

The Best of Mexico

by David Baird, Shane Christensen & Joy Hepp

Across Mexico, in villages and cities, and 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 is graced by 42km (26 miles) of sandy beach. Some, such as Playa Los Muertos—the popular public beach in town—abound with *palapa* restaurants, volleyball players, and parasailers. The beaches of Punta Mita, the exclusive development north of Vallarta, have white-sand, crystalline waters and coral reefs just offshore. Others around the bay nestle in coves, accessible only by boat. Puerto Vallarta is the only beach town in Mexico with an authentic colonial feel as well as first-rate resort amenities. See “Puerto Vallarta,” in chapter 10.
- **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 over so far they almost touch the ground. Puerto Escondido offers unique accommodations at excellent prices, with exceptional budget dining and nightlife. See “Puerto Escondido,” in chapter 11.
- **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo:** These side-by-side resorts afford beachgoers the best of both worlds: serene simplicity and resort comforts. For travelers seeking to get back to basics, the best and most beautiful beach 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 high-rise hotels in Ixtapa, on the next bay over from Zihuatanejo, front Playa Palmar, a fine, wide swath of beach. The most beautiful beach in Ixtapa lies in front of Las Brisas hotel. See “Northward to Zihuatanejo & Ixtapa,” in chapter 11.
- **Cancún:** Cancún and the coastline of the Yucatán state of Quintana Roo are home to Mexico's most enticingly beautiful beaches, with powdery white sand and Caribbean waters the color of a Technicolor dream. Cancún also has the widest assortment of luxury beach-front hotels, plus more restaurants, nightlife, and activities than any other resort destination in Mexico. See chapter 14.
- **Isla Mujeres:** There's only one main 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 15.

- **Tulum:** Fronting some of Mexico’s best Caribbean beaches, Tulum’s small *palapa* hotels afford guests a little slice of paradise far from crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; the coast is quiet and should remain so, because all the hotels there are small and have to generate their own electricity. If you can pull yourself away from the surf, you’ll find nearby ruins to explore and a vast nature preserve as well. See chapter 16.
- **Playa del Carmen:** “Playa” is Mexico’s hip beach destination with a pronounced *mañana* attitude. 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 sand is white; the water is clear blue and ideal for swimming. If you want more variety, you’ll find that ancient Mayan ruins, Cozumel, and the megaresort of
- Cancún are near enough to round out your beach vacation. See “Playa del Carmen,” in chapter 16.
- **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 19.
- **Los Cabos:** Dramatic rock formations and crashing waves join forces with wide stretches of soft sand and rolling surf breaks. Start at Playa Palmilla and work your way down the Tourist Corridor to the famed Lover’s Beach 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 19.

2 THE BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

- **Passing Time in the Plazas & Parks:** All the world may be a stage, but some stages have richer backdrops than others. Town plazas are the place to sit and watch daily Mexican life unfold before your eyes. 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 13) features nearly nonstop music and tropical gaiety. One look tells you how important **Oaxaca’s** *zócalo* (see chapter 12) is to the local citizenry; the plaza is remarkably beautiful, grand, and intimate all at once. **Mexico City’s** Alameda (see chapter 5) 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 7) is the focal point for meeting, sitting, painting, and sketching. During festivals, it fills with dancers, parades, and elaborate fireworks. **Guanajuato** and **Querétaro** (see chapter 7) have the coziest plazas, and **Mérida’s** El Centro (see chapter 17), can’t be beat on Sundays.
- **Música Popular:** Nothing reveals the soul of a people like music, and Mexico has given rise to various styles, which you can hear in many different settings.



You can hear brassy **mariachi** music in the famous Plaza de Garibaldi in Mexico City (see chapter 5), under the arches of El Parián in Tlaquepaque, and in other parts of Guadalajara (see chapter 9). Or perhaps you want to hear romantic **boleros** sung to the strumming of a Spanish guitar, or what Mexicans call *música tropical* and related *cumbias*, mambos, and cha-chachas (see chapter 14).

