

# Planning Your Trip to Southern Pacific Mexico

Though Pacific Mexico may be uniform in its often exotic tropical beaches and jungle scenery, the resorts along this coast couldn't be more varied in personality. From high-energy seaside cities to pristine, primitive coves, this is the Mexico that first lured vacationers from around the globe. Spanish conquistadors were attracted to this coast for its numerous sheltered coves and protected bays from which they set sail to the Far East. Years later, Mexico's first tourists found the same elements appealing, but for different reasons—they were seeking escape in the warm sunshine, and stretches of blue coves nicely complemented the heady tropical landscape of the adjacent coastal mountains.

Time at the beach is generally the top priority for most travelers to this part of Mexico. Each of the beach towns detailed in this book is capable of satisfying your sand-and-surf needs for a few days, or even a week or more. You could also combine several coastal resorts into a single trip, or mix the coastal with the colonial, say, with visits to both Puerto Escondido and Oaxaca City, or Acapulco and Taxco.

The resorts have distinct personalities, but you get the requisite beach wherever you go, whether you choose a city that offers virtually every luxury imaginable or a rustic town providing little more than basic (but charming) seaside relaxation.

Over the years, a diverse selection of resorts has evolved in the area. Each is distinct, yet together they offer an ideal attraction for almost any type of traveler. The region encompasses the country's oldest, largest, and most decadent resort, **Acapulco**, one-time playground of Hollywood's biggest celebrities. Of all the resorts, Acapulco has the best airline connections, the broadest range of late-night entertainment, the most savory dining, and the widest range of accommodations—from hillside villas and luxury resort hotels to modest inns on the beach and in the city center.

The resort of **Ixtapa** and its neighboring seaside village, **Zihuatanejo**, offer beach-bound tourist attractions, but on a smaller, newer, and less hectic scale than Acapulco. They attract travelers for their

complementary contrasts—international high-rise hotels in one, plus the local color and leisurely pace of the other. To get here, many people fly into Acapulco, then make the 4- to 5-hour trip north (by rental car or bus), although one can fly directly into Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, as well.

South of Acapulco, along the Oaxacan Coast, lie the small, laid-back beach towns of **Puerto Escondido** and **Puerto Angel**, both on picturesque bays bordered by relaxed communities. The region's most upscale resort community, **Bahías de Huatulco**, couples an unspoiled, slow-paced nature with the kind of modern infrastructure and luxurious facilities you'd find in the country's more crowded megaresorts. Nine bays encompass 36 beaches—many are isolated stretches of pure white sand—and countless inlets and coves. Huatulco has become increasingly known for its ecotourism attractions; you won't find much in the way of shopping or nightlife, but for most visitors, the clear blue waters and quiet, restful beaches are reason enough to come.

From Acapulco a road leads inland to **Taxco**, a colonial city that clings to the side of a mountain and is famed for its hundreds of silver shops. And verdant **Cuernavaca**, known as the land of eternal spring, has gained a reputation for exceptional spa facilities, while also boasting a wealth of cultural and historic attractions.

The whole region is graced with a stunning coastline and tropical mountains. Outside the urban centers, however, paved roads are few, and these two states remain among Mexico's poorest, despite decades-long influx of U.S. tourist dollars (and many other currencies).

For additional help in planning your trip and for more on-the-ground resources in Southern Pacific Mexico, please turn to chapter 6, "Fast Facts," on p. 163.

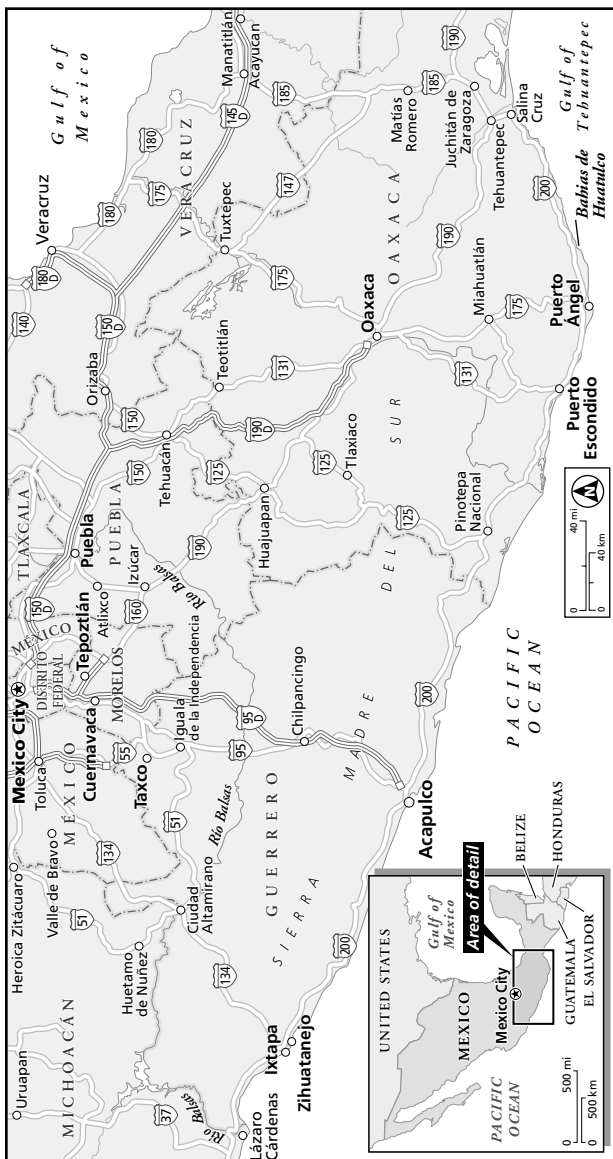
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## 1 WHEN TO GO

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### SEASONS

Mexico has two principal travel seasons: high and low. High season begins around December 20 and continues through Easter, although in some places high season can begin as early as mid-November. Low season begins the day after Easter and continues through mid-December; during low season, prices may drop 20% to 50%. In beach destinations, the prices may also increase during the months of July and August, the traditional national summer vacation period. Prices in inland cities, such as Guadalajara, seldom fluctuate from high to low season, but may rise dramatically during Easter and Christmas weeks.



## CLIMATE

Mexico's central Pacific coast offers one of the world's most perfect winter climates—dry and balmy with temperatures ranging from the 80s during the day to the 60s at night. From Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo down south, you can swim year-round. High mountains shield Pacific beaches from *nortes* (“northers”—freezing blasts out of Canada via the Texas Panhandle).

Summers are hot and sunny, with an increase in humidity during the rainy season, between May and October. Rains come almost every afternoon in June and July, and are usually brief but strong—just enough to cool off the air for evening activities. In September, heat and humidity are least comfortable and rains heaviest.

### CALENDAR OF EVENTS

For an exhaustive list of events beyond those listed here, check <http://events.frommers.com>, where you'll find a searchable, up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities all over the world.

During national holidays, Mexican banks and governmental offices—including immigration—are closed.

#### JANUARY

**New Year's Day (Año Nuevo).** National holiday. Parades, religious observances, parties, and fireworks welcome in the New Year everywhere. January 1.

**Three Kings Day (Día de los Reyes).** Commemorates the Three Kings' bringing of gifts to the Christ Child. Children receive gifts, and friends and families gather to share the *Rosca de Reyes*, a special cake. Inside the cake is a small doll representing the Christ Child; whoever receives the doll in his or her piece must host a tamales and atole party the next month. January 6.

#### FEBRUARY

**Candlemas.** Music, dances, processions, food, and other festivities lead up to a blessing of seed and candles, a ritual that mixes pre-Hispanic and European traditions marking the end of winter. All those who attended the Three Kings' Celebration reunite to share atole and tamales at a party hosted by the recipient of the doll found in the Rosca. February 2.

**Carnaval.** Carnaval takes place the 3 days preceding Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. It is celebrated with special gusto in Mazatlán. Here, the celebration resembles New Orleans's Mardi Gras, with festivities and parades. Transportation and hotels are

packed, so it's best to make reservations 6 months in advance and arrive a couple of days ahead of the beginning of celebrations.

**Ash Wednesday.** The start of Lent and time of abstinence. It's a day of reverence nationwide, but some towns honor it with folk dancing and fairs. Lent begins on February 25 in 2009, and February 17 in 2010

#### MARCH

**Benito Juárez's Birthday.** National holiday. March 21.

#### APRIL

**Holy Week.** Celebrates the last week in the life of Christ, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, with somber religious processions almost nightly, spoofings of Judas, and reenactments of specific biblical events, plus food and craft fairs. Businesses close during this week of Mexican national vacations.

If you plan on traveling to or around Mexico during Holy Week, make your reservations early. Airline seats on flights in and out of the country are reserved months in advance. Buses to almost anywhere in Mexico will be full, so try arriving on the Wednesday or Thursday before Good Friday. Easter Sunday is quiet.

#### MAY

**Labor Day (May Day).** Nationwide parades; everything closes. May 1.

**Holy Cross Day (Día de la Santa Cruz).** Workers place a cross on top of unfinished buildings and celebrate with food, bands, folk dancing, and fireworks around the work site. May 3.

**Cinco de Mayo.** A national holiday that celebrates the defeat of the French in the Battle of Puebla. May 5.

#### JUNE

**Día de San Pedro (St. Peter and St. Paul's Day).** Celebrated wherever St. Peter is the patron saint, and honors anyone named Pedro or Peter. It's especially festive at San Pedro Tlaquepaque, near Guadalajara, with numerous mariachi bands, folk dancers, and parades with floats. In Mexcatitlan, Nayarit, shrimpers hold a regatta to celebrate the season opening. June 29.

#### SEPTEMBER

**Independence Day.** Celebrates Mexico's independence from Spain. A day of parades, picnics, and family reunions throughout the country. At 11pm on September 15, the president of Mexico gives the famous independence *grito* (shout) from the National Palace in Mexico City, which is duplicated by every *presidente municipal* (mayor) in every town plaza in Mexico.

**Day of the Dead.** The Day of the Dead is actually 2 days, All Saints' Day (honoring saints and deceased children) and All Souls' Day (honoring deceased adults). Relatives gather at cemeteries carrying candles and food, and often spend the night beside the graves of loved ones. Weeks before, bakers begin producing bread shaped like mummies or round loaves decorated with bread "bones." Decorated sugar skulls emblazoned with glittery names are sold everywhere. Many days ahead, homes and churches erect special altars laden with Day of the Dead bread, fruit, flowers, candles, and favorite foods and photographs of saints and of the deceased. Children, dressed in costumes and masks, carry mock coffins and pumpkin lanterns through the streets at night, expecting people to drop money in them. November 1 and 2.

**Revolution Day.** Commemorates the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 with parades, speeches, rodeos, and patriotic events. November 20.

## DECEMBER

**Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe.** Throughout the country, the patroness of Mexico is honored with religious processions, street fairs, dancing, fireworks, and Masses. It is one of Mexico's most moving and beautiful displays of traditional culture. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to a young man, Juan Diego, in December 1531, on a hill near Mexico City. He convinced the bishop that he had seen the apparition by revealing his cloak, upon which the Virgin was emblazoned. Children dress up as Juan Diego, wearing mustaches and red bandannas. December 12.

**Christmas Posadas.** On each of the 9 nights before Christmas, it's customary to reenact the Holy Family's search for an inn, with door-to-door candlelit processions in cities and villages nationwide. Most business and community organizations host them in place of the northern tradition of a Christmas party. December 15 to 24.

**Christmas.** Mexicans extend this celebration, often starting 2 weeks before Christmas, through New Year's. Many businesses close, and resorts and hotels fill up. December 24 and 25.

**New Year's Eve.** As in the rest of the world, New Year's Eve is celebrated with parties and fireworks.

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## 2 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

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### PASSPORTS

All travelers to Mexico are required to present **photo identification** and **proof of citizenship**, such as a valid passport, naturalization papers, or an original birth certificate with a raised seal, along with a driver's license or official ID, such as a state or military-issued ID. Driver's licenses and permits, voter registration cards, affidavits, and similar documents are not sufficient to prove citizenship for readmission into the United States. If the last name on the birth certificate is different from your current name, bring a photo identification card *and* legal proof of the name change, such as the original marriage license or certificate. **Note:** Photocopies are *not* acceptable.

New regulations issued by the Department of Homeland Security now require virtually every air traveler **entering the U.S.** to show a passport. All U.S. and Canadian citizens traveling by **air** to Mexico are required to present a valid passport or other valid travel document to enter or reenter the United States. Other valid travel documents (known as WHTI-compliant documents; visit [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov) for more information) include the new **Passport Card** and SENTRI, NEXUS, FAST, and Global Entry Programs. Members of the U.S. Armed Forces on active duty traveling on orders are exempt from the passport requirement. The limited-use, wallet-size **Passport Card** is valid only for frequent travel for U.S. citizens who live in border communities, and only covers land and sea travel (and not air travel) between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean region, and Bermuda.

As of January 31, 2008, U.S. and Canadian citizens traveling between the United States and Mexico by **land** or **sea** need to present either a WHTI-compliant document (see above), or a government-issued photo ID, such as a driver's license, plus proof of citizenship such as a birth certificate. Effective June 1, 2009, all U.S. citizens are required to present a passport book, passport card, or WHTI-compliant document when re-entering the United States. Children under age 16 are able to continue crossing land and sea borders using only a U.S. birth certificate (or other form of U.S. citizenship such as a naturalization certificate). The original birth certificate or a copy may be used.

From our perspective, it's easiest just to travel with a valid passport. Safeguard your passport in an inconspicuous, inaccessible place, like a money belt, and keep a copy of the critical pages with your passport number in a separate place. If you lose your passport, visit the nearest consulate of your native country as soon as possible for a replacement.

For information on how to get a passport, see p. 167 (“Passports,” in chapter 6, “Fast Facts”). The websites listed provide downloadable passport applications and current fees for processing passport applications. The “Foreign Entry Requirements” brochure no longer exists. For information on entry requirements for Mexico, see the Entry/Exit Requirements section in the Country Specific Information for Mexico at [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_970.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_970.html). You may also contact the U.S. embassy or consulate of Mexico for further information.

## VISAS

For detailed information regarding visas to Mexico, visit the National Immigration Institute at [www.inm.gob.mx](http://www.inm.gob.mx).

American and Canadian tourists do not require a visa or a tourist card for stays of 72 hours or less within the border zone (20–30km/12–19 miles from the U. S. border). For travel to Mexico beyond the border zone, Americans must be in possession of a tourist card, also called Tourist Migration Form (FMTTV: Migration Form for Tourists, Transmigrants, Visiting Businesspersons or Visiting Consultants). This document is provided by airlines or by immigration authorities at the country’s points of entry. If you enter Mexico by land, it is your responsibility to stop at the immigration module located at the border.

Authorities can demand to see your tourist card at any time. You must therefore carry the original or a copy at all times and must surrender the original upon leaving Mexico. Failure to do so will result in a fine and/or expulsion.

In order to obtain a tourist card, Americans and Canadians are required to present a valid passport or valid official photo identification (such as a passport or driver’s license) and proof of citizenship (such as a passport, birth certificate, or citizenship card).

Your tourist card is stamped on arrival. Travelers who fail to have their tourist card stamped may be fined, detained, or expelled from the country.

An immigration official will determine the number of days you can remain in Mexico. Do not assume that you will be granted the full 180 days. An extension of your stay can be requested for a fee at the National Institute of Immigration of the Ministry of the Interior or its local offices.

**Note on travel of minors:** Mexican law requires that any non-Mexican citizen under the age of 18 departing Mexico without both parents must carry notarized written permission from the parent or guardian who is not traveling with the child to or from Mexico. This permission must include the name of the parent, the name of the child, the name of anyone traveling with the child, and the notarized



signature(s) of the absent parent(s). The U.S. Department of State recommends that permission include travel dates, destinations, airlines, and a summary of the circumstances surrounding the travel. The child must be carrying the original letter (not a facsimile or scanned copy), and proof of the parent/child relationship (usually a birth certificate or court document) and an original custody decree, if applicable. Travelers should contact the Mexican Embassy or closest Mexican Consulate for current information.

## CUSTOMS

Mexican Customs inspection has been streamlined. At most points of entry, tourists are requested to press a button in front of what looks like a traffic signal, which alternates on touch between red and green. Green light and you go through without inspection; red light and your luggage or car may be inspected. If you have an unusual amount of luggage or an oversized piece, you may be subject to inspection anyway.

### What You Can Bring into Mexico

When you enter Mexico, Customs officials will be tolerant if you are not carrying illegal drugs or firearms. Tourists are allowed to bring in their personal effects duty-free. A laptop computer, camera equipment, and sports equipment that could feasibly be used during your stay are also allowed. The underlying guideline is: Don't bring anything that looks as if it's meant to be resold in Mexico. **U.S. citizens** entering Mexico by the land border can bring in gifts worth up to \$50 duty-free, except for alcohol and tobacco products. Those entering Mexico by air or sea can bring in gifts worth a value of up to \$300 duty-free. The website for Mexican Customs ("Aduanas") is [www.aduanas.gob.mx](http://www.aduanas.gