#### PART ONE

# PLANNING your VISIT to MEXICO

# **AIR TRAVEL**

MEXICO'S COASTAL RESORTS receive numerous flights from U.S. cities, especially from each airline's airport hub. Flights with connections at major hub cities in the United States are available to all the destinations in this book. See each regional chapter for more information on airlines.

The airlines listed in the table on the next page provide flights to resort areas. Schedules and destinations change seasonally. As a rule, more flights are available during the winter high season than in the summer. We've listed the destinations each airline normally serves, but the situation could certainly change before you travel.

Many foreign airlines have agreements with Mexican carriers. For instance, you can book a flight on American Airlines from London to Acapulco, transferring in New York to an Aeroméxico flight to Acapulco. Aeroméxico also has direct flights between several European and North American cities and Mexico City and is part of the SkyTeam codesharing alliance with Delta and Continental. If you're coming from Australia, American Airlines connects with Mexicana flights through Los Angeles. Mexicana also has alliances with Air Japan and Air New Zealand. British Airways (2800-AIRWAYS; www.britishairways.com) makes Mexico connections from London via Miami or Dallas/Ft. Worth.

Travelers will most likely have flights connecting in Mexico City when traveling to Acapulco and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, Puerto Escondido, and Huatulco. You may find less-expensive flights available to other Mexican destinations as well if you're willing to change planes in Mexico City.

#### MEXICO CITY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

First-time Mexico travelers may find the idea of changing flights at Mexico City's Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juárez intimidating.

#### **RESORT AIR SERVICE**

AIRLINE | PHONE | WEB SITE

Alaska Airlines | 2 800-252-7522 | www.alaskaair.com

Cancún, Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo

American Airlines | 2 800-433-7300 | www.aa.com

Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, Acapulco, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, Cozumel, and Cancún

America West/US Airways | 22 800-428-4322 | www.usairways.com

Acapulco, Cancún, Los Cabos, Cozumel, Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán, and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo

Continental Airlines | 2 800-231-0856 | www.continental.com

Los Cabos, Puerto Vallarta, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, Acapulco, Huatulco, Cozumel, and Cancún

Delta | 2 800-241-4141 | www.delta.com

Acapulco, Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, Mazatlán, and Ixtapa / Zihuatanejo

Northwest Airlines | 2800-225-2525 | www.nwa.com

Note: Except for Cancún all are seasonal: Acapulco, Cancún, Cozumel, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, Mazatlán, and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo

United Airlines | 2800-538-2929 | www.united.com

Mexico City, Cancún, Cozumel, Los Cabos, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, and Puerto Vallarta

Often, the best flights to the resort areas, and the best airfares, are available on the Mexican airlines. Both airlines listed below have direct flights from the U.S. to the coast, and flights that connect through Mexico City (see box, below) to the following resorts.

Aeroméxico | 2800-237-6639 | www.aeromexico.com

Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, Cancún, Cozumel, Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Huatulco, and Ixtapa/ Zihuatanejo

Mexicana | 2800-531-792 | www.mexicana.com

Mexicana has flights to all the resort cities listed in our book, with most routed through Mexico City.

But the capital city's airport has improved dramatically and layovers aren't terribly daunting. Both the international and national termi-

unofficial TIP
If you have less than
three hours between
flights, it's best to remain
inside the securitycleared area.

nals have restaurants, shops, Internet cafes, and airline club rooms inside security. Smoking is allowed in designated clusters of tables and chairs and in some restaurants and bars in the lavover areas.

With more time, you can exit through baggage claim and wander the airport's vast public

areas. Bookstores and newsstands stocked with the latest books and magazines on Mexican art, architecture, culture, archaeology, and travel are great places to while away the hours. Check out the pharmacies

selling the latest must-have supplies, from retinol wrinkle-reducing creams to Nicorette, and the liquor stores with in-vogue tequilas. Art exhibits fill the vast spaces between the two terminals. The international terminal has the fanciest facilities, including the second-floor food court serving everything from sushi to Mrs. Fields Cookies.

Two hotels are close to the Mexico City airport in case of overnight delays. Both are expensive but accommodating. **The Camino Real Aeropuerto** (28 800-722-6466 U.S., 55-3003-0033 Mexico; www.caminoreal.com) faces the airport and is accessed via a pedestrian skywalk from Terminal B. The hotel has

changed names several times and has long been our favorite place to hang out between flights. The 24-hour restaurant serves good Mexican and international comfort food in a calm setting; the buffet breakfast is a good deal and the management doesn't mind if you linger over your meal for hours. The gym is open to nonhotel guests for a fee. You can spend many hours walking the treadmill, swimming laps, and showering in this health club—it's a great way to break up a long journey. Massages and beauty services also are available. Be forewarned: There aren't any lounge chairs by the pool or other places to sleep. The airport **Hilton** (**2** 800-HILTONS or 800-445-8667; 55-5133-0505 Mexico; www.mexicocity.hilton .com), located on the third floor of the international terminal, is a bit more formal. Hanging out is frowned upon, and the gym isn't open to

unofficial TIP To call Mexico from the United States, dial 011 (international access code), then 52 (Mexico's country code), then the area code and local phone number. In Mexico, area codes have three digits and local numbers have seven digits-except in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. Phone numbers in those places have two-digit area codes and eight-digit local numbers.

the public. The restaurant is open to nonguests, however, and is blissfully quiet. If you need a nap and a shower between flights, a day-use room, to be used a maximum of six hours between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m., rents for \$99.

#### AIRFARE CONSOLIDATORS

FLIGHT CONSOLIDATORS ARE A GOOD WAY to shop for the best deal. Consolidators buy up blocks of unsold seats from airlines and resell them to you. These companies deal with a fluid product and a rapidly changing marketplace, and many operate under several different names geared to particular customer interests (domestic versus international travel, group versus solo travel, etc.). Among the myriad airfare consolidators, some of the most popular, stable, and relatively trustworthy include **JustFares.com** (② 866-676-7338; www.justfares.com), **Flight Coordinators** (② 800-544-3644; www.flightcoordinators.com), **Fly4Less** (② 800-FLY-4-LESS; www.fly4less.com), and 1-800-Fly-Cheap (② 800-FLY-CHEAP). The travel section of most Sunday newspapers also is a good source for flight-consolidator ads. Some consolidators deal primarily

with domestic tickets, and while they may get you a ticket to Mexico, it might be the same price as the published fare from an airline with more restrictions. The Internet has made it easy to shop around for fares, but keep in mind that caveat emptor—buyer beware—remains the rule, especially in the more shady corners of the Web. Before you go searching the Internet or use a consolidator, check prices with the big airlines to get a ballpark figure of how much your desired ticket may cost. You may actually get a better deal working directly with an airline or a good travel agent. No matter how you book your ticket, pay with a credit card so you can contest a suspicious deal. Make sure you're booked on a scheduled flight and not a charter flight (unless you've agreed to fly on a charter), and call the airline to confirm the reservation and the seat assignment.

### **Package Vacations**

Deals including airfare, accommodation, and some meals and tours are common and can help you save money and planning time. It's often easier to go with a package rather than searching for bargain airfares, car rentals, rooms, and tours. But there are caveats. Make sure the package includes the type of room and tours you really want. Having airport transfers included is a great idea—it helps you avoid the taxi hustle at the airport. If car rental is included, make sure it's the type of car you want. Get absolutely every detail in writing.

Travelocity (2888-709-5983; www.travelocity.com) and other Web sites offer package vacation deals for the major beach resorts of Mexico. Most can arrange the entire trip including air travel, shuttle service from the airport, hotel reservations, and meals. Mexicana Airlines' Vacation Travel Plus (2800-531-7921; www.mexicana.com) and Aeroméxico Vacations (2 800-245-8585; www.aeromexicovacations.com) incorporate reduced airfare with accommodations. Packages are available for all budgets and can greatly ease the work involved in planning a trip. When you book a trip through American Express Vacations (2888-297-0403) you can use any agent to book standard reservations or ask for a concierge-level travel agent who will create a customized package including everything from private guides to dinner reservations and spa treatments. The company offers a Travel Protection Plan with insurance covering almost every conceivable glitch. Contact American Express to find an agent in your area. Classic Vacations (2800-635-1333; www.classicvacations.com) creates customized vacations that can include first-class air and luxury hotels along with all other details; they offer trip insurance as well. More mainstream companies book packages including either charter flights or scheduled airline flights. Apple Vacations (☎ 800-727-3400; www.applevacations.com) is one of the largest package operators in Mexico, along with Funjet (2888-558-6654; www.funjet.com), SunTrips (2800-527-7181; www.suntrips.com), and Pleasant Holidays (2800-742-9244; www.pleasantholidays.com).

### DISCOUNT-AIRFARE WEB SITES

www.airdiscounters.com Airfares from the U.S. to most major cities worldwide

www.cheapflights.com Discounted flights to Cancún from major U.S. and European cities

www.expedia.com Well-established travel Web site; always check prices against the airlines' Web sites before booking

www.frommers.com Book flights through Travelocity

www.hotwire.com Flights must originate in Canada or the U.S.

www.orbitz.com Good place to browse thousands of fares

www.travelocity.com Wide range of airfares and background info

These companies work with groups and individuals and offer some amazingly inexpensive deals.

# THINGS to KNOW before YOU GO

#### TRAVEL INSURANCE

YOUR OWN INSURANCE COMPANY may offer some form of travel insurance, so check first with them before buying any additional coverage. You can purchase insurance for travel canceled due to any number of factors, such as emergencies related to your own or your family's health, death in the family, business emergencies, and so on. You also can purchase insurance to cover lost luggage, medical emergencies, or other unfortunate eventualities. Trusted sellers include **Travel Guard International** (2800-826-4919; www.travelguard.com); Travel Insured International (2800-243-3174; www.travelinsured.com); or Access America (2800-729-6021; www.accessamerica.com). Sanborn's Mexico Insurance (2800-222-0158; www.sanbornsinsurance.com) specializes in auto insurance for travel in Mexico but also provides individual and group medical insurance and medical evacuation insurance.

#### LUGGAGE

EVERY AIRLINE HAS DIFFERENT RULES, so find out before you get to the airport how many bags can be checked, their maximum weight, and the size and weight of carry-ons. With more stringent security enforcement, be careful not to bring forbidden items in your carry-on bags or on your person. The Transportation Security Administration at www.tsa.gov lists what you can and cannot take with you on the plane. Be prepared to have your checked and carry-on luggage opened and examined frequently—hasty packers may be embarrassed by the public display of their disarray. Cameras and laptops often undergo intense scrutiny. Make sure your batteries are in

good shape so you can turn electronic items off and on frequently when so requested by security agents.

#### **VALUABLES**

BE SURE TO BRING VALUABLES, such as cameras, laptops, jewelry, money, and anything particularly fragile or precious, on the plane with you. Only certain types and small amounts of medications such as insulin may be brought on board with you (check with the airline or TSA, above). In general, it makes little sense to flash around expensive watches, gold chains, and other baubles in any tourist resort, unless you're staying at a high-end resort and have access to a good security system. Our advice is to leave such items at home.

#### MEDICATIONS

BRING AN EXTRA SUPPLY OF ANY MEDICINE you are taking, along with a copy of the prescription. If you lose your medication, it will

unofficial TIP
Contrary to a popular
misconception, Mexican
pharmacists are forbidden from selling some
medications, particularly
narcotics, without a
prescription.

help to know its generic name in order to get a new prescription. Pharmacies in Mexico are far more accessible than those in the U.S., and pharmacists can usually supply an appropriate medication if you are feeling ill. Few prescription sleep aids or medications newly approved in the United States are available for purchase with or without a script. Some travelers try to buy drugs in Mexico without a doctor's prescription, sometimes successfully. We caution against

attempting this transaction, as penalties can be stiff. If there is a chance that you may run out of your medication, ask your doctor for a back-up prescription. Also bring along a spare pair of eyeglasses or contact lenses, or carry the prescription with you.

#### PERSONAL ELECTRONICS

ELECTRICAL CURRENT IN MEXICO IS 110 volt 60 cycle AC. Brookstone, Radio Shack, and most travel-gear stores and catalogs sell converters that adapt voltages to any appliance, which will be helpful for travelers coming from the United Kingdom. The outlets in some Mexican hotels have space for two flat prongs; bring a three-prong adapter if needed.

## **Laptops**

The electrical current is reasonably consistent in most resort areas. We're most comfortable using battery power when working on our laptops, using the hotel's electricity for recharging the battery. Hooking up your modem can be a major hassle. Many hotels have digital phone systems or switchboards that won't recognize your modem's way of dialing. Ask to use a direct outside line. Wireless Internet access is becoming more common in the public areas of hotels throughout Mexico.

#### **Cell Phones**

Cellular coverage is good in most Mexican resort areas, but there's little reliable coverage outside of heavily populated areas. The signals are not particularly strong, so hills, mountains, or large buildings can weaken service or block it entirely.

Some American cellular phone companies have "roaming" agreements in Mexico, but others do not. Sometimes, even the representatives of the cellular companies don't really understand what kind of coverage they provide. One *Unofficial Guide* researcher was told by a Verizon operator that his phone would not work anywhere in Mexico—and yet, even while in a remote part of Baja, the phone automatically connected to a Mexican cellular network with no problems. If you want to use your cellular phone in Mexico, call your service provider to find out what Mexican coverage they have (or think they have) and what additional rates apply (about \$1 a minute is standard, or about half that if you purchase a monthly international plan).

If you'd rather pick up a phone once you arrive, cell phones are available for rent at the Mexico City airport but not at most regional airports. Hotels are the best source of information about rentals; some concierges can arrange to have a phone available when you arrive. You can pay a per-minute charge by credit card or pre-pay for a certain number of minutes. Phone kits are available, consisting of a phone, charger, and calling card.

Another option is to rent a Mexico-friendly cell phone before you go. The phone is mailed to your home, you get the number in advance, use the phone on your trip, and mail it back when you return. Just like the rentals described above, you can pay as you go or prepay for a certain number of minutes. If you really want to be sure of a connection, you can shell out big bucks for a satellite cell phone which should function even in remote areas. Companies that rent all kinds of cell phones for use in Mexico (and many other countries around the world) include: RoadPost (2888-290-1616; www.roadpost.com), Cellular Abroad (2800-287-5072; www.cellularabroad.com), World Cellular Rentals (2877-626-0216; www.worldcr.com), Ace Telecom (2877-223-8353; www.acetelecom.com,) and Roberts Rent-A-Phone (2800-964-2468; www.roberts-rent-a-phone.com.)

#### INTERNET AND E-MAIL

INTERNET CAFES ARE COMMON in Mexico, and we've listed several in the regional chapters. Some hotels offer Internet access for their guests; some now have wireless access in their lobbies. Most Internet service providers (such as AOL and Earthlink) allow you to check email remotely via their Web sites; consult your service provider. You can sign up for free e-mail accounts with services such as Hotmail (www.hotmail.com) and Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) that can be checked from anywhere that has a connection to the Web.

#### **RENTAL CAR COMPANIES SERVING MEXICO**

Avis | 2800-230-4898 | www.avis.com | 800-331-1212 (within Mexico)

Budget | 2 800-527-0700 | www.drivebudget.com

Hertz | 2800-654-3131 | www.hertz.com | 800-654-3131 (within Mexico)

National | \$\alpha\$ 800-227-7368 (800-CAR-RENT) | www.nationalcar.com 01-55-5661-5000 or 01-55-5593-0315 (both within Mexico, not toll free)

# unofficial TIP

Arrange your car rental online while in Mexico for considerable savings over U.S. rates. Reserve the car through the rental Web site (or other travel site), then take your confirmation code to the office and pay the lower rate. When comparing prices, it's imperative to determine which taxes, fees, and types of insurance are included in the price being quoted, as these will add considerably to the price.

#### **CAR RENTAL**

THE MINIMUM AGE REQUIREMENT to rent a car in Mexico varies anywhere from 21 to 25 years depending on the company. Companies willing to rent to a person younger than 25 may include a surcharge in their rental fee. The rates at many of the resort areas are high. If you are traveling from the United States, you may get a better deal from an international agency if you book before you go. The major agencies have counters at the larger resorts. Locally owned and operated rental companies are a bit more risky, as their fleet may not be well maintained. Be sure to check the condition of the car before you leave the lot and make note of any dents, as you will be charged for any "new" wear and tear when you return the car.

#### MONEY

DOLLARS ARE NEARLY AS COMMON AS PESOS in many major resort areas. Travelers on short trips to Cancún and Los Cabos don't even bother changing their money. But if you're staying longer, planning to shop a lot, or intend to travel around to remote areas, you're best off carrying pesos. You can change money at some banks before you travel or at the airport when you arrive. *Casas de cambio*, or currency exchanges, are found in most of the larger cities and will give you a favorable exchange rate, as will the banks. Large hotels will usually change traveler's checks and foreign dollars, but don't expect as many pesos for

your dollar.

unofficial TIP
Travelers coming from
Europe or Australia
should bring United
States dollars or travelers
checks; you will get a
much better exchange
rate in Mexico.

There are ATMs in major cities and resort areas. There's an ATM in many small towns, but in case there isn't, or it's not working or out of money, make sure to carry some cash if you leave the big city. Don't forget to memorize your PIN before you leave home. Many travelers are finding they get the best exchange rate at ATMs; check to see what your bank charges for such transactions before leaving home, but the fee

also depends on what the Mexican bank you use charges. Banks charge a flat fee for transactions, while credit-card companies charge interest from the day of withdrawal. Either of these charges may negate the favorable exchange rate. Find out before you leave what the maximum amount is

unofficial TIP
Carry small bills in pesos
and dollars for tips and
small purchases.

that you can withdraw from your account via ATMs. Also, notify your credit-card companies about your travel plans. When those companies see your cards being used in a foreign country, they will sometimes flag your cards as possibly stolen—which can result in their ceasing to honor purchases until you call and verify your identity. You can do so by calling the company's office in the U.S. collect.

#### THE WEATHER

MEXICO MEASURES ITS WEATHER IN DEGREES CELSIUS (Centigrade) rather than Fahrenheit, so you might want to memorize a few conversions (see chart). You can check out the weather before you go from any number of Web sites. The Weather Underground (www.wunderground.com) lists dozens of cities in Mexico with current temperature (in degrees Celsius and Fahrenheit), heat index, relative humidity, and other conditions. The Weather Channel (www.weather.com) and CNN (www.cnn.com) also have comprehensive, up-to-the-minute information on weather conditions in Mexico.

In a country as large as Mexico, weather is determined by many factors, including altitude, proximity to the coast, longitude, and latitude. June through October are generally the wettest months, with late September and October bringing the occasional hurricane to the Gulf and southern-Pacific coasts. Baja is dry and hot, with the sun shining approximately 350 days a year in Cabo San Lucas. *Chubascos* (hurricanes) do blow through Los Cabos every few years, bringing high winds and heavy rains. They sometimes cause considerable short-term damage to hotels, golf courses, and roads. But businesses usually get back up and running quickly.

The best time to see those bright, sunny beaches depicted in travel posters is between December and June. Rain showers and fierce storms are possible from July through November, and you can actually spend a week without seeing the sun. We were in Acapulco during a tropical storm recently. It rained fiercely for four days, and we waded through two feet of water when sightseeing. On the upside, Acapulco was washed clean and looked like the jungle it once was. We had lots of time for reading, spa treatments, and doing nothing—a lovely concept at times. We'll go into more detail about what to expect weather-wise in the regional chapters.

#### WHAT TO BRING

WHAT TO BRING DEPENDS on where you are going, but these general items will come in handy everywhere:

- This book
- Small English-Spanish dictionary or phrase book
- · Good map of the city or cities you will be visiting
- \$30 in single dollars or the equivalent in pesos for tips and small purchases
- Money belt
- · Good day pack or shoulder bag
- Small, collapsible umbrella and/or folding rain poncho (wet season)
- · Currency converter or small calculator
- · Portable electrical transformer (if from the U.K.) and plug adapters
- Digital camera with extra memory cards; if you carry a film camera, bring extra film
- · Battery charger
- Favorite snacks
- · Good walking shoes
- Broad-spectrum sunscreen and a hat
- Insect repellent
- · Earplugs (for planes and noisy hotels)

#### CLOTHING

THE BEACH RESORTS ARE INFORMAL, and you can spend much of your time in your bathing suit and cover-up. Shorts and T-shirts are acceptable nearly everywhere, except in dinner restaurants. Even there, jackets are rarely required for men. You'll do fine with a lightweight pair of slacks and a few button-down, polo, or Hawaiian-style shirts. Women dress up in sundresses and high-heeled sandals for fancy dinners. Some discos prohibit guests from wearing sneakers, beach sandals, shorts, or T-shirts. As a rule, customers at Mexican discos are stylishly dressed.

Given the tropical climate at most beach resorts, you'll want to bring plenty of extra shirts and an extra bathing suit. Shoes that will remain comfortable when your feet are swollen and sweaty are a must. If you're visiting during the winter, bring a jacket or sweatshirt—the winds can get very chilly, even during the day. A windbreaker or sweatshirt comes in handy for boat trips year-round.

#### WHEN TO GO

WINTER IS THE TRADITIONAL TRAVELER SEASON, with hotel rates reaching their peak in December and early January, around the holidays. Reservations for this time of year need to be made well in advance. November (before Thanksgiving) can be a perfect time of year in many parts of Mexico, just after the rainy season but before high season begins. The weeks between Easter and Memorial Day, before the rain begins and the humidity rises, are also relatively

#### **CONVERTING CELSIUS TO FAHRENHEIT**

Convert temperatures (approximately) from Celsius to Fahrenheit by doubling the Celsius temperature and adding 30 degrees. Here are some more exact numbers:

CELSIUS	FAHRENHEIT	CELSIUS	FAHRENHEIT	
<b>−3</b> °	26.7°	10°	50°	
-1°	30.2°	15°	49°	
<b>0</b> °	32°	<b>20</b> °	68°	
1°	33.8°	25°	<b>77</b> °	
5°	41°	30°	86°	
10°	50°	37°	98.6°	

uncrowded and pleasant. Prices tend to drop in May and June, but the same cannot be said for the humidity. If you can stand the hot temperatures, look for bargains between June and October. This trend is changing, however, as more and more families are taking their summer vacations in Mexico. July and August are often very busy. Mexican families tend to vacation at the beach during that time, packing the hotels. European travelers also flock to the coast (particularly the Caribbean) during July and August. Some accommodations will raise their rates for these months and then drop them again in September.

#### **GATHERING INFORMATION**

YOUR BEST SOURCE OF INFORMATION is the central toll-free number for information in the United States at **2** 800-44-MEXICO, or the Web site at **www.visitmexico.com**. Operators at the 800 number will take your address and will snail-mail you brochures. Some operators will answer questions about airlines and destinations. Note: There are no offices in Australia or New Zealand.

#### **Web Sites**

Web sites come and go, but the ones listed on the next page have been around awhile and should provide you with useful information and links to other sites. We also list relevant sites in the regional chapters.



# SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS for TRAVELING to MEXICO

# PASSPORTS, VISAS, AND CUSTOMS

IF YOU ARE A U.S. OR CANADIAN CITIZEN, you will need a tourist card in order to enter Mexico. If you are arriving by plane, you can

#### **MEXICO TRAVEL WEB SITES**

www.amtave.org Mexican Association of Adventure Tourism and Ecotourism

www.go2mexico.com Online guide with monthly features

www.mexconnect.com Free, monthly electronic magazine

www.mexicanwave.com Excellent articles and reports on Mexican travel from the U.K. perspective

www.mexicoguru.com Offers satellite maps, travel articles, and destination pieces.

www.mexonline.com Independent guide to Mexico

www.planeta.com Specializes in ecotourism in Mexico and other Latin American countries

www.visitmexico.com Mexico Tourism Board

get one at the airline counter or (usually) on the plane. Tourist cards also are available at Mexican embassies and consulates, and from some travel agents. The cards are free and will be issued to persons with proof of U.S. or Canadian citizenship in the form of a passport, certified birth certificate and photo ID, or notarized affidavit of citizenship. All U.S. and Canadian citizens returning to their countries of origin by plane need a passport; after June 1, 2009, all persons will need one, including those returning by land or sea. U.S. citizens wishing to obtain a passport should check the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs Web site (**travel.state.gov**). The name on your airline reservation must match the one on your passport or other ID.

British and Australian travelers need a valid passport as well as the tourist card. A minor child traveling with one parent, from any country, must have notarized authorization from the other parent giving permission for the child to go to Mexico. Children over age 10 must also have a tourist card. Tourist cards are valid for up to 180 days; many times Mexican immigration officials will issue fewer days, so ask for as many days initially as you'll need to complete your stay. It's inconvenient to get more once in Mexico, and there's a fee for the paperwork. Hold on to this card (actually a small slip of paper)—you'll be asked to return it as you pass through Mexican customs or at the airline counter when you exit Mexico.

The official literature says you should carry your tourist card at all times. We've never been asked to show ours, and we usually keep it with our passports in the hotel's safety deposit box. Instead, carry a driver's license or other photo ID and a copy of your passport.

Several years ago, the Mexican government instituted the DNI (Duties for Non-Immigrants), a fee that travelers must pay to enter the country. If you are arriving by air, this will automatically be included in the price of your ticket. If you cross the border by land, you will be required to pay the fee (around \$20) when you get your tourist card.

# Mexico Tourism Board Offices

#### LOS ANGELES

1880 Century Park East, Suite 511 Los Angeles, CA 90067

**3**10-282-9112

#### MIAM

5975 Sunset Drive, Suite 305 South Miami Beach, FL 33143

**2** 786-621-2909

#### **NEW YORK**

400 Madison Avenue, Suite 11C New York, NY 10017

**2** 212-308-2110

#### MONTRÉAL

1 Place Ville Marie, Suite 1931 Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3B 2C3

**2** 514-871-1052

#### **TORONTO**

2 Bloor Street West, Suite 1502 Toronto, Canada M4W 3E2

**2** 416-925-0704

#### VANCOUVER

999 West Hastings Street, Suite 1110

Vancouver, Canada V6C 2W2

**2** 604-669-2845

#### **UNITED KINGDOM**

41 Trinity Square Wakefield House London, England EC3N 4DJ

**2** 44-207-488-9392

# WHAT YOU MAY AND MAY NOT BRING INTO MEXICO

THOSE ARRIVING IN MEXICO BY SHIP or by air may bring in \$300 worth of goods per person. You also may carry with you personal items, such as a laptop computer, camera, video camera, 12 rolls of film (not closely monitored), 20 packs of cigarettes or 20 cigars, and three liters of wine, beer, or liquor. You must be 18 years of age to import cigarettes or liquor. Do not bring firearms or ammunition into the country unless you have written authority from the Mexican consulate or risk severe penalties and serious jail time. Obviously, drugs such as marijuana and cocaine should not be brought across the border. Prescription drugs are best carried in their original containers, showing your name as the prescription holder.

#### **DOLLARS AND TRAVELER'S CHECKS**

THE UNIT OF CURRENCY IN MEXICO is the *peso*. The bills come in 10-, 20-, 50-, 100-, and 500-peso notes; coins of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos look quite similar. The bills are different colors, but are similar enough to be confusing. At press time, the exchange rate hovered around 11 pesos to \$1. You can use U.S dollars at some resort areas, but you'll get a poor exchange rate for your money in restaurants and shops. You'll find money-exchange desks, where you can cash enough money for taxis and tips, in baggage-claim areas at most airports. An easier method is to bring along at least \$20 in single bills and several

\$5 bills for initial expenses and tips. Traveler's checks are easily cashed at most hotels. Most money changers will only give you pesos when you cash traveler's checks. Remember, you're in a foreign country with its own currency.

#### **EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES**

THE FOREIGN EMBASSIES ARE LOCATED in Mexico City. Consulates or honorary consulates are in many resort areas (see the regional chapters).

#### **United States**

The American Embassy is located at Paseo de la Reforma 305; Colonia Cuauhtémoc, 06500; **2** 55-5080-2000. The embassy office hours are Monday–Friday, 9 .a.m.–2 p.m. and 3 p.m.–5 p.m. Their Web site is **www.usembassy-mexico.gov**. Cost for a replacement passport is \$85.

#### Canada

The Canadian Embassy is at Schiller 529; Colonia Polanco (Rincón del Bosque), 11580; ☎ 55-5724-7900. It's open Monday–Friday, 8:45 a.m.–5:15 p.m.

#### Australia

The Australian Embassy is housed at Ruben Dario 55; Colonia Polanco, 11560; ☎ 55-1101-2200. The embassy is open Monday—Thursday, 8:30 a.m.—2 p.m., 3 p.m.—5:15 p.m.; and Friday, 8:30 a.m.—2 p.m.

# **United Kingdom**

This embassy is located at Rio Lerma 71; Colonia Cuauhtémoc, 06500; ☎ 55-5242-8500. Hours are Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

#### TRAVELING WITH CHILDREN

MOST MEXICANS LOVE CHILDREN and are immensely helpful and accommodating when kids are concerned. In fact, some of our best times in Mexico have involved traveling with kids. Most hotels and resorts will provide cribs, cots, and other supplies. Many of the larger resorts have kids' programs and babysitting services. See Part Two, Accommodations and Restaurants (page 42) for information on hotel chains that have programs and special packages for families.

You needn't load your luggage with diapers and baby food. You can find the necessary supplies at grocery stores and markets in all resort destinations. Granted, you'll pay more for imported U.S. brands. But you can buy Mexican brands of everything from disposable diapers to processed cheese and Bimbo bread—the whitest, blandest bread in the world—for those cheese sandwiches young kids seem to love. Most kids are content with the simplest Mexican

dishes, including cheese quesadillas, chicken tacos, and bean burritos. And the resorts all have familiar burger and pizza joints.

You should bring a car seat (if you plan on having a car) and sturdy stroller for the little ones, and a few familiar toys and blankets. Ask your pediatrician for prescriptions for antidiarrheal medicines and antibiotics for kids, just in case an upset stomach occurs. You'll want to keep a close eye on your kids while they're swimming. Hotel pools and beaches normally don't have lifeguards. Bring plenty of children's waterproof sunscreen, as it's quite expensive at the resorts.

#### DISABLED ACCESS IN MEXICO

MEXICO IS WOEFULLY BEHIND when it comes to assisting travelers with disabilities. Many of the most enchanting hotels have narrow, uneven stairways to the rooms; many of the sidewalks are crumbling; curb cuts are virtually nonexistent; and wheelchair-accessible restrooms are hard to find. That said, Mexicans do everything they can to assist travelers with disabilities. The newer resort areas—Cancún and Los Cabos, in particular—are more accessible. Older cities, such as Puerto Vallarta, are known for their cobblestone streets and steep hills into the jungle, which may look attractive but are difficult for anyone with a wheelchair. A few hotel chains, including Westin, Fiesta Americana, Hyatt Regency, and Marriott, have disabled-accessible rooms.

A few organizations have some helpful tips on traveling in Mexico. **Access-Able** (**2** 303-232-2979; **www.access-able.com**) has a limited number of links to accommodations and attractions with disabled access, along with links to publications and organizations that may be helpful.

#### **HEALTH**

"WILL I GET SICK?" This is the most common question we've heard from first-time travelers to Mexico. It's an important issue when you travel in any foreign country. Visitors to the United States have the same concerns. Often, unfamiliar water and food can wreak havoc with your digestion, especially if you tend to have a delicate stomach.

Using a large dose of common sense while traveling in Mexico will help prevent you from becoming ill during your trip. The most common ailments suffered by foreigners traveling in Mexico are upset stomach and diarrhea—usually nonfatal but unpleasant maladies. Ingesting contaminated food or water is the leading cause of this uncomfortable ailment. So is the temptation to gorge on the wonderful tropical fruits available at most resorts. Drinking too much cheap tequila (a common pitfall) will make you wish the Angel of Death would pay a merciful visit. Many a case of so-called Montezuma's revenge is caused by overindulgence in alcohol, sun, and unfamiliar

foods. Stay up all night drinking tequila shooters, and you're bound to feel less than perky the next day.

Conventional wisdom advises that you drink only bottled water and other drinks, eat only fruit that can be peeled, be careful when ordering salads, avoid ice, and don't buy food from street vendors. Wash your hands often. Naturally, exceptions exist to all of these rules. Drinking bottled water is a good idea, though many modern resorts have water purification systems. Be forewarned—many hotels have bottled water in the bathrooms, and unwitting guests commonly think the water is free. Not true. There's often a hefty charge for those little bottles, but they are convenient and may satisfy your needs. We go through about one gallon of water a day—which could cost \$20 or more at hotel prices. When on a budget, we usually carry one or two bottles of water to get us through the first night, then go to the nearest market and buy a few large bottles of water for the room. When you're sightseeing or hanging out on the beach, carry around bottled water to keep from getting dehydrated.

The fruit, salads, and ice issues are less clear-cut. Most traveler-oriented restaurants use purified water to clean produce and make ice, and it's usually safe to order anything on the menu. Start out slowly for the first couple of days as your body adjusts, and stick with cooked foods. If you're feeling OK, you can be more adventuresome. Some folks say it helps to take a spoonful of Pepto-Bismol before eating. Others swear that acidophilus capsules or yogurt help fight bacteria.

The rule against eating street food is wise, at least for beginners who haven't absorbed some of the local intestinal flora in their digestive tracts. Whether you follow this rule is a personal decision based on experience. Street vendors typically sell great, cheap tacos, which are safe if you stick with clean vendor stands and cooked food. Other vendors carve papayas into fanciful, edible flowers or fill paper cups with chopped pineapple sprinkled with powdered chile. Ask to have yours specially made with freshly peeled fruit and you will probably be fine. *Licuados*, fruit drinks made with water or milk, are marvelous thirst quenchers and are sold at juice stands around the plazas. Look for bottles of purified water at the stand and watch as your drink is prepared, or order pure, freshly squeezed orange juice.

If you are stricken with diarrhea, don't allow yourself to become dehydrated. Drink plenty of bottled water, soft drinks without caffeine, or Gatorade. Chamomile and papaya tea are soothing. Don't overmedicate yourself with antidiarrheal drugs, such as Lomitil. Your body is trying to get rid of unfamiliar bugs the best way it knows. Let nature follow its own course for a few days and stick with mild medications such as Pepto-Bismol. If the diarrhea or nausea persist, go to a pharmacy and ask for a stronger medication. The pharmacists at beach resorts are quite familiar with traveler illnesses, and they can typically prescribe something to get you back in shape.

A more serious health concern for travelers in Mexico is hepatitis A, a viral infection that can be caused by direct person-to-person contact, through exposure to contaminated water, ice, or shellfish harvested from sewage-contaminated water, or from fruits, vegetables, or other foods that are eaten uncooked and became contaminated during handling by infected persons. To avoid this illness, take the same precautions as listed above for diarrhea. Also, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises getting a vaccination against hepatitis A four to six weeks before your trip. It's safe to say that most travelers don't take this precaution, and few end up with hepatitis. But if you travel frequently, it's a good idea to go ahead and get the vaccination. Make sure your tetanus vaccination is up-to-date while you're at it. You are less likely to encounter the hepatitis B virus; it is a blood-borne disease, usually contracted by sexual contact or the sharing of needles with an infected person.

CDC recommends taking antimalaria medication if you plan on venturing into the most rural areas of tropical Mexico during your visit. Malaria, a disease characterized by flu-like symptoms of fever and chills, headache, muscle aches, and general fatigue, is caused by the bite of an infected mosquito. Symptoms occur seven to nine days after being bitten. The risk of contracting malaria in the resort areas of Mexico is slim; we've never taken any antimalaria medications in Mexico and have traveled to the most remote regions without incident. It is always a good idea to take measures against mosquito bites by applying an insect repellent (preferably with DEET as the active ingredient), wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants around sunset (the bugs are hungriest then), and making sure screens are on your windows.

Another disease caused by the mosquito bites is dengue. Symptoms of dengue include high fever, severe headache, joint pain, nausea, and vomiting. There is no vaccination and no cure except rest, pain management (NOT aspirin), and hydration. A few outbreaks of dengue have occurred in southern Mexico, but they are usually confined to outlying areas. The chance that you will get dengue is remote unless there is an epidemic at the time of your visit.

Cholera is an acute intestinal infection caused by contaminated food or water that has come into contact with an infected person. The risk to travelers in Mexico is low. Common-sense sanitary precautions usually preclude getting this disease, which is characterized by diarrhea and vomiting.

Typhoid fever is a significant problem in many developing countries of the world. It is usually found in only the most rural areas of Mexico, but there are outbreaks of this food- and water-borne disease, so if you plan to travel far off the beaten path, you may want to talk to your doctor or consult the CDC Web site. Check this Web site before your trip to make sure that no outbreaks of these diseases are in the areas you will be visiting.

If you do become seriously ill while traveling in Mexico, check with your hotel. Many have a doctor on call that can come to your room to treat you. Health care in the larger cities is good, but not always so easy to come by in the smaller towns.

#### MEDICAL RESOURCES

**CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION:** Up-to-date information on vaccinations and disease outbreaks. **2** 800-311-3435, www.cdc.gov.

**INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO TRAVELERS:** A nonprofit organization aimed at providing advice to travelers regarding diseases found worldwide. **☎**716-754-4883 in the U.S., **☎** 519-836-0102 in Canada, **www.iamet.org**.

**MEXICO HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAVEL GUIDE:** An excellent comprehensive health guide profiling 180 physicians and medical centers throughout Mexico, published by Page & Page. **☎** 866-MEDTOGO (866-633-8646), **www.medtogo.com**.

#### **POLLUTION PROBLEMS**

WATER POLLUTION IS A PROBLEM at beach resorts all over the world. Mexico has been slow to recognize and deal with this issue, though locals and frequent visitors know to stay away from certain bodies of water.

Enclosed bays tend to have the worst problems, especially in times of heavy rains when sewage may rush into the water. But even during the calmest seasons, the bays suffer from serious overuse. Motorized water toys buzz beside areas designated for swimmers in most resort bays. The health risks of swimming or playing in polluted waters (and accidentally swallowing the water) include gastrointestinal problems and possible exposure to hepatitis or infection.

Travelers would be wise to use discretion when choosing where to swim. Going into the water is safest at beaches that face the open sea, as in Cancún, the Caribbean Coast, Cozumel (away from cruise-ship piers), Isla Mujeres, Mazatlán, and the coast north and south of the Bay of Banderas in Puerto Vallarta. Areas more prone to pollution are those close to major construction, urban locales, or river mouths, such as beaches at the south side of the main towns of Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo. If you're a dedicated swimmer, surfer, or water-sports buff, make sure your hepatitis and tetanus inoculations are up-to-date.

Don't let pollution concerns keep you from visiting Mexico's beach resorts. You can still listen to the water slap against the shore or fall asleep to the sound of crashing waves. Most hotels have elaborate pool areas with perfectly clean, chlorinated water. Long walks on solitary beaches are still a joy, and you can enjoy plenty of places to snorkel, dive, swim, and ride the waves. Just use common sense. If the water trapped in a busy, enclosed bay looks grimy, or if trash

#### **MEXICAN NATIONAL HOLIDAYS**

January 1 New Year's Day

February 5 Constitution Day

March 21 Benito Juárez's Birthday

May 1 Labor Day

September 16 Independence Day (begins eve of September 15)

November 20 Revolution Day

December 25 Christmas Day

collects on the beach, stay on the sand. In times of heavy rains stay out of bays backed by towns. Take day trips to uncrowded beaches facing the open sea when you want to swim in saltwater. Look for tips on the best clean beaches throughout this book.

#### SELF-HELP

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IS ACTIVE in Mexico; signs announce English-language meetings at some hotels. Check at the front desk of your hotel or look in any available English-language newspaper. You can access the Mexican Alcoholics Anonymous Web site at www.alcoholicos-anonimos.org.mx. In Mexico City, the phone number for general services is 255-5264-2588.

#### **NATIONAL HOLIDAYS**

GOVERNMENT OFFICES AND BANKS are closed for national holidays. Businesses close during national and local elections, and liquor sales in bars and shops are prohibited when polls are open. Expect less than stellar service around holidays. Mexicans sometimes attach a few extra days to a holiday (especially if the holiday falls on a Thursday or Tuesday), creating what's called *puente*, or bridge.

Major businesses and some museums, restaurants, and shops are closed on the following days. In addition, they may close during Holy Week (Semana Santa) and the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, although those geared toward tourism generally are not, as sales volume is high.

# A Calendar of Festivals and Events

Every day is a holiday somewhere in Mexico. Births, deaths, anniversaries, and the simplest good fortune are all cause for celebration. Religious holidays are honored with special fervor in various areas, as are natural and political events. The following days are especially important on the coast.

## February or March

**CARNAVAL** (Mardi Gras) This movable fiesta is celebrated for five days before Lent with parades, floats, all-night dances, fireworks, and cultural events. The festivities are particularly exciting in Mazatlán and Cozumel.

## March and September

**EQUINOX** (Spring and Fall) March 19–21, September 20–23. A celebration is held at Chichén Itzá, an archaeological site near Cancún, to usher in the spring and fall. During the equinox, and a few days before and after, the alignment makes the shadow of a serpent appear to crawl down a corner of the Temple of Kukulkán, finally uniting with a carved snake head at the pyramid's base. Celebrants wear white and climb atop the pyramid to say prayers and receive spiritual blessings. Because rain clouds in fall tend to block the sun's shadow, the spring event is better publicized and attended.

## March or April

**SEMANA SANTA** (Easter week) Mexican families flock to coastal resorts during the week before Easter to witness religious celebrations and reunite with their loved ones, and to beat the heat of interior cities. Special foods are prepared, and religious processions are common. The most interesting Semana Santa rituals take place inland in the indigenous areas of the Copper Canyon and Chiapas, and in some colonial cities such as Taxco and Oaxaca. At the beach, the celebrations are geared more toward recharging party batteries than spiritual ones, but churches are packed on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

**SPRING BREAK** Cancún has become notorious for its bawdy parties and free-for-all attitude during spring break. City leaders are trying to erase the nastier aspects of spring break and promote the destination as a family springtime escape. Some hotels actively ban underage guests and offer special packages for family vacations. Others seek out the party crowd. Mazatlán attracts a large spring-break contingent along with families. Los Cabos is gaining considerable fame with the MTV crowd. No matter where you plan to vacation, ask about the hotel's spring-break policies before booking your room.

#### October and November

**DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS, DÍA DE TODOS SANTOS** (All Saints' and All Souls' days) October 31 through November 2. Celebrations in honor of a family's deceased relatives are held throughout the country in varying degrees. The customs practiced in more traditional indigenous areas have been adopted or expanded at towns on the Yucatán Peninsula and at the Pacific Coast resorts, primarily to satisfy the tourist trade. Altars with flowers, candles, skull and skeleton candies, breads, toys, and photos of the deceased are arranged in homes and at museums and shops. *Día de los Muertos* has become nearly as commercialized as Halloween in some areas, and altars and folk art displays are used to attract shoppers.

**HALLOWEEN** What better reason to dress like a clown and behave like a fool? Discos and bars hold outrageous Halloween parties for weeks before the main event. Pack your costumes and hangover remedies.

#### December

**FIESTA DE LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE** December 12 and preceding days. Celebration of Mexico's patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, with religious parades, some on the water. Puerto Vallarta and Puerto Escondido have significant processions, the former lasting for a month preceding the holiday.