- **Regional Folk Dancing:** From the Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City to the Ballet Folclórico in Guadalajara (see chapters 5 and 9), or the almost-nightly park dances in **Mérida** (see chapter 17), Mexican folk dance events are diverse and colorful expressions of Mexican traditions.
- **Fireworks:** Mexicans share 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 called *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 10), **La Paz** (see chapter 19), **Cozumel** (see chapter 15), and **Veracruz** (see chapter 13).
- **Regional Fairs:** Almost every city and town has its regional fair (*feria regional*). They showcase the best products of the region—tequila or fruit liquors, livestock, carved silver, or clay handicrafts.

3 THE BEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

- **Teotihuacán:** It's so close to Mexico City, yet centuries away. You can sense 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 5.
- **Monte Albán:** A grand ceremonial city built on a mountaintop overlooking the valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán affords visitors 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 12.
- **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 12.
- **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 17.
- **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 17.

- **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 17.

4 THE BEST ACTIVE VACATIONS

- **Scuba Diving in Cozumel & along the Yucatán's Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off **Cozumel**, Mexico's premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. See chapter 15. 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 16. Other excellent dive sites are in and around **Puerto Vallarta** and off **Los Cabos**. See chapters 10 and 19.
- **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 16.
- **Hiking & Horseback Riding in the Copper Canyon:** Miles and miles of beautiful, remote, challenging canyon lands are paradise for the serious hiker or rider. Follow a Tarahumara Indian guide, who can take you deep into the canyons to places rarely viewed by tourists. Experienced horseback riders can set up a 12-day ride, with Paraíso del Oso, 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 & Stops along the Way," in chapter 18.
- **Golf in Los Cabos & Puerto Vallarta:** Puerto Vallarta, with its eight championship courses, is *the* new destination for golfers to watch—with a second Jack Nicklaus Signature course that opened in fall 2008 in Punta Mita. Added to the appeal of golf here are fabulous courses within easy driving distance along the Pacific Coast at El Tamarindo, Isla Navidad, and Manzanillo. See chapter 10. The Corridor between San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas is one of the world's premier golf destinations, with seven championship courses and a total of 207 holes slated for the area. See chapter 19.
- **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 11. Other noted surf breaks in Mexico include Sayulita, Punta Mita, and Las Islitas Beach near **San Blas** (all north of Puerto Vallarta); Playa Costa Azul, on the outskirts of **San José del Cabo**; and "Killers" at Todos Santos Island in northern Baja. See chapters 10 and 19.
- **Sportfishing in La Paz:** Billfishing for magnificent marlin and sailfish is popular in southern Baja, and La Paz pulls in the most consistent share. See chapter 19. Fishing is excellent in Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Manzanillo, and Zihuatanejo, too. See chapters 10, 11, and 19.

- **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 19.

5 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 8.
- **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 10, and "Los Cabos: Resorts, Watersports & Golf," in chapter 19.
- **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 10, 16, and 19.
- **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 16.
- **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, in the U.S.; 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 18.
- **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 19.

6 THE BEST PLACES TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL

- **Tepoztlán:** On the weekends, Tepoztlán's cobblestone streets are filled with spirituality seekers, market lovers, and city dwellers, but during the week, travelers will find a tranquil, enchanting town that is the embodiment of small-town life in Mexico. In many ways, Tepoztlán is like a town out of a storybook; there are quaint ice cream shops, a rock-hewn staircase on the edge of town leads to an ancient pyramid, and wild horses often roam the streets.
- **Costa Alegre:** Between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, a number of ultraexclusive boutique hotels cater to those with both excessive time and money. These resorts, such as Hotelito Desconocido, Las Alamandas, the Careyes Hotel, and El Tamarindo, are miles from civilization on private beaches. See "Costa Alegre: Puerto Vallarta to Barra de Navidad," in chapter 10.
- **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 has evolved into Mexico's most exclusive residential resort development, with both the Four Seasons and St. Regis located here. The beaches are white and the waters crystalline. See "Puerto Vallarta," in chapter 10.
- **Riviera Maya & Punta Allen Peninsula:** Away from the popular resort of Cancún, the Riviera Maya's heavenly quiet getaways offer tranquillity at low prices on beautiful palm-lined beaches. South of the Tulum ruins, Punta Allen's beachside budget inns are among the most peaceful getaways in the country. See chapter 16.
- **Lago Bacalar:** The spring-fed waters of Lake Bacalar make an ideal place to unwind. South of Cancún, near Chetumal, there's nothing around for miles. If you want adventure, you can paddle a kayak on the lake, follow a birding trail, or venture to Belize or nearby Maya ruins. See "Lago Bacalar," in chapter 16.
- **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 & Stops along the Way," in chapter 18.
- **Cabo Pulmo:** It's only a 97km (60-mile) drive from the Los Cabos airport to Cabo Pulmo, yet if the mounded Sierra de La Laguna peaks weren't a dead giveaway for Baja, you could be in the South Pacific. Swaying in the shade of a *palapa*-roofed bungalow at Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, you won't care where you are—you just won't want to leave. The Sea of Cortez breaks on a coral reef, allowing only the finest bits of sand and smooth pebbles to pad the coast. The coral itself is a sight to behold, but the real attraction is the sea life in this protected marine park. Extensive hiking/mountain-biking trails loop through the mountains for those who prefer the peace of the desert. See chapter 19.

7 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 award-winning building, designed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, is stunning. See p. 132.
- **Palacio Nacional:** Mexico's national center of government overlooks one of the three biggest public squares in the world (the *zócalo*) and 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. 132.
- **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. The exterior is early-20th-century Art Nouveau covered in marble; the interior is 1930s Art Deco. See p. 153.
- **The Templo Mayor's Aztec Splendor:** The Templo Mayor and Museo del Templo Mayor constitute an archaeological excavation and museum with 6,000 objects on display. They showcase the variety and splendor of the Aztec Empire as it existed in the historic center of what is now Mexico City. See p. 134.
- **Catedral Metropolitana:** This towering cathedral, begun in 1567 and finished in 1788, blends baroque, neo-classical, and Mexican *churrigüesque* architecture, and was constructed primarily from the stones of destroyed Aztec temples. See p. 138.
- **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. 169.
- **La Parroquia in San Miguel de Allende:** Inspired by European gothic, but lighter and more cheerful, this fanciful church is like a fiesta captured in stone—especially at night, when it's illuminated. See p. 201.
- **Murals of José Clemente Orozco in Guadalajara:** Of the great Mexican muralists of the Revolutionary period, Orozco is perhaps the most technical and the most expressive of his generation's concerns. To see his image of Hidalgo bearing down on you from the ceiling of the grand staircase of the Palacio de Gobierno is to understand almost instantly what he and his *compañeros* were striving to accomplish. See p. 292.
- **Museo Virreinal de Guadalupe:** Six kilometers (3¾ 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. 242.
- **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. 257.

- **Museo Pantaleón Panduro in Tlaquepaque:** The peoples of Mexico have always placed a high value on pottery as a field of artistic achievement. It's a cultural continuity that spans from pre-Columbian times to the present. And this museum is perhaps the greatest single expression of this love for pottery. Its collection holds prized pieces from the yearly national ceramics competition. See p. 294.
- **Museo Antropología de Xalapa:** Along with the finest examples of Olmec and Totonac sculpture and ceramics, this museum includes the best collection of the Olmec megalithic heads. See p. 504.
- **Puebla's Capilla del Rosario:** 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 aim is to overpower the senses. See p. 491.
- **Puebla's Museo Amparo:** This museum contains a magnificent collection of pre-Columbian and colonial art, which is beautifully displayed. See p. 492.

8 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Bazar del Sábado in San Angel:** This festive Saturday market in and around Plaza San Jacinto in colonial San Angel, one of Mexico City's more exclusive southern neighborhoods, 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 shops and street plazas. See p. 150.
- **Polanco, Mexico City:** This fashionable neighborhood is noted for its designer boutiques, formal dress shops, fine jewelers, and leather-goods offerings. Avenida Presidente Masaryk is Mexico City's equivalent of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills or the Champs Élysées in Paris. See "Shopping," in chapter 5.
- **Contemporary Art:** Latin American art is surging in popularity. Galleries in Mexico City feature Mexico's masters and emerging stars. Oaxaca, Puerto Vallarta, and San Miguel de Allende galleries also have excellent selections. See chapters 5, 7, 10, and 12.
- **Taxco Silver:** Mexico's silver capital, Taxco, has hundreds of stores featuring fine jewelry and decorative objects. See "Taxco: Cobblestones & Silver," in chapter 6.
- **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. And the tiles produced there adorn building facades and church domes throughout the area. See chapter 13. Dolores Hidalgo, 40km (25 miles) northwest of San Miguel de Allende, produces attractive, inexpensive Talavera of less traditional design. See "San Miguel de Allende," in chapter 7.
- **San Miguel de Allende's Diverse Crafts:** Perhaps it's the influence of the Instituto Allende art school, but something has given storekeepers here 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. See "San Miguel de Allende," in chapter 7.
- **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 8.

- **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 that sell a wide variety of decorative art. In Tonalá, more than 400 artisans have workshops, and you can visit many of them; on market days, wander through blocks and blocks of market stalls to find that one perfect piece. See “Shopping,” in chapter 9.
- **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 10.

- **Oaxacan Textiles:** The valley of Oaxaca produces the best weavings and naturally dyed textiles in Mexico; it's also famous for its pottery and colorful, imaginative woodcarvings. See “Oaxaca City,” in chapter 12.
- **The Markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas:** This city, deep in the heart of the Maya highlands, has shops, open plazas, and markets that sell distinctive waist-loomed wool and cotton textiles, leather shoes, local pottery, and Guatemalan textiles. See “San Cristóbal de las Casas,” in chapter 12.

9 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

- **Condesadf** (Mexico City; www.condesadf.com): The city's trendiest hotel sits in the hip urban neighborhood of Condesa. In an early-20th-century French building, it combines Art Nouveau with contemporary designs, and features one of the city's hottest restaurants and rooftop bars. See p. 118.
- **Hotel Four Seasons** (Mexico City; www.fourseasons.com): The standard of excellence in Mexico, and the most classically luxurious option in Mexico City, this hotel captures serenity and elegance in a palace-style building that surrounds a picturesque courtyard. Bonuses include the gracious staff and unique cultural tours on offer. See p. 115.
- **W Mexico City** (Mexico City; www.starwood.com/whotels): Stylish and high-tech, this W is where the young and cool come to stay. With its super-*caliente* red hues and lively bar, the W Mexico

City has infused the country's capital with a dose of minimalist urban chic. Luxury extras include expansive bathrooms with circular tubs. See p. 114.

- **Villa Montaña** (Morelia; www.villamontana.com.mx): 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 that overlooks Morelia; from its terraces, guests can survey the city below. The restaurant is one of the city's best. See p. 261.
- **Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita** (north of Puerto Vallarta; www.fourseasons.com): This luxury resort 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 two private Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses. See p. 334.

- **Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay** (Mazatlán; www.pueblobonitoemeraldbay.com): This neoclassical resort sits on a stunning stretch of coastline in Nuevo Mazatlán, far removed from the city's other hotels. The protected beach area, magnificent freeform infinity pool, and gorgeous landscaped grounds make this a compelling destination for couples and families alike. See p. 346.
- **El Tamarindo Beach & Golf Resort** (between Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta; www.eltamarindoresort.com): The most exclusive resort in Mexico, this breathtaking hotel has just a small selection of casitas hidden amid tropical landscaping or facing the Pacific, with a stunning private oceanfront golf course. Guests are likely to be Hollywood celebrities and rich folk from around the world. It's about 1 hour north of Manzanillo along Costa Alegre. See p. 353.
- **La Casa Que Canta** (Zihuatanejo; www.lacasaquecanta.com): This is one of Mexico's most romantic spots, an unforgettable boutique hotel above La Ropa beach. *Palapa*-style guest rooms have their own furnished outdoor terraces, many with private plunge pools overlooking the sea. The service, amenities, and cuisine will make you feel like you've landed in heaven. See p. 402.
- **Amuleto** (Zihuatanejo; www.amuleto.net): With a spectacular view of Zihuatanejo Bay that makes it seem like you're on top of the world, this intimate boutique hotel was designed for people seeking seclusion. Amuleto, which houses only six individually designed suites, has a beautiful infinity pool, an outstanding open-air restaurant, and exquisite service. See p. 406.
- **Ritz-Carlton Cancún** (Cancún; www.ritzcarlton.com): Thick carpets, sparkling glass and brass, and rich mahogany surround guests at this hotel, for years the standard-bearer of luxury in Cancún. The service is impeccable, leaving guests with an overall sense of pampered relaxation. Its restaurants are among the best in the city. See p. 529.
- **Aqua** (Cancún; www.feel-aqua.com): This is the trendiest resort in Cancún, a privileged spa-retreat for the urban jet-set. It features spacious oceanview rooms, eight beachfront pools, an invigorating spa, world-class cuisine, and exceptional service. See p. 526.
- **JW Marriott** (Cancún; www.jwmarriottcancun.com): This family-friendly resort offers sophistication without pretense. Its free-form infinity pool is one of the most impressive anywhere, and the spa is among Cancún's best. Pool and beachfront activities abound, and service throughout the property is outstanding. See p. 528.
- **Presidente InterContinental Cozumel** (Cozumel; www.intercontinentalcozumel.com): Surrounded by shady palms, this hotel also has the best beach on the island, right in front of Paraíso Reef. Favorite rooms are the deluxe beachside units with spacious patios and direct access to the beach—you can even order romantic in-room dining on the patios, complete with a trio to serenade you. See p. 574.
- **Maroma** (north of Playa del Carmen; www.maromahotel.com): You can't ask for a better setting for a resort than this beautiful stretch of Caribbean coast with palm trees and manicured gardens. You'll start to relax before you even take the first sip of your welcome cocktail. Service is very attentive, and the rooms are luxurious. See p. 585.
- **Hacienda Xcanatún** (outskirts of Mérida; www.xcanatun.com): Large, boldly designed suites built with extravagance in mind, extensive grounds, a private spa, an excellent restaurant, and ample staff—this hotel does the difficult trick of being small in size but large in offerings. See “Haciendas & Hotels,” on p. 631.

- **Hacienda Puerta Campeche** (Campeche; www.luxurycollection.com): Not a hacienda at all, really, this gorgeous hotel was created out of several adjoining colonial houses. This makes for a large property (especially for having only 15 rooms), with an open area in back featuring a pool and tropical gardens under ancient, crumbling walls. From any vantage point, the hotel is beautiful—in both overall layout and design details. And the service is impeccable. See p. 660.
- **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (Los Cabos; www.lasventanas.com): Stunning in its relaxed elegance, Las Ventanas has 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 offers a slice of heaven. See p. 710.
- **Esperanza** (Los Cabos; www.esperanzaresort.com): This Auberge resort pampers guests in a desert-chic setting, on a bluff overlooking twin coves below. Spacious, sumptuous rooms are enhanced by ample terraces, and the resort's spa and dining services make a stay here even more memorable. See p. 709.
- **One&Only Palmilla** (Los Cabos; www.oneandonlypalmilla.com): A popular Mexican resort with the Hollywood crowd, the completely renovated Palmilla has reclaimed its rank as the most deluxe hotel in this seaside playground known for sumptuous quarters and great golf. The exceptional spa, fitness center, and yoga garden, as well as a restaurant under the direction of renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, are added bonuses. See p. 710.

10 THE BEST INEXPENSIVE INNS

- **Holiday Inn Zócalo** (Mexico City; www.hotelescortes.com): This unique Holiday Inn is one of the city's most charming hotels. Located next to the capital's historic central square, it's decorated in a colonial Mexican style with colorful art, antiques, and handicrafts. See p. 117.
- **Red Tree House** (Mexico City; www.theredtreehouse.com): Mexico City is the second-largest city in the world, so it's easy to feel like a number whether you're in a restaurant, on the subway, or in a crowded hotel. Life at the Red Tree House features daily breakfasts in a light and airy kitchen and plenty of space to lounge in the courtyard and garden; the owners have created an atmosphere where every guest feels at home. See p. 119.
- **Hotel San Francisco Plaza** (Guadalajara; www.sanfranciscohotel.com.mx): This two-story colonial-style hotel is a more agreeable place to stay than lodgings that cost twice the price, 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. 285.
- **Hotel Los Flamingos** (Acapulco; www.hotellosflamingos.com): Once a private club for Hollywood's elite, this hotel will enchant you with its pervasive mid-century charm, funky profusion of hot pink, and breathtaking cliff-top views. See p. 385.
- **Paraíso Escondido** (Puerto Escondido; www.hotelparaísoescondido.net): This eclectic inn is a great bargain, especially for the originality of the decor and the excellent service. It's a short walk to the beach and the action along Puerto's main drag. See p. 417.

- **Misión de los Arcos** (Huatulco; www.misiondelosarcos.com): Just 1 block from the central plaza, this elegant hotel has an all-white facade and intriguing decorative touches that give it an inviting feel. There's shuttle service to the Huatulco beaches. See p. 430.
- **Las Golondrinas** (Oaxaca; www.hotel.lasgolondrinas.com.mx): 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. 449.
- **Casa Na-Bolom** (San Cristóbal; ☎ 967/678-1418): This beautiful colonial house was once the home and office of Frans and Trudy Blom, and a gathering place for anthropologists interested in the region's various ethnic groups. It is now a museum and library full of materials about the region and its indigenous peoples. Rooms have fireplaces and are decorated in local fashion. See p. 472.
- **Rey del Caribe Hotel** (Cancún; www.reycaribe.com): An ecological oasis in downtown Cancún, this hotel has considered every detail to achieve an organic and environmentally friendly setting. Amid a tropical garden, it's a welcome respite from the party-hearty crowd, with sunny rooms, warm service, yoga and meditation classes, and healthful dining. See p. 532.
- **Cabo Inn** (Cabo San Lucas; www.caboinnhotel.com): This former bordello is the area's best budget inn. 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. 722.

11 THE BEST SPA RESORTS

- **El Santuario Resort Spa** (Valle de Bravo; www.elsantuario.com): The suites at this spa resort, built into the foot of a quartz mountain, overlook a vast lake. A 1,858-sq.-m (19,999-sq.-ft.) spa offers a wealth of therapies, plus yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi, and meditation classes. See p. 178.
- **Misión Del Sol Resort & Spa** (Cuernavaca; www.misiondelsol.com): This is 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. 178.
- **Hotel Ixtapan Spa & Golf Resort** (Ixtapan; www.hotelixtapan.com): 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. 176.
- **Paradise Village** (Nuevo Vallarta; www.paradisevillage.com): 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. 331.
- **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún; www.meridien Cancun.com.mx): The Spa del Mar is a state-of-the-art, 1,400-sq.-m (15,069-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. See p. 529.

- **ME** (Cancún; www.mecancun.travel): The ultrachic Yhi Spa of Cancún's ME hotel overlooks the ocean and offers body glows and exfoliations, aromatherapy massages, body masks, and wraps—this is a place to indulge yourself until you're convinced that you've landed in heaven. See p. 531.
- **Casa de los Sueños Resort & Spa Zenter** (Isla Mujeres; www.casadelos-suenosresort.com). 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. 556.
- **The Tides Riviera Maya** (www.tidesrivieramaya.com), **Maroma** (www.maromahotel.com), and **Paraíso de la Bonita** (www.paraisodeslabonita.com):

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. See p. 585.

- **One&Only Palmilla** (Los Cabos; www.oneandonlypalmilla.com): Home to Mexico's most extravagant spa, 13 private treatment rooms set amid gardens offer the most pampering array of services, complemented by a yoga garden, fitness center, and classes designed to put you in touch with—or indulge—your inner self. See "The Best Luxury Hotels," above, and p. 710.
- **Rancho La Puerta** (Baja Norte; www.rancholapuerta.com): One of Mexico's best-known spas, Rancho La Puerta is a spa-vacation pioneer, having opened its doors (at the time, tent flaps) in 1940. A steady stream of guests returns to this pristine countryside for the constantly expanding facilities, spa services, and outdoor opportunities. See p. 752.

