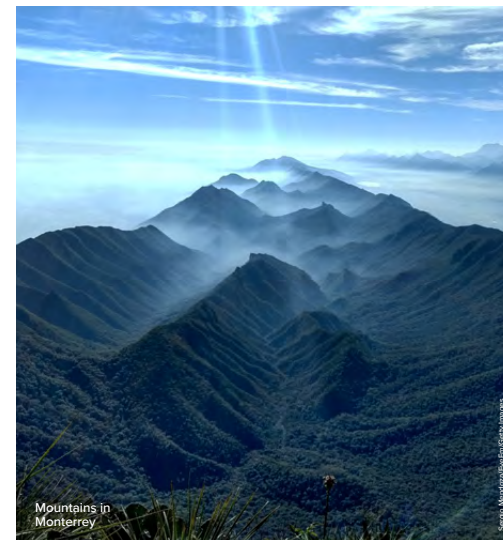
I deeply distrust blanket statements about the best time to visit Mexico. There isn't one – at least not one that applies uniformly to the entirety of this vast, geographically diverse country.

In the northern desert states, like Durango, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Nuevo León, winters are brutally cold, and summers are baking hot. Meanwhile, the central and southern regions typically (and conversely) experience dry winters and warm, wet summers. Over in the coastal regions, summer can be oppressively humid (we're talking sweating-when-sitting-still-level humid), which perhaps explains why the comfortably warm winters are peak season for places like the Riviera Maya and Puerto Vallarta.

One aspect of the Mexican climate that's often overlooked is the prolonged, and very, very real rainy season. Sometimes accompanied by hurricanes, the rainy period tends to hit central and southern Mexico between June and September, and when it rains in the Mexican capital, trust me, it pours; however, storms most often arrive like clockwork in the late-afternoon, so don't be deterred – simply pencil in a museum trip. And maybe pack a raincoat.

While it's tricky to pinpoint the perfect time to visit, it is possible to plan your trip strategically.

Winter is peak season for most Mexican resorts, and, naturally, the most comfortable time to visit those humid coastal regions. Take advantage and go



Mountains in Monterrey

Shutterstock.com

whale watching, too – the best place to do so is in Baja California Sur.

When spring rolls around, schedule a trip to Mexico City. The jacaranda trees come into bloom, while the rains have yet to really arrive and the morning chill has all but disappeared. Plus, the city is quieter than usual over Easter as the residents go on holiday.

Summer should be used to take advantage of stable temperatures in high-altitude spots, like Guanajuato and San Cristóbal de las Casas. Alternatively, it can be a great time to get up close and personal with nature, because summer is whale shark season off the Caribbean coast, while turtle releases are frequent in Puerto Vallarta, Oaxaca, and Los Cabos.

Autumn sees most places easing out of their rainy seasons, bringing cool and comfortable weather. You really have your pick of places to visit, but for my money, Oaxaca and Monterrey are great autumnal options. *Lauren Cocking*

While it's tricky to pinpoint the perfect time to visit, it is possible to plan your trip strategically

Where to Stay

From boutique hotels to backpacker hostels, Mexico has accommodation options for every budget. Demand for rooms – and rates – are at their highest in the peak season (roughly December to April, with spikes at Christmas, New Year and Easter), July to August in the beach resorts, on national holidays, and during local fiestas. Nomad **Shafik Meghji** offers his tips.

Hotels

Budget hotels often have shared bathrooms, while mid-range ones are almost always en suite and come with TVs and often a/c. Top-end hotels range from global chains to all-inclusive resorts. Boutique hotels and B&Bs are increasingly popular and are often the most appealing places to stay. *Posadas* (inns), *paradors*, and *casa de huéspedes* (both guesthouses) are generally small-scale, often family-run budget or mid-range hotels. Expect to pay around US \$25-50 (\$507-1,015 MXN) per night for a double/twin in a budget hotel, around US \$50-100 (\$1,015-2,030 MXN) in a mid-range establishment, and US \$100+ (\$2,030+ MXN) at the top end.

