

The Best of Mexico

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Across Mexico, in villages and cities, in mountains, tropical coasts, and jungle settings, enchanting surprises await travelers. These might take the form of a fantastic small-town festival, delightful dining in a memorable restaurant, or even a stretch of road through heavenly countryside. Below is a starter list of our favorites, to which you'll have the pleasure of adding your own discoveries.

1 The Best Beach Vacations

- **Puerto Vallarta:** Spectacularly wide Banderas Bay offers 42km (26 miles) of beaches. Some, like Playa Los Muertos—the popular public beach in town—abound with *palapa* restaurants, beach volleyball, and parasailing. The beaches of Punta Mita, the exclusive development north of Vallarta, are of the white-sand variety, with crystalline waters and coral reefs just offshore. Others around the bay nestle in coves, accessible only by boat. Puerto Vallarta is the only place where authentic colonial ambience mixes with true resort amenities. See “Puerto Vallarta” in chapter 9.
- **Puerto Escondido:** The best overall beach value in Mexico is principally known for its world-class surfing beach, Playa Zicatela. The surrounding beaches all have their own appeal; colorful fishing *pangas* dot the central town beach, parked under the shade of palms leaning so far over they almost touch the ground. Puerto Escondido offers unique accommodations at excellent prices, with exceptional budget dining and nightlife. See “Puerto Escondido” in chapter 10.
- **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo:** These side-by-side resorts offer beachgoers the best of both worlds: serene simplicity and resort comforts. For those in search of a back-to-basics beach, the best and most beautiful is Playa La Ropa, close to Zihuatanejo. The wide beach at Playa Las Gatas, with its restaurants and snorkeling sites, is also a great place to play. The luxury hotels in Ixtapa, on the next bay over from Zihuatanejo, front Playa Palmar, a fine, wide swath of beach. See “Northward to Zihuatanejo & Ixtapa” in chapter 10.
- **Cancún:** In terms of sheer beauty, Mexico's best beaches are in Cancún and along the Yucatán's Quintana Roo coast, extending south almost all the way to the Belizean border. The powdery, white-sand beaches boast water the color of a Technicolor dream; it's so clear you can see through to the coral reefs below. Cancún offers the widest assortment of luxury beachfront hotels, with more restaurants, nightlife, and activities than any other resort destination in the country. See chapter 13.

- **Tulum:** Fronting some of the best beaches on Mexico's Caribbean coast, Tulum's small *palapa* hotels offer guests a little slice of paradise far from crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; at the coast, things are quiet and will remain so because all these hotels are small and must generate their own electricity. If you can pull yourself away from the beach, nearby are ruins to explore and a vast nature preserve. See chapter 15.
 - **Isla Mujeres:** There's only one small beach here—Playa Norte—but it's superb. From this island, you can dive El Garrafón reef, snorkel offshore, and take a boat excursion to the Isla Contoy national wildlife reserve, which features great birding and a fabulous, uninhabited beach. See "Isla Mujeres" in chapter 14.
 - **Playa del Carmen:** "Playa" is Mexico's hip beach destination with a dash of third-world chic. Above all, it's easy and low key. You walk to the beach, you walk back to the hotel, you walk to one of the many good restaurants. Next day, you repeat. The beaches are white sand; the water is clear blue and perfect for swimming. If you feel the
- urge to be active, not far away are ancient Maya ruins, Cozumel, and the megaresort of Cancún, offering all the variety that you might want in a beach vacation. See chapter 15.
- **La Paz:** This state capital borders a lovely beach, dotted with colorful playgrounds and lively open-air restaurants. Take a cue from the local residents, though, and pass on swimming here in favor of the exquisite beaches just minutes from downtown. La Paz's beaches and the islets just offshore have transformed this tranquil town into a center for diving, sea kayaking, and other adventure pursuits. See "La Paz: Peaceful Port Town" in chapter 18.
 - **Los Cabos:** Dramatic rock formations and crashing waves mix with wide stretches of soft sand and a rolling break. Start at Pueblo la Playa, just north of San José del Cabo, and work your way down the Cabo Corridor to the famed Playa de Amor at Land's End. Some beaches are more appropriate for contemplation than for swimming, which isn't all bad. See "Los Cabos: Resorts, Watersports & Golf" in chapter 18.

2 The Best Cultural Experiences

- **Passing Time in the Plazas & Parks:** All the world may be a stage, but some parts have richer backdrops than others. Town plazas are the perfect settings for watching everyday life unfold. Alive with people, these open spaces are no modern product of urban planners, but are rooted in the traditional Mexican view of society. Several plazas are standouts: **Veracruz's** famous *zócalo* (see chapter 12) features nearly nonstop music and tropical gaiety. One look tells you how important **Oaxaca's** *zócalo* (see chapter 11) is to the local citizenry; the plaza is

remarkably beautiful, grand, and intimate all at once. **Mexico City's** Alameda (see chapter 4) has a dark, dramatic history—heretics were burned at the stake here during the colonial period—but today it's a people's park where lovers sit, cottoncandy vendors spin their treats, and the sound of organ grinders drifts over the changing crowd. **San Miguel de Allende's** Jardín (see chapter 6) is the focal point for meeting, sitting, painting, and sketching. During festivals, it fills with dancers, parades, and elaborate fireworks. **Guanajuato** and

Mexico





Querétaro (see chapter 6) have the coziest of plazas, while El Centro in **Mérida** (see chapter 16) on a Sunday can't be beat.

- **Música Popular:** Nothing reveals the soul of a people like music, and Mexico boasts many kinds in many different settings. You can find brassy, belt-it-out **mariachi** music in the famous Plaza de Garibaldi in Mexico City (see chapter 4), under the arches of El Parián in Tlaquepaque, and in other parts of Guadalajara (see chapter 8). Or perhaps you want to hear romantic **boleros** about love's betrayal sung to the strumming of a Spanish guitar, or what Mexicans call **música tropical** and related *cumbias*, mambos, and cha-cha-chas (see chapters 13 and 16).
- **Regional Folk Dancing:** Whether it's the Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City or the Ballet Folclórico in Guadalajara (see chapters 4 and 8), the almost-nightly park performances in Mérida (see chapter 16), or celebrations countrywide, these performances are diverse and colorful expressions of Mexican traditions.
- **Fireworks:** Mexicans have such a passion for fireworks and such a cavalier attitude toward them that it's a good

thing the buildings are stone and cement, or the whole country would have burned down long ago. Many local traditions surround fireworks, and every festival includes a display. The most lavish are the large constructions known as *castillos*, and the wildest are the *toros* that men carry over their shoulders while running through the streets, causing festival-goers to dive for cover.

- **Strolling El Malecón:** Wherever there's a seafront road, you'll find *el malecón* bordering it. This is generally a wide sidewalk for strolling, complete with vendors selling pinwheels and cotton candy. In some places, it has supplanted the plaza as a centerpiece of town life. The best examples are in **Puerto Vallarta**, **Mazatlán** (see chapter 9), **La Paz** (see chapter 18), **Cozumel** (see chapter 14), and **Veracruz** (see chapter 12).
- **Regional Fairs:** Almost every city and town has its regional fair (*feria regional*). These fairs showcase the best products of the region—tequila or fruit liquors, livestock, intricately carved silver, or clay handicrafts. One of the most notable regional fairs is La Feria del Caballo in Texcoco, which takes place in late March or early April.

3 The Best Festivals & Celebrations

- **Festival de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe:** This annual celebration leads up to Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, celebrated throughout Mexico on December 12. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of Mexico, and is also identified with the Aztec earth goddess and mother of humankind. The basilica just outside of **Mexico City** features the largest celebration and the most impressive crowd of impassioned believers, but perhaps the best place to view the festivities is in **Puerto Vallarta**, where

they continue around the clock for 12 days. It is a visual delight. See “Exploring Mexico City” in chapter 4, and “Puerto Vallarta” in chapter 9.

- **Days of the Dead:** People across the country celebrate *Los Días de los Muertos* (Oct 31–Nov 2); they erect altars for the dead, with marigolds (the flower of the dead) and offerings of food and drink. The most popular celebrations happen in the villages around **Pátzcuaro** (see chapter 7) and in the valley of **Oaxaca** (see chapter 11). People head out to the

cemetery for all-night vigils and sing and pray for the souls of the dearly departed. During the day, markets sell crafts and special items made just for the festival.

- **Carnaval:** Mexico has two particularly notable celebrations. Festivities in **Veracruz** fill the 3 days before Ash Wednesday, with fabulous floats, dancing in the plaza, and live entertainment. **Mazatlán**'s party lasts a full week before Lent, with parades, strolling musicians, and crowds of revelers along the entire length of the *malecón*. See "Veracruz City" in chapter 12, and "Mazatlán" in chapter 9.
- **Holy Week:** The silver city of **Taxco** hosts one of the most compelling Holy Week commemorations in the country, beginning the Friday before Palm Sunday with nightly processions (and several during the day). On the evening of Holy Thursday, villagers carrying saints from the surrounding area march ahead of hooded members of a society of self-flagellating penitents. On the Saturday morning before Easter, the Plaza Borda fills for the Procession of Three Falls, which reenacts the three times Christ stumbled and fell while carrying the cross. See chapter 5. In **San Miguel de Allende**, **Pátzcuaro** and surrounding communities, and **Oaxaca**, the solemn weeklong commemoration involves nightly candlelit processions through the streets and other religious events. See chapters 6, 7, and 11.
- **La Fiesta de los Locos:** In **San Miguel de Allende**, a town known for celebrations, this one is the most fun for visitors. Young and old alike dress in grotesque costumes and parade around the center of town, or in dressed-up carts, to musical accompaniment. Keep an eye open for practical jokes. See "San Miguel de Allende" in chapter 6.
- **Guelaguetza:** On the last 2 Mondays in July, **Oaxaca** puts on a big show. Dance groups from communities across the state perform in the amphitheater on the hillside above the city. See "Oaxaca City" in chapter 11.
- **"Night of the Radishes":** Unique in the country, December 23 in **Oaxaca** is when the Oaxaqueños build fantastic sculptures out of radishes, flowers, and dried cornhusks. They go on display on the *zócalo*. On December 24, each Oaxacan church organizes a procession with music, floats, and crowds bearing candles. See "Oaxaca City" in chapter 11.
- **"Gourmet Festival":** This festival of fine dining held in **Puerto Vallarta** brings together some of the world's finest chefs creating magical menus in the town's top restaurants. Added attractions include a gourmet food expo, cooking classes, tequila and wine tastings, and an array of special events and parties. Dates vary, but the festival generally takes place for 10 days in mid-November. www.festivalgourmet.com. See "Puerto Vallarta" in chapter 9.

4 The Best Archaeological Sites

- **Teotihuacán:** So close to Mexico City, yet centuries away. You can feel the majesty of the past in a stroll down the pyramid-lined Avenue of the Dead, from the Pyramid of the Sun to the Pyramid of the Moon. Imagine what a fabulous place this must have

been when the walls were stuccoed and painted brilliant colors. See "A Side Trip to the Pyramids of San Juan Teotihuacán" in chapter 4.

- **Monte Albán:** A grand ceremonial city built on a mountaintop overlooking the valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán

offers the visitor panoramic vistas; a fascinating view of a society in transition, reflected in the contrasting methods of pyramid construction; and intriguing details in ornamentation. See “Oaxaca City” in chapter 11.

- **Palenque:** Like the pharaohs of Egypt, the rulers of Palenque built tombs deep within their pyramids. Imagine the magnificent ceremony in A.D. 683 when King Pacal was entombed in his magnificent burial chamber, which lay unspoiled until its discovery in 1952. See “Palenque” in chapter 11.
- **Ek Balam:** Archaeologists at this site have made the most astonishing discoveries of the decade. Ek Balam’s main pyramid is taller than Chichén Itzá’s, and it holds a sacred doorway bordered with elaborate stucco figures of priests and kings and rich

iconography. See “Ek Balam: Dark Jaguar” in chapter 16.

- **Uxmal:** No matter how many times you see Uxmal, the splendor of its stone carvings is awe-inspiring. A stone rattlesnake undulates across the facade of the Nunnery complex, and 103 masks of the rain god Chaac project out from the Governor’s Palace. See “The Ruins of Uxmal” in chapter 16.
- **Chichén Itzá:** Stand beside the giant serpent head at the foot of El Castillo pyramid and marvel at the architects and astronomers who positioned the building so precisely that shadow and sunlight form a serpent’s body slithering from the peak to the earth at each equinox (Mar 21 and Sept 21). See “The Ruins of Chichén Itzá” in chapter 16.

5 The Best Active Vacations

- **Scuba Diving in Cozumel & along the Yucatán’s Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off the island, Mexico’s premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. See chapter 14. The Yucatán’s coastal reef is part of the second-largest reef system in the world and affords excellent diving. Especially beautiful is the Chinchorro Reef, 32km (20 miles) offshore from Majahual or Xcalak. You can also dive in the clear, cool water of the many caverns and *cenotes* (sinkholes, or natural wells) that dot the interior. See chapter 15. Other excellent dive sites are in and around **Puerto Vallarta** and off **Los Cabos**. See chapters 9 and 18.
- **Fly-Fishing off the Punta Allen Peninsula:** Serious anglers will enjoy the challenge of fly-fishing the saltwater flats and lagoons of Ascension Bay, near Punta Allen. See “Tulum, Punta Allen & Sian Ka’an” in chapter 15.
- **Hiking & Horseback Riding in the Copper Canyon:** Miles and miles of beautiful, remote, challenging canyon lands are paradise for the serious hiker or rider. **Canyon Travel** (☎ 800/843-1060 in the U.S.) can set hikers up with a Tarahumara Indian guide, who can take you deep into the canyons to places rarely viewed by tourists. Doug Rhodes of the **Paraíso del Oso** (☎ 800/884-3107 in the U.S.) leads tours of experienced horseback riders on a 12-day ride that tests a rider’s skill in mountainous terrain. It has to be the most challenging ride in North America. See “The Copper Canyon Train and Stops Along the Way” in chapter 17.
- **Golf in Los Cabos & Puerto Vallarta:** Puerto Vallarta, with its seven championship courses, is *the* new destination for golfers to keep their eyes on. Added to the appeal of golf here are courses within easy driving distance along the

Pacific Coast at El Tamarindo, Isla Navidad, and Manzanillo. See chapter 9. The Corridor between San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas is one of the world's premier golf destinations, with five championship courses open and a total of 207 holes slated for the area. See chapter 18.

- **Surfing Zicatela Beach in Puerto Escondido:** This world-class break is a lure for surfers from around the globe. It challenges the best in the sport each September and October, when the waves peak and the annual surf competitions take place. See chapter 10. Other noted surf breaks in Mexico include Sayulita and Las Islitas Beach near **San Blas** (both north of Puerto Vallarta), and Playa Costa Azul, on the outskirts of

San José del Cabo. See chapters 9 and 18.

- **Sportfishing in La Paz:** Billfishing for magnificent marlin and sailfish is a popular sport throughout southern Baja, and La Paz pulls in the most consistent share. See chapter 18. Fishing is also excellent in Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Manzanillo, and Zihuatanejo. See chapters 9, 10, and 18.
- **Sea Kayaking in the Sea of Cortez:** From Cabo San Lucas to La Paz, and continuing north, the Sea of Cortez is a sea kayaker's dream. It has dozens of tiny coves and impressive inlets to pull into and explore, under the watchful gaze of sea lions and dolphins. Professional outfitters provide gear, guides, and instruction for novices. See chapter 18.

6 The Best of Natural Mexico

- **Michoacán's Million Monarch March:** Mexico is an exotic land, and no place drives this home more forcefully than a mountain forest where you stand surrounded by the fluttering wings of millions of monarch butterflies—it's like being in a fairy tale. The setting is the rugged highlands of Michoacán, from mid- to late November through March. See "Morelia" in chapter 7.
- **Whale-Watching:** Each winter, between December and April, magnificent humpback and gray whales return to breed and instruct their young in the waters of Banderas Bay, fronting **Puerto Vallarta**, and in **Los Cabos**. See "Puerto Vallarta" in chapter 9, and "Los Cabos: Resorts, Watersports & Golf" in chapter 18.
- **Sea-Turtle Nesting Beaches:** Between June and November, sea turtles return to the beaches of their birth to lay their eggs in nests on the sand. With poaching and natural predators threatening

these species, communities along Mexico's Pacific coast have established protected nesting areas. Many are open for public viewing and participation in the egg collection and baby-turtle release processes. Turtles are found along the Yucatán coast, in Baja Sur, on the Oaxaca coast, in Puerto Vallarta, and on Costa Alegre. See chapters 9, 11, 15, and 18.

- **Lago Bacalar** (Yucatán Peninsula): The waters of this crystal-clear, spring-fed lake—Mexico's second largest—are noted for their vibrant color variations, from pale blue to deep blue-green and turquoise. The area surrounding the lake is known for birding, with over 130 species identified. See "Lago Bacalar" in chapter 15.
- **The Rugged Copper Canyon:** The canyons known collectively as the Copper Canyon are beautiful, remote, and unspoiled. The entire network is larger than the Grand Canyon; it incorporates high waterfalls, vertical

canyon walls, mountain forests in the canyon-rim country, and semiarid desert inside the canyons. This is the land of the Tarahumara Indians, who gained their legendary endurance from adapting to this wilderness. See chapter 17.

- **Desert Landscapes in Baja Sur:** The painted-desert colors and unique

plant life are a natural curiosity in **Los Cabos**, where horseback, hiking, and ATV trips explore the area. The arid desert contrasts sharply with the intense blue of the strong sea surrounding the peninsula. See “Los Cabos: Resorts, Watersports & Golf” in chapter 18.

7 The Best Places to Get Away from It All

- **Costa Alegre:** Between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, a number of superexclusive hotels cater to those with both time and money. These resorts—Hotelito Desconocido, Las Alamedas, Hotel Careyes, and El Tamarindo—are miles from civilization on private beaches. See “Costa Alegre: Puerto Vallarta to Barra de Navidad” in chapter 9.
- **San Sebastián:** A 15-minute flight from Puerto Vallarta takes you a century back in time. The colonial mountain town of San Sebastián used to be the center of Mexico’s mining operations; today, it’s simply a place of delicious seclusion in a magical mountain setting. See “Puerto Vallarta” in chapter 9.
- **Punta Mita:** Its ancient inhabitants considered the northern tip of the Bay of Banderas sacred ground. Today, the point where the Sea of Cortez, the Pacific Ocean, and Banderas Bay meet is evolving into Mexico’s most exclusive residential resort development. The beaches are white and the waters crystalline. See “Puerto Vallarta” in chapter 9.
- **Riviera Maya & Punta Allen Peninsula:** Away from the popular resort of Cancún, the Riviera Maya’s heavenly quiet getaways offer tranquility at low prices on beautiful palm-lined beaches. South of the Tulum ruins,

Punta Allen’s beachside budget inns offer some of the most peaceful getaways in the country. See chapter 15.

- **Lago Bacalar:** The spring-fed waters of Lake Bacalar—Mexico’s second-largest lake—make an ideal place to unwind. South of Cancún, near Chetumal, there’s nothing around for miles. If you want adventure, you can take a kayak out on the lake, follow a birding trail, or venture to Belize or the nearby Maya ruins. See “Lago Bacalar” in chapter 15.
- **Cerocahui:** Up in the high Sierra Tarahumara, far from where the large tours stop, you’ll find a peaceful little town surrounding a former mission. Nearby are two small hotels that are even more peaceful—no phones, no crowds, no traffic, just beautiful mountains and canyons clothed in pine forest. See “The Copper Canyon Train and Stops Along the Way” in chapter 17.
- **Todos Santos:** Purportedly home of the original Hotel California: You can check out any time, but you may not want to leave once you unwind for a while in this artists’ outpost, also known as “Bohemian Baja.” But come soon, because it’s gaining the attention of like-minded adventurers. See “Todos Santos: A Creative Oasis” in chapter 18.

8 The Best Art, Architecture & Museums

- **Museo Nacional de Antropología:** Among the world's most outstanding museums, the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City contains riches representing 3,000 years of the country's past. Also on view are fabulous artifacts of still-thriving indigenous cultures. The building, designed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, is stunning. See p. 126.
- **Museo Frida Kahlo (Frida Kahlo House & Museum):** While perhaps not a world-class collection of works by Mexico's first couple of art, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, this museum does contain a strong sampling of their works, plus their fascinating private collection. With rooms arranged as they were when the couple lived here, in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán, it also allows visitors to peek into the lives of these creative masters. This is also where much of the 2002 film *Frida* was shot. See p. 124.
- **Palacio Nacional:** Mexico's center of government and presidential office was originally built in 1692 on the site of Moctezuma's "new" palace, to be the home of Hernán Cortez. The top floor, added in the late 1920s, holds a series of stunning Diego Rivera murals depicting the history of Mexico. See p. 126.
- **Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City:** The country's premier venue for the performing arts, this fabulous building is the combined work of several masters, including the Italian architect Adamo Boari. The theater's exterior is early-20th-century Art Nouveau, covered in marble; the interior is 1930s Art Deco. See p. 130.
- **The Templo Mayor's Aztec Splendor:** The Templo Mayor and Museo del Templo Mayor, in Mexico City, are an archaeological excavation and a museum with 6,000 objects on display. They showcase the variety and splendor of the Aztec Empire as it existed in the center of what is now Mexico City. See p. 128.
- **Catedral Metropolitana:** This towering cathedral, begun in 1573 and finished in 1788, blends baroque, neoclassical, and Mexican churrigueresque architecture, and was constructed primarily from the stones of destroyed Aztec temples. See p. 132.
- **Santa Prisca y San Sebastián Church:** One of Mexico's most impressive baroque churches, completed in 1758, this church in Taxco has an intricately carved facade, an interior decorated with gold-leafed saints and angels, and paintings by Miguel Cabrera, one of Mexico's most famous colonial-era artists. See p. 161.
- **Mexican Masks in Zacatecas:** Masks are a ubiquitous feature in Mexican festivals and folk art, and the Museo Rafael Coronel in Zacatecas has the greatest collection in the country. See p. 226.
- **Museo Virreinal de Guadalupe:** Six kilometers (4 miles) southeast of Zacatecas in the small town of Guadalupe, this Franciscan convent and art museum holds a striking collection of 17th- and 18th-century paintings by such masters as Miguel Cabrera and Cristóbal de Villalpando. The expressive, dramatic works will fascinate art lovers. See p. 227.
- **Morelia's Cathedral:** Sober lines, balanced proportions, a deft blending of architectural styles, and monumental height—Morelia's cathedral is the most beautiful in the country. It's built of brownish-pink stone that turns fiery rose in the late-afternoon sun. See p. 242.

- **Xalapa's Museo Antropología:** With the finest examples of Olmec and Totonac sculpture and ceramics, this museum includes the best collection of the Olmec megalithic heads. See p. 497.
- **Puebla's Capilla del Rosario:** Located in the church of Santo Domingo, this chapel is a tour de force of baroque

expression, executed in molded plaster, carved wood, Talavera tile, and gold leaf. The overall effect is to overpower the senses. See p. 504.

- **Puebla's Museo Amparo:** A magnificent collection of pre-Columbian and colonial art, beautifully displayed. See p. 506.

9 The Best Shopping

- **Bazar del Sábado in San Angel:** This festive weekly market in a colonial neighborhood south of Mexico City offers exceptional crafts, of a more sophisticated nature than you'll see in most *mercados*. Furnishings, antiques, and collectibles are also easy to find in surrounding garages and street plazas. See p. 144.
- **Polanco, Mexico City:** This fashionable neighborhood is noted for its designer boutiques, cigar shops, fine jewelers, and leather-goods offerings. See "Shopping" in chapter 4.
- **Contemporary Art:** Latin American art is surging in popularity and recognition. Galleries in Mexico City feature Mexico's masters and emerging stars, with Oaxaca, Puerto Vallarta, and San Miguel de Allende galleries also offering excellent selections. See chapters 4, 6, 9, and 11.
- **Taxco Silver:** Mexico's silver capital, Taxco, has hundreds of stores featuring fine jewelry and decorative objects. See "Taxco: Cobblestones & Silver" in chapter 5.
- **Talavera Pottery in Puebla & Dolores Hidalgo:** An inheritor of the Moorish legacy of ceramics, Puebla produces some of the most sought-after dinnerware in the world. The tiles produced there adorn building facades and church domes throughout the area. See chapter 12. Dolores Hidalgo, 40km (25 miles) northwest

of San Miguel de Allende, produces attractive, inexpensive Talavera of less traditional design. Almost every block has a factory or store outlet. See "San Miguel de Allende" in chapter 6.

- **San Miguel de Allende's Diverse Crafts:** Perhaps it's the influence of the Instituto Allende art school, but something has given storekeepers here real savvy about choosing their merchandise. The stores have fewer typical articles of Mexican handicrafts and more interesting and eye-catching works than you'll find in other towns. And the shopping experience is low-key. See "San Miguel de Allende" in chapter 6.
- **Pátzcuaro's Fine Crafts:** Michoacán is known for its crafts, and Pátzcuaro is at the center of it all. You can find beautiful cotton textiles, woodcarvings, pottery, lacquerware, woven straw pieces, and copper items in the market, or you can track the object to its source in one of the nearby villages. See "Pátzcuaro" in chapter 7.
- **Decorative Arts in Tlaquepaque & Tonalá:** These two neighborhoods of Guadalajara offer perhaps the most enjoyable shopping in Mexico. Tlaquepaque has attracted sophisticated and wide-ranging shops selling a wide variety of decorative art. In Tonalá, more than 400 artisans have workshops, and you can visit many of them on regular days; on market

days, wander through blocks and blocks of market stalls seeking that one perfect piece. See “Shopping” in chapter 8.

- **Huichol Art in Puerto Vallarta:** One of the last indigenous cultures to remain faithful to their customs, language, and traditions, the Huichol Indians come down from the Sierra Madre to sell their unusual art to Puerto Vallarta galleries. Inspired by visions received during spiritual ceremonies, the Huichol create their art with colorful yarn or beads pressed into wax. See “Shopping” in chapter 9.

- **Oaxacan Textiles:** The valley of Oaxaca produces the best weavings and naturally dyed textiles in Mexico; it’s also famous for its pottery (especially the black pottery), and colorful, imaginative woodcarvings. See “Oaxaca City” in chapter 11.
- **The Markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas:** This city, deep in the heart of the Maya highlands, has shops, open plazas, and markets featuring distinctive waist-loomed wool and cotton textiles, as well as leather shoes, handsome pottery, genre dolls, and Guatemalan textiles. See “San Cristóbal de las Casas” in chapter 11.

10 The Hottest Nightlife

- **Polanco & Condesa, Mexico City:** Mexico City, like any world capital, has sizzling nightlife. Latin, Cuban, and alternative music rock in the Polanco neighborhood; Condesa is nicknamed the SoHo of Mexico City, due to its architecture and galleries. Its trendy club scene evokes the culture’s roots in Madrid and Barcelona. Arrive fashionably late—the party doesn’t start before midnight. See “Mexico City After Dark” in chapter 4.
- **Guadalajara’s Sophisticated Scene:** Nightlife here extends to theater, classical music, jazz, and salsa, never forgetting mariachi music—which, when done properly, requires vocalists to really flaunt their talent. See “Guadalajara After Dark” in chapter 8.
- **Puerto Vallarta:** Of all the beach destinations, Puerto Vallarta enjoys the most sophisticated and varied nightlife. An excellent selection of small clubs features live jazz, blues, salsa, and good old rock ’n’ roll. You’ll also find mariachi, pre-Columbian, and traditional Mexican ballads. Heating up the scene are a new group of contemporary clubs and lounges with

DJs spinning house, trance, and chill. See “Puerto Vallarta” in chapter 9.

- **Acapulco Dance Clubs:** Nightlife can’t possibly get more lavish, extravagant, or flashy than it is in Acapulco, Mexico’s hands-down diva. This city’s main cultural attractions are the clubs that jam until sunrise, several of which have walls of windows overlooking the bay. See “Acapulco” in chapter 10.
- **The Lively Offerings of San Cristóbal de las Casas:** Small though it may be, this city has a live-music scene that can’t be beat for fun and atmosphere. It’s inexpensive, too. This is the perfect place to do some barhopping: It offers variety, convenience (everything is within walking distance), and few if any cover charges. See “San Cristóbal de las Casas” in chapter 11.
- **Cancún’s Clubs in Malls:** Cancún’s wide-ranging hot spots include most of the name-brand nightlife destinations, concentrated in entertainment malls and festival shopping centers, as well as hotel-lobby bars with live music, and sophisticated dance clubs. Popular nightlife tours allow you to

bypass lines and sample various clubs in a single night. The clubs here can accommodate up to 3,000, and there are plenty of options for staying out until the sun comes up. See “Cancún After Dark” in chapter 13.

- **Cabo San Lucas Beach Bars:** In the nightlife capital of Baja California, after-dark fun centers on the casual

bars and restaurants that line the main drag, as well as those on the town’s public Medano Beach. The place retains a rowdy, outlaw feel, despite the influx of tony hotels nearby. A new lounge scene is, thankfully, updating this lively town’s nightlife. See “Los Cabos: Resorts, Watersports & Golf” in chapter 18.

11 The Best Luxury Hotels

- **Hotel Four Seasons** (Mexico City; ☎ 800/332-3442 in the U.S.): The standard of excellence in Mexico, and the most stylish choice in Mexico City, this hotel captures both serenity and elegance in a hacienda-style building that surrounds a picturesque courtyard. The gracious staff and offerings of unique cultural tours are bonuses. See p. 111.
- **W Mexico City** (Mexico City; ☎ 888/625-5144 in the U.S.): Stylish, comfortable, and high-tech, this dramatic new addition to Mexico City hotels has set the city abuzz. With its super-*caliente* red hues and lively bar scene, the W Mexico City has infused the country’s capital with a dose of passion. Luxury extras include expansive bathrooms with circular tubs and walk-in showers with hanging hammocks. See p. 112.
- **Casa de Sierra Nevada Quinta Real** (San Miguel de Allende; ☎ 866/621-9288 in the U.S. and Canada): This luxury hotel has all the flavor of colonial Mexico; it’s a collection of eight elegant colonial houses in one of the country’s most appealing colonial towns. See p. 192.
- **Villa Montaña** (Morelia; ☎ 800/223-6510 in the U.S., or 800/448-8355 in Canada): The Villa Montaña defines perfection. From the layout of the grounds to the decoration of the rooms, every detail has been skillfully handled. The hotel perches on a ridge overlooking Morelia; from its terraces, guests can survey the city below. The restaurant is one of the city’s best. See p. 245.
- **Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita** (north of Puerto Vallarta; ☎ 800/332-3442 in the U.S.): This luxury resort has soared in popularity since opening in 1999. It offers an unrivaled location (on a remote, pristine stretch of beach) and the stellar service characteristic of the Four Seasons chain. Also on-site are an expansive spa and a private Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course. See p. 329.
- **El Tamarindo** (between Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta; ☎ 315/351-5032): The most exclusive remote resort in Mexico, this stylish place combines large private casitas facing the Pacific with a stunning private oceanfront golf course. Fellow guests are likely to be Hollywood celebrities and the well-to-do from around the world. It’s about 1 hour north of Manzanillo along Costa Alegre. See p. 353.
- **Villa del Sol** (Zihuatanejo; ☎ 888/389-2645 in the U.S.): Few hotels meet the demanding standards of luxury and attention to detail required to be a member of the French Relais & Châteaux, but this small beachfront inn does. It’s also a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World. See p. 406.

- **Hotel Camino Real** (Oaxaca; ☎ 800/722-6466 in the U.S.): No other hotel in Mexico captures the sense of antiquity as well as this one. It occupies a 16th-century convent in the middle of the best part of Oaxaca City and has several beautiful, tranquil courtyards where renovation efforts have carefully preserved the marks of time. See p. 447.
- **Ritz-Carlton Hotel** (Cancún; ☎ 800/241-3333 in the U.S. and Canada): In a resort known for high-rise luxury, this hotel is in a class of its own, with spectacular facilities fronting a perfect beach. You'll find spacious, beautifully furnished rooms, elegant dining, and exceptional service. See p. 526.
- **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún; ☎ 800/543-4300 in the U.S. and Canada): In a resort known for high-rise luxury, this hotel is in a class of its own, with a more intimate, inviting ambience in its collection of services and rooms fronting a perfect beach. You'll find spacious, elegantly furnished rooms, delectable dining, and exceptional service. See p. 525.
- **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (Los Cabos; ☎ 888/525-0483 in the U.S.): Stunning in its relaxed elegance, Las Ventanas comes complete with a deluxe European spa, excellent gourmet restaurant, and elegantly appointed rooms and suites. From fireplaces and telescopes to private pools and rooftop terraces, each suite is a private slice of heaven. See p. 716.
- **One&Only Palmilla** (Los Cabos; ☎ 800/637-2226 in the U.S.): Currently the most popular Mexican resort with the Hollywood crowd, the completely renovated Palmilla has regained its spot as the most deluxe hotel in this seaside playground known for sumptuous accommodations and great golf. The new, exceptional spa, fitness center, and yoga garden, as well as a restaurant by renowned chef Charlie Trotter are added bonuses. See p. 716.

12 The Best Unique Inns

- **Verana** (Yelapa; ☎ 800/677-5156): The stylish Verana adds a dash of sophistication to funky Yelapa—a remote village accessible only by boat, about 45 minutes from Puerto Vallarta. Each of the six handcrafted *casas* has a unique architectural style that complements the expanse of vistas to the surrounding jungle and ocean. It's a perfect blend of style, romance, and nature. See p. 312.
- **Quinta María Cortez** (Puerto Vallarta; ☎ 888/640-8100 in the U.S.): This is one of the country's most original places to stay; it's an eclectic B&B uniquely decorated with antiques, curios, and original art. It sits on a beautiful cove on Conchas Chinas beach. See p. 311.
- **Hacienda San Angel** (Puerto Vallarta; ☎ 322/222-2692): Once a villa owned by Richard Burton, this elegant B&B adds a sophisticated option to places to stay in this seaside resort. With a direct view to the signature Guadalupe church crown, the nine suites are exquisitely decorated in antiques, original art, and the finest in linens and amenities. Personalized service and its central location make it a true find in Mexico. See p. 309.
- **La Casa Que Canta** (Zihuatanejo; ☎ 888/523-5050 in the U.S.): This architecturally dramatic hotel incorporates wonderful Mexican adobe and folk art in grandly scaled rooms. It's a delightful place to unwind, read on the terrace overlooking the bay, and order room service. See p. 405.

- **Hotel Santa Fe** (Puerto Escondido; ☎ 954/582-0170): This Spanish-colonial-style inn has a welcoming staff and comfortable rooms appointed with rustic wood furnishings. The hacienda-style buildings, splashed with bougainvillea, surround two courtyard swimming pools. Across the street is the famed surfing beach, Zicatela. The restaurant is one of the best on the Pacific coast. See p. 418.
- **Mesón de la Sacristía de la Compañía** (Puebla; ☎ 222/232-4513): No other place captures the feel of colonial Mexico, or does it with as much fun, as this small hotel that doubles as a popular nightspot and antiques store. See p. 508.
- **Deseo Hotel + Lounge** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/879-3620): Perhaps it should be Hotel = Lounge. That might be an overstatement, but the lounge is at the center of everything, making Deseo the perfect fit for outgoing types who are into an alternative lodging experience. Enjoy a cocktail at the bar or on one of the large daybeds and chill to the modern lounge music. See p. 588.
- **Casa Mexilio Guest House** (Mérida; ☎ 800/538-6802 in the U.S.): An imaginative arrangement of rooms around a courtyard features a pool surrounded by a riot of tropical vegetation. The rooms are on different levels, connected by stairs and catwalks. Breakfast here provides extra incentive for getting out of bed. See p. 645.
- **Casa Natalia** (San José del Cabo; ☎ 888/277-3814 in the U.S.): This renovated historic home, now a charming inn, is an oasis of palms, waterfalls, and flowers against the desert landscape. Each room and suite is an artful combination of modern architecture and traditional Mexican touches. The restaurant is the hottest in town. See p. 711.
- **Posada Las Flores** (Loreto; ☎ 877/245-2860 in the U.S.): Adjacent to the main plaza in this town steeped in history, this inn is the perfect setting from which to explore—rooms are individually decorated in fine Mexican antiques and arts and crafts. It also boasts a rooftop glass-bottomed swimming pool. See p. 743.

13 The Best Inexpensive Inns

- **Best Western Hotel de Cortés** (Mexico City; ☎ 800/528-1234 in the U.S.): This historic building and former home of Augustinian friars offers exceptionally clean, comfortable, value-priced accommodations. It's on La Alameda park, near the Palace of Fine Arts and the Franz Mayer Museum. See p. 114.
- **Hotel Victoria** (Taxco; ☎ 762/622-0004): With its pristine 1940s decor and fabulous hillside setting overlooking all of Taxco, this hotel gets special marks as an inexpensive inn that exudes all the charm of old-fashioned Mexico. See p. 163.
- **Hotel San Francisco Plaza** (Guadalajara; ☎ 33/3613-8954): This two-story colonial-style hotel is a more agreeable place to stay than lodgings charging twice as much, and it's every bit as comfortable. It's in the downtown area, near the main plaza and several good restaurants and nightspots. See p. 270.
- **Hotel Flor de María** (Puerto Escondido; ☎ 954/582-0536): This hotel is charming in every way, from the hospitable owners, Lino and María Francato, to the guest rooms individually decorated with Lino's fine artistic touches. The restaurant is the best in town. See p. 420.

- **Paraíso Escondido** (Puerto Escondido; ☎ 954/582-0444): This eclectic inn is a great bargain, especially for the originality of the decor, and the excellent service. It's a short walk to both the beach and the action along Puerto's main street. See p. 418.
- **Misión de los Arcos** (Huatulco; ☎ 958/587-0165): Just 1 block from the central plaza, this hotel has a similar style to the elegant Quinta Real, at a fraction of the cost. An all-white facade and intriguing decorative touches give it an inviting feel. There's shuttle service to the Huatulco beaches. See p. 431.
- **Las Golondrinas** (Oaxaca; ☎ 951/514-3298): We receive more favorable letters about this hotel than about any other in the country. It's small, simple, and colorful, with homey touches of folk art and pathways lined with abundant foliage. See p. 450.
- **Treetops** (Playa del Carmen; ☎ 984/873-0351): An economical, quiet hotel steps from both the beach and Avenida 5, Treetops could easily get by on location alone. But the owners
- have gone out of their way to create a distinctive lodging with plenty of amenities. The hotel has its own *cenote* and piece of shady jungle, making it a lovely place to relax after a trying day of strolling the beach and wandering the village streets. See p. 590.
- **Rey del Caribe Hotel** (Cancún; ☎ 998/884-2028): A unique oasis in downtown Cancun, this hotel has considered every detail to achieve the goal of living in an organic and environmentally friendly manner. Set in a tropical garden, the combination of sunny rooms, warm service, yoga and meditation classes, and healthful dining is a welcome respite to party-hearty Cancún. See p. 530.
- **Club Cabo Inn** (Cabo San Lucas; ☎ 624/143-3348): This former bordello is the best budget inn in the area. Rooms are small but extra clean and invitingly decorated, amenities are generous, and the owner-managers are friendly and helpful. Ideally located, close to town and near the marina, the inn caters to sportfishers. See p. 728.

14 The Best Spa Resorts

- **Hotel Spa Ixtapan** (Ixtapan; ☎ 800/638-7950 in the U.S.): In operation since 1939, this resort is a classic, traditional spa with consistently upgraded amenities and services. It's also close to the region's renowned thermal baths. See p. 166.
- **Misión Del Sol Resort & Spa** (Cuernavaca; ☎ 777/321-0999 in the U.S.): Mexico's finest spa resort, with every architectural and functional detail designed to soothe body and soul—from meditation rooms to reflexology showers to magnets under your mattress. The sumptuous, full-service spa and fitness center and delicious vegetarian cuisine make this
- a heavenly base for personal renewal. See p. 177.
- **Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita** (Punta Mita; ☎ 800/332-3442): The enticing spa at this posh resort is one of its principal appeals. The menu of spa services based on native Mexican therapies is an intriguing complement to the modern facilities and amenities. Located north of Puerto Vallarta. See p. 329.
- **Paradise Village** (Nuevo Vallarta; ☎ 800/995-5714): Excellent fitness facilities combined with pampering yet affordable spa services make this one of the best all-around spas in Mexico. It actively promotes the beneficial

properties of indigenous Mexican spa therapies and natural treatments. See p. 327.

- **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún; ☎ 800/543-4300 in the U.S.): The Spa del Mar is a state-of-the-art, 1,400-sq.-m (15,000-sq.-ft.) facility bordering the brilliant Caribbean. It boasts the most complete spa in the area, with inhalation rooms, saunas, steam, Jacuzzis, cold plunges, Swiss showers, a cascading waterfall whirlpool, and 14 treatment rooms. There's also an expansive fitness center and salon services. See p. 525.
- **Ikal del Mar** (☎ 888/230-7330 in the U.S.); **Maroma** (☎ 866/454-9351 in the U.S.); and **Paraíso de la Bonita** (☎ 800/327-0200 in the U.S.): The area north of Playa del Carmen, around Puerto Morelos, is a hotbed of spa-resort luxury. These three establishments, in lovely settings, offer guests an impressive range of pampering treatments. And it's all just a half-hour or so from the Cancún airport. See p. 600.
- **El Tamarindo** (Costa Alegre; ☎ 315/351-5032): Admittedly, the spa facilities at this resort are limited, but the spa director has creatively integrated the surrounding natural beauty and history into this spa—think massages on the beach, scrubs made from local volcanic mud, and their very special version of the ancient purification ritual, the *temazcal*. See p. 353.
- **Aqua** (Cancún; ☎ 800/343-7821 in the U.S.): This brand-new resort, part of the Fiesta Americana chain, was designed with the sense of “spa” (*salud por agua*) in mind—all colors and spaces carry a water theme. As for its actual spa, it's a 1,500 sq.-m (over 15,000-sq.-ft.) facility that blends Eastern, pre-Hispanic, and Western treatment philosophies. Tai Chi, yoga, and Pilates classes are offered, and you can indulge in a full array of massages and treatments. See p. 522.
- **Casa de los Sueños Resort & Spa Zenter** (Isla Mujeres; ☎ 998/877-0651). This luxury B&B has a small but well-appointed spa and “Zenter,” which is also accessible to nonguests. Highlights include yoga classes, massages, and holistic spa treatments, which take place either indoors or out, in one of the most tranquil places you'll find. See p. 555.
- **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (Los Cabos; ☎ 888/525-0483 in the U.S.): This is an elegant and highly professional spa in one of the area's most exclusive resorts. See “The Best Luxury Hotels” above, and p. 716.

15 The Best Mexican Food & Drink

- **Fonda El Refugio, for Traditional Mexican Food** (Mexico City; ☎ 55/5207-2732): This elegantly casual place prepares specialties from all over the country, including *manchamantelas* (“tablecloth stainers”) on Tuesday and *albóndigas en chile chipotle* (meatballs in chipotle sauce) on Saturday. See p. 119.
- **El Nivel, to Experience a True Cantina** (Mexico City; ☎ 55/5522-9755):

What a bar . . . this cantina has the honor of holding Mexico City liquor license #1, dating back 3 centuries. Once only the domain of men, cantinas in Mexico serve small plates of complimentary snacks as you continue to order rounds of drinks. El Nivel, located across from the Palacio de Gobierno, draws a crowd of politicians and journalists. See p. 120.

- **Adobe Fonda, for Inventive Nueva Cocina** (Tlaquepaque; ☎ 33/3657-2792): Delicious Mexican food served inside one of those gorgeous decorative arts stores that line Tlaquepaque's Calle Independencia. The point of departure for the food is some uncommon Mexican recipes, which are then given sparkling Italian and Argentine accents. See p. 271.
- **El Sacromonte, for Artful Alta Cocina** (Guadalajara; ☎ 33/3825-5447): Various dishes delight the senses with novel tastes and textures and skillful presentation. The menu describes each dish in Spanish couplets—a fun topic for conversation over an aperitif. See p. 272.
- **Arrayán, for Tacos Like You've Never Before Tasted** (Puerto Vallarta; ☎ 322/223-2963): The colorful atmosphere may be casual, funky, and fun, but the food is seriously and authentically Mexican. Prime beef filet tacos are just one specialty—others include Mexican duck confit, shrimp pozole, and homemade ice creams from indigenous fruits. See p. 316.
- **El Mirador, for Margaritas** (Acapulco, in the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias; ☎ 800/342-AMIGO in the U.S.): You can enjoy a great margarita at many places in Mexico, but this is the only one that serves them with a view of the spectacular La Quebrada cliff divers. See p. 387.
- **El Naranjo, for Oaxacan Cuisine** (Oaxaca; ☎ 951/514-1878): Oaxaca has an elaborate regional cuisine, and I am delighted by what El Naranjo does with it. Each day offers a different *mole* in addition to several uncommon dishes. This is a wonderful place for throwing caution to the wind—the owner is meticulous about cleaning and sterilizing foods. See p. 451.
- **Mariscos Villa Rica Mocambo, for Fresh Seafood, Veracruz Style** (Veracruz; ☎ 229/922-2113): Nobody else does seafood the way Veracruz does seafood, and this restaurant is the showcase for the region's cuisine. See p. 493.
- **100% Natural, for Licuados:** *Licuados*, drinks made from fresh fruit mixed with water or milk, are much more popular than soft drinks. This restaurant chain offers the widest selection, including innovative mixtures like the Cozumel (spinach, pineapple, and orange) and the Caligula (orange, pineapple, beet, celery, parsley, carrot, and lime juices)—a healthy indulgence. Branches in Puerto Vallarta, Acapulco, and Cancún.