12 THE BEST MEXICAN FOOD & DRINK

- **La Opera** (Mexico City; ☎ 55/5512-8959): This legendary cantina, in the style of an opulent European cafe, has attracted the capital's most illustrious personalities for decades—Pancho Villa shot a still-visible hole through the roof. In the historic center, it doubles as a restaurant, but it's best as a late-afternoon watering hole. See p. 126.
- **El Sacromonte** (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. See p. 286.
- **Adobe Fonda** (Tlaquepaque; ☎ 33/3657-2792): Delicious Mexican food is served inside one of those gorgeous

decorative arts stores that line Tlaquepaque's Calle Independencia. The point of departure for the food is with some uncommon Mexican recipes, which are then given sparkling Italian and Argentine accents. See p. 286.

- **El Arrayán** (Puerto Vallarta; www.elarrayan.com.mx): The colorful atmosphere may be casual, funky, and fun, but the food is seriously and authentically Mexican. The owner, Carmen, has taken her prime beef filet tacos off the menu—wanting guests to try more traditional Mexican fare—but you can still ask for them. Or take her cue and order the duck confit, shrimp *pozole*, or homemade ice creams from indigenous fruits. Don't miss her martini made

from *raicilla*, Mexico's version of moonshine. See p. 323.

- **Trio** (Puerto Vallarta; www.triopv.com): Most locals will tell you Trio is their favorite restaurant in Vallarta, a modest but stylish cafe where chef-owners Bernhard G  th and Ulf Henriksson's undeniable passion for food imbues each of the delicious Mexican and Mediterranean dishes. See p. 322.
- **Zibu** (Acapulco; ☎ 744/433-3058): This chic open-air restaurant combines Mexican and Thai architectural and culinary styles to create one of the nation's best dining experiences, including a breathtaking view of the sea. See p. 386.
- **Los Flamingos** (Acapulco; www.hotellosflamingos.com/restaurant.html): If you're in Acapulco on a Thursday, you can enjoy a bowl of *pozole*, a traditional hominy-and-meat stew. Although you'll find it served at lunchtime throughout town, the best place to savor it is at Los Flamingos' cliff-top restaurant. Order a Coco Loco to accompany it, and you're in for a real treat. See p. 385.
- **Mariscos Villa Rica Mocambo** (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. 513.
- **La Habichuela** (Canc  n City; ☎ 998/884-3158): In Canc  n's original downtown, this gourmet seafood restaurant is a romantic retreat off the beaten path. An expert waitstaff attends to the diners seated in the restaurant's lovely garden patio. See p. 537.
- **La Pigua** (Campeche; ☎ 981/811-3365): Campeche's regional specialty is seafood, and nowhere else will you find seafood like this. Mexican caviar, coconut-battered shrimp, and chilies stuffed with shark are just a few of the specialties. Thinking about La Pigua's *pompano* in a fine green herb sauce makes me want to start checking flight schedules. See p. 661.
- **Don Emiliano** (downtown San Jos   del Cabo; www.donemiliano.com.mx): Don Emiliano wields farm-fresh ingredients laced with Mexican tradition and emerges from the kitchen with modern delights such as stepped-up *chile en nogada* for D  a de Independencia and *lemon atole* with candied pumpkin for Day of the Dead. Apart from holiday menus, don't miss the regular menu, which combines the likes of locally made cheeses with roasted tomatillos and dried hibiscus flowers with beef tenderloin. See p. 707.
- **Palapa Azul** (La Paz; ☎ 612/122-1801): Best plucked straight from the ocean, *almejas* (clams) can be found everywhere from roadside shacks to gourmet restaurants in Baja Sur, and are prepared raw with lime and salsa or baked inside their shells. The best place to enjoy this local treat is Palapa Azul on La Paz's Tecolote beach. The shells are stuffed with cheese, jalape  os, bacon, butter, tomatoes, and a secret ingredient the chef isn't willing to reveal. They are then wrapped in aluminum foil and tossed into an oven. The result is delectable, and so is the view of the Sea of Cortez you will enjoy while eating your meal.