Hostels

Widespread in cities and tourist destinations, hostels are ideal for budget, independent, and solo travelers. Standards of cleanliness, security, and facilities vary widely, but the best have bright, spacious dorms/private rooms,



ample communal areas and kitchens, and offer plenty of activities. A dorm bed costs US\$5.50-20 (\$10-405 MXN) a night.

Airbnbs

Increasingly popular, you'll find Airbnb properties in all the major tourist destinations. They're particularly good for families and groups.

Homestays

Staying with a local is a great way to really get under the country's skin. Many hosts offer a family-style atmosphere, home-cooked meals, and even local tours.

Haciendas

Many of Mexico's haciendas – colonial-era rural estates – have been turned into atmospheric, high-end hotels. The Yucatán

Peninsula has arguably the finest range of haciendas, some of them located on the fringes of the region's Maya ruins. I once spent a memorable night in a jungle-shrouded, 16th-century hacienda that housed the pioneering archeologists who excavated Chichén Itzá.

Many of Mexico's haciendas – colonial-era rural estates – have been turned into atmospheric, high-end hotels

Cabañas

Popular on the coast, *cabañas* are literally "cabins", though in practice the term is often used to refer to a beach hut. At the most basic end, expect dirt floors, no electricity and little more than a bed; at the opposite end of the scale, *cabañas* can resemble luxury apartments.

Camping

Organized campsites are in short supply and those that exist tend to be aimed at

travelers with campervans/RVs, rather than tents – for the latter, expect to pay US\$3-15 a night. Many hostels will also let you camp – or sleep in a hammock (either your own or one rented for a small fee) under a covered shelter – in their grounds. Camping on beaches and in the countryside is not advisable as robberies (or worse) are a serious risk.

Jungle lodges

To get away from it all for a few days, try a jungle lodge. Many are akin to luxury boutique hotels, though others are more rustic affairs. Although generally in the wilderness, some are just a short drive from major tourist resorts. The best have a genuine ecotourism focus, using renewable energy, minimizing waste, and avoiding single-use plastics.

General Cost Guide

ACCOMMODATION

Hostels: Dorm beds US \$5.50-20 (\$10-405 MXN) per night

Budget hotel, double room: US \$25-50 (\$507-1,015 MXN)

Mid-range, double room: US \$50-100 (\$1,015-2,030 MXN)

High end, double room: \$100+ (\$2,030+ MXN)

Camping: US \$3-15 (\$60-305 MXN)

TRANSPORT

Rental cars: From US \$50-60 (\$1,015-1,217 MXN) per day

City taxis: US \$1-1.25 (\$20-25 MXN) per km

Local buses: US \$1-3 (\$20-60 MXN)

Mexico City metro: One-way fare US \$0.25 (\$5 MXN)

Getting Around

Traveling around Mexico is generally a good value, straightforward, and relatively comfortable, though sometimes time-consuming, as Shafik Meghji explains. There are frequent connections between cities, big towns, and main tourist resorts, but in remote rural areas, public transit often involves long waits and delays.

Buses

There are two main classes of long-distance buses: first (*primera*) and second (*segunda*). The former are quicker, more expensive, and more comfortable, with a/c, video screens, toilets, and reserved seating.

Segunda services vary dramatically: some are almost as comfortable as *primera* vehicles; others are rickety, smoke-belching rust buckets – one *segunda* service I took in rural Chiapas broke down three times on a single journey. They are also generally slower, avoiding the faster toll (*cuota*) roads and stopping regularly.

Bus travel is inexpensive: for example, a first-class ticket for the 4.25hr journey between Cancún and Mérida costs around US \$21 (\$425 MXN). *Segunda* services tend to be 10-30% cheaper.

Unfortunately, buses are sometimes held up and passengers robbed. *Primera* buses tend to be safer, as they stick the main roads



Unfortunately, buses are sometimes held up and passengers robbed. *Primera* buses tend to be safer, as they stick the main roads

Domestic flights

Mexico spans almost 760,000mi² (2 million km²), so flying can save you a huge amount of time and effort. Fares are relatively good value, especially on the busiest routes: the one-hour flight from Mexico City to Tijuana, for example, costs US \$75-100 (\$1,521-2030 MXN). Aeromexico is the main carrier, but budget airlines like Interjet, Aeromar, and Volaris are often better value.

Rental cars

Hiring a car gives you an incredible amount of freedom: you can travel at your own pace and visit destinations poorly served by public transport. If there are two or more of you, it's also very good value: rental cars typically cost from US \$50-60 (\$1,015-1,217 MXN) per day. But driving in

Mexico can be challenging, particularly in the cities, and road traffic death rates are high. Crime is another serious issue. Car jackings, violent robberies, and illegal roadblocks are big problems in some parts of the country, notably the northwest. Avoid traveling at night and use toll roads whenever possible.

Trains

Mexico's rail network is extremely limited, but there are a couple of spectacular journeys, notably in the Copper Canyon.

Public transit

Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara have useful and inexpensive metro systems. Everywhere else, you're dependent on even cheaper (fares approximately US \$1-3/\$20-60 MXN)

but generally overcrowded local buses. *Colectivos/combis* are vans, minibuses or large estate cars that travel set routes, picking up and dropping off passengers along the way – there are rarely marked stops, you just flag them down on the street. They're slightly more expensive than local buses, but often quicker. *Colectivos/combis* generally start and finish their journeys at dedicated stands, which are often near the bus stations. There are no fixed schedules, but departures tend to be frequent.

Taxis

Taxis are plentiful in cities and towns. If the taxi doesn't have a meter – or the driver refuses to use it – negotiate a price beforehand. Uber operates in the bigger cities and tourist destinations.

Responsible Travel in Mexico

Mexico has more than 60 ethnic groups, a range of beautiful but often fragile ecosystems, and many priceless cultural treasures. It's important to do your part to ensure your visit has a positive impact.

Contribute to the local economy
Support communities and artisans by hiring local guides and buying authentic, locally made crafts. Consider staying with a local family to provide extra income and get insights into their lifestyle.

Be respectful of local cultures
Don't take photos without permission, and follow the local etiquette regarding appropriate dress and behavior.

Minimize your footprint
Avoid plastic water bottles – instead, carry a large, reusable bottle and refill it when you have access to drinkable water (or use a filter or water purification tablets). Pack out any trash you bring in.

Protect nature
Don't touch living coral or buy items made from coral. Use a reef-safe sunscreen. Seek out animal encounters in the wild, rather than in captivity. Look for environmentally responsible lodging and tour operators, and research them to make sure they're genuine.

Top 10 Safety Tips for Mexico

Despite Mexico's reputation as a place of crime and drug violence in recent years, travelers shouldn't be deterred from experiencing one of the world's most colorful and amazing cultures.

Street safety

Using common sense, being aware of your surroundings, keeping your valuables out of sight, and taking a few precautions while exploring the cities will help ensure your Mexican trip will be safe and fun.

Scams

Fake taxis, fake cops, airport scams, watered-down drinks, car rental damage scams, and the good old foreign exchange switch. These are just some of the scams that can test any traveler in Mexico. Most locals aren't out to fleece you, but by staying alert, you can avoid becoming a scammer's next lucrative customer. Wait at taxi stands instead of taking street cabs, ask "plain clothes" police to show identification, and keep your guard up around people who seem overly eager to share their "local knowledge."

Drugs and drug cartel country

Unfortunately, Mexico does have a reputation for drug-related crime, including at popular spots such as Cabo San Lucas, Tijuana, Acapulco, and others. Most travelers have an incident-free trip, but there have been

reports of travelers being killed by drug cartels. Often it's been a case of "wrong place, wrong time" or not following safety warnings by authorities or government advisories – for example, in the spectacular hiking spot of Copper Canyon, where taking a local guide is not just a necessity for the language barrier but also for safety. Use common sense when entering local bars or nightclubs, avoid traveling at night, keep to toll roads, and exercise caution when heading outside tourist areas. Keep in mind that though a state may be under a travel advisory, not all areas of that state are necessarily unsafe – violence is sometimes confined to certain towns, regions, or districts, so do your research to see which hotspots should be avoided.

Safety at night

If there's one thing Mexicans know how to do well, it's party. From sunset to sunrise, whether you're at a bar, in a club, or enjoying a nighttime festival, it's important to look after yourself, your fellow travelers, and your belongings. Drink spiking can occur, which places you at risk of assault and theft, so keep an eye on your drinks and drink in moderation so you can get back to your accommodation safely.



From sunset to sunrise, whether you're at a bar, in a club, or enjoying a nighttime festival, it's important to look after yourself, your fellow travelers, and your belongings

Transport crime

Pickpocketing, car jackings, and robberies can occur in Mexico, and the risk of these crimes increases at night, in known drug cartel country, and in border areas. Travelers need to take personal safety precautions and secure their valuables when on the move, including on public transport and around transport hubs. It's best to do your traveling by day and stick to main roads.

Express kidnapping

While not exclusive to Mexico, express kidnapping is a growing issue in Latin America. Often used as a means to obtain quick money, the victim is kidnapped and forced to empty their bank account. While most people are released without physical injury, it's still a traumatic experience. Using indoor ATMs in public spaces and taking licensed taxis can help reduce the risk.

Women's safety

While most locals are friendly, there are some who still uphold the *machismo* attitude towards women. Solo women travelers may experience harassment as a result. Low-key, modest clothing (especially in rural locations) can help avoid unwanted attention. Ask locals about the safe places to go when in town and if you're unsure about exploring by yourself, take a tour – it's also a great way to meet other travelers. Avoid traveling at night.

LGBTQ travel

Mexico is increasingly becoming a hot spot for LGBTQ travelers, but the conservative influence of the Catholic Church still exists and for LGBTQ Mexicans, expressing their sexuality is done discreetly. Public displays of affection are generally frowned upon. Many cities have large and vibrant gay communities, but in rural locations, attitudes are more conservative. It's important to exercise discretion in order avoid putting yourself



or locals potentially in harm's way.

Natural hazards/ocean safety

Most of the time, things are pretty calm in Mexico, but at various times of year, nature decides to challenge the locals and travelers. Volcanoes, earthquakes, heat, hurricanes, animals, even going to the beach can present risk for any traveler. Riptides and big swells are a potential danger on either side of the country, so check conditions before you swim. Keep an eye on travel advisories, especially during hurricane season.

Travel health

Split by the Tropic of Cancer, Mexico has both tropical and temperate climates, which aid mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever, malaria, chikungunya, and other health hazards. Many of the country's best hiking spots are thousands of feet above sea level, posing the risk of altitude sickness. Throw in a dose of "Montezuma's Revenge," and staying healthy while traveling in Mexico can present even the most intrepid traveler with a challenge. Sticking to purified water and following your doctor's advice regarding vaccinations and malaria medications are just two of the precautions you can take.

While most locals are friendly, there are some who still uphold the *machismo* attitude towards women. Solo women travelers may experience harassment as a result

Travel smart with our **Safety** advice



Festival Calendar

Boisterous celebrations are held all across the country, all year round. Here are a few key events to check out.

January

Fiestas Grande de Enero

Chiapa de Corzo's nearly month-long festival pays homage to a trio of patron saints and is well-known for the Dance of the Parachicos. Alongside the dancing, feasting and fireworks also play an important part in the festivities.

Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas

February/March

Carnaval

You needn't go to Brazil for Carnaval, because Mexico has its very own versions of these raucous street festivals, the most famous of which are held in Veracruz and Sinaloa. Effigies are burnt, kings and queens are crowned, and floats take over the streets.

Veracruz, Veracruz and Mazatlán, Sinaloa

April

Feria de San Marcos

Agricultural fairs might not seem appealing, yet the *Feria de San Marcos* in Aguascalientes will win over even the most skeptical visitor. Skip the ethically questionable bull and cock fights, but stay for the parties, rides and *charreadas* (rodeos).

Aguascalientes

Mid-August

The Night Nobody Sleeps

Bundle up warm and head to

Huamantla, Tlaxcala for a night of open-air art and religious revelry. On *The Night Nobody Sleeps (La noche que nadie duerme)*, locals hustle to carpet the streets with elaborate artworks made of multicoloured sawdust, before the 1am parade honouring the Virgen de la Caridad begins.

Huamantla, Tlaxcala

Late July

Guelaguetza

Dance and culture extravaganzas don't come better than the Guelaguetza, a celebration of the indigenous people and cultures from across Oaxaca. Traditional food, music, and clothing are omnipresent.

Oaxaca City, Oaxaca

August

Wine Harvest Festival

Ensenada, in the center of Mexico's wine country, is the home of the annual *Fiestas de Vendimia*, aka the Wine Harvest Festival, a 10-day celebration which toasts to the region's stellar wine heritage.

Ensenada, Baja California



Culture Festival, Guelaguetza

Agricultural fairs might not seem appealing, yet the *Feria de San Marcos* in Aguascalientes will win over even the most skeptical visitor

Autumn

International Cervantino Festival

Guanajuato has an inexplicable but long-established obsession with Spaniard Miguel Cervantino, one that's reflected in Latin America's most important coming-together of arts and culture – the Cervantino Festival.

Guanajuato City, Guanajuato

October

Fiestas de Octubre

To experience the essence of Guadalajara in microcosm, drop by the *Fiestas de Octubre*, a month-long affair of Mexican rodeos (*charreadas*), mariachi, concerts, parades, and typical regional food.

Guadalajara, Jalisco

November 1st and 2nd

Día de Muertos

Day of the Dead is easily the best-known Mexican celebration, although it's often (wrongly) conflated with Halloween. In reality, *Día de Muertos* is less about fancy dress and more about celebrating deceased ancestors, with some of the most traditional celebrations held in Patzcuaro, Michoacán.

Countrywide

First weekend in November

or first weekend in December

Oaxaca Craft Beer Festival

Best known as a producer of mezcal, Oaxaca is also home to a growing craft beer scene. This festival, an annual event since 2015, features tastings from around 20 local brewers along with live music, talks, and food.

Oaxaca City, Oaxaca

Mid-November

Vela de Las Auténticas Intrepidas Buscadoras del Peligro

A celebration of *muxe* culture (*muxe* is a third gender recognized by the indigenous Zapotec people), this four-day festival is



Night of the Radishes festival, Oaxaca

The only thing horrifying about this city-wide radish-carving competition (yes, really) are the queues

equal parts jamboree, pageant, and Mass.

Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca

December 12th

Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

Even non-believers should experience the atmosphere of the *Día de Nuestra Señora* in Mexico City, as thousands of faithful worshippers migrate north for mass at the Basilica de Guadalupe, the place where Juan Diego saw an apparition of the Virgin in 1531.

Mexico City

December 23rd

Night of the Radishes

Few Mexican festivals are as bizarre – and impressive – as Oaxaca's Night of the Radishes (*La Noche de Rábanos*), which sounds not unlike a low-budget horror film. However, the only thing horrifying about this annual, city-wide radish-carving competition (yes, really) are the queues.

Oaxaca City, Oaxaca

A Local's Guide to Social Etiquette

When traveling to a new country, it's important to know what to expect and how to behave. Being socially aware will improve your chances of having meaningful interactions with the locals.

Mexico native **Jennifer Fernández Solano** shares her tips.

How to dress

Mexico is a big country with varying social customs. Don't assume that you can get away with shorts throughout the country; while skimpily clothing is fine for the beach, Mexicans dress conservatively in cities. Pack a pair of jeans or trousers to avoid stares or catcalls (which unfortunately still happen). It's always a good idea to try to blend in with the locals.

If you're planning to go to fine dining restaurants, wear dressy clothes and proper shoes. The same goes for swanky cocktail bars and especially events like your friend's wedding or New Year's Eve party. Mexicans love dressing up for the occasion.

Social interactions

Mexicans kiss once on the cheek when greeting each other socially, even if it's the first time they're meeting someone. Take your cue from the person you're meeting and don't be surprised if the person leans in a little to give you a quick hug after the kiss, that's just the Mexican way.

If someone is a little late, don't freak out. It's true that Mexicans have a relaxed view of time, so up to 15 minutes



Pack a pair of jeans or trousers to avoid stares or catcalls (which unfortunately still happen). It's always a good idea to try to blend in with the locals.

late is still considered "on time."

As far as tipping goes, 12 or 15% is appropriate. 10% is now the passive-aggressive way of saying that something wasn't quite right.

Topics best avoided

Try to avoid referring to the United States as "America" anywhere in Latin America. For Latin Americans, the whole continent is "America," not just one country. (And we're taught it's just one continent, we don't divide it into North and South America.)

Even if you find everything really cheap compared to what things cost back home, don't comment on it. Chances are the person you're mentioning it to earns in Mexican pesos – so they're not finding it cheap and may feel like you're rubbing your money in their face.

Finally, don't assume your Mexican friend or new acquaintance has connections with the illegal drug trade. Mexico might be going through a dark period in its history, but assuming everyone in the country knows a "narco" is offensive, to say the least.

31 states. Countless adventures. Make sure you're covered.

Before you head off down Mexico way, here are our top tips to help protect you and your gear.

Theft

Theft is one of our most common travel insurance claims by travelers in Mexico. You should carry your electronics, passport, and valuables with you at all times (don't leave them in the car or in your luggage), and lock up your gear securely when you can't take it with you. If your stuff is stolen, you'll need a police report or some other kind of written documentation (e.g. a property irregularity report from the airline or bus company if your bags were checked in) to validate your claim.

All World Nomads travel insurance plans will have some coverage for theft or if a carrier has lost your checked-in luggage. However, with any insurance plan, limits, conditions, and exclusions may apply, for example, if you have simply misplaced your gear or if your tech gets damaged.

Surviving "Montezuma's Revenge"

Diarrhea can take down even the most experienced traveler, so if a trip to the local restaurant leaves you spending your holiday in the bathroom, our assistance teams can help point you to the nearest doctor to get you the care you need. And, with World Nomads travel insurance, you can make a claim for reimbursement for these medical expenses (less any excess, if applicable – meaning the amount you're required to contribute before your policy kicks in), even if you're still traveling.

Travel insurance is designed for medical emergencies while traveling, and our assistance team can support you 24/7. We'll be able to give you advice on what to do next, help locate suitable

medical facilities where you can be seen by a medical professional who can prescribe medication and, if necessary, arrange hospitalization depending on the severity of your illness. Policies vary, but cover can include emergency local medical expenses and the costs of your trip being interrupted if the furthest you're able to travel is the toilet and back.

The danger with gastroenteritis (often called "gastro"), which can cause nausea, vomiting, tummy cramps, and watery diarrhea, is that you may lose more fluids than you can keep down. Dehydration can be deadly, so don't rely on your own instincts or Google to get medical advice. Doctors in Mexico see gastro all the time, and are well equipped to test you to see if that's what you have, or if it's something more serious. However, if you're in a remote area, access to medical care can be tricky, so that's where our assistance teams can help. And remember, even if the local hospital doesn't seem as modern as you're used to, it doesn't mean that they can't help you get better and back on the road.

Scuba diving

We've tried to give you the freedom to learn or hone your diving skills by helping cover accidents that may occur when you're diving. However, not all World Nomads travel insurance plans for travelers from all countries cover scuba diving or cavern diving, and many plans exclude cover for cave diving. Be sure to select the right plan and/or adventure sport option for the type of diving and depth of dive you're doing before you buy. You should also be licensed to dive to the maximum depth of the cenote or cave and you must dive with a fully certified dive guide.

"Upon returning to our camp in Palenque, we found that a nearby river had flooded and swept away all of our belongings."

Tara B., US resident in Mexico. \$3,006 USD claim paid

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Meet Our Contributors

True nomads all, our writers are world travelers bound by the desire to truly understand the countries they visit.

If you'd like to contribute, keep an eye on our [Assignments page](#), where you can apply for upcoming opportunities.



Chelsea Gregory
UNITED STATES

Fueled by curiosity, Chelsea has spent the last eight years collecting experiences and stories from around the globe.



Kendall Hill
AUSTRALIA

Former travel editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kendall is an Australian journalist specializing in travel and food features.



Allyson Jennings
AUSTRALIA

Allyson is a scientist, conservationist, and explorer. When not on an adventure, she's producing travel safety content for World Nomads.



Lydia Jones
UNITED KINGDOM

Born in Slovakia, Lydia now lives in Mexico, where she has developed a deep understanding of the indigenous culture.



Sam Kazmer
UNITED STATES

Sam is a freelance travel and craft beer writer and entrepreneur. His writing covers outdoor adventure, travel, craft beer, and food.



Vanessa Nielsen
MEXICO

Founder of Sol Book Box, a Spanish children's book subscription, Vanessa was born and raised in Mexico but has lived in the US, France, and Honduras.



Tim Neville
UNITED STATES

A frequent contributor to *The New York Times*, Tim has cycled glaciers and scaled hundreds of miles to report his stories.



Shakif Meghji
UNITED KINGDOM

Shakif is an award-winning travel writer, journalist, and co-author of more than 35 guide books to destinations around the world.



Souad Msallem
UNITED KINGDOM

Souad is a freelance writer and food anthropologist, endlessly fascinated by the stories behind the places she visits.



Dan Pierson
UNITED STATES

Founder of Bolt, a new kind of travel community, Dan's adventures have taken him to 50+ countries, including time spent living in Mexico.



Johanna Read
CANADA

Johanna is a travel writer and photographer who collects advice about eating near and far (and about what to do between snacks).



Ed Salvato
UNITED STATES

Considered one of the world's leading gay travel experts, Ed is co-founder and editor-in-chief of *ManAboutWorld* magazine.



Max Serjeant
UNITED KINGDOM

Max is a British travel writer and anthropologist, currently based in Australia. He's traveled extensively in Latin America, Europe, and Asia.



Maxine Rose Schur
UNITED STATES

An award-winning writer, Maxine's travel essays have appeared in numerous anthologies and publications.



Jennifer Fernández Solano
MEXICO

Jen started her career as a magazine editor in Mexico City and writes for publications like *Forbes Travel Guide*.



Sara Walton
UNITED STATES

A native Texan, Sara is a traveling PADI Open Water Instructor with a passion for the underwater world.



Christine Williams
UNITED STATES

Christine and Jules make up the team at *Don't Forget To Move*, a blog specializing in promoting responsible tourism around the world.



Alex Wittman
UNITED STATES

Raised in the US, Alex now calls Mexico home. In line with her Midwest upbringing, she approaches travel with a down-to-earth mindset.



Harriet Wood
UNITED KINGDOM

Harriet is a traveler, writer, researcher, and supporter-of-all-good-things working between the UK and Mexico.



Lauren Cocking
UNITED KINGDOM

Lauren splits her time between Mexico and Yorkshire, writing about the things she eats, drinks, and reads along the way.



Dane Faurschou
AUSTRALIA

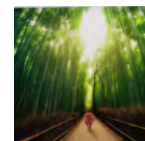
Dane is currently traveling from Canada to Argentina, trying to summit as many peaks and surf as many waves as he can.



Joseph Furey
UNITED KINGDOM

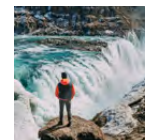
Joe hit the road in his teens, and he's barely stopped for gas since. Writing credits include *The Guardian*, *National Geographic*, and *Vice*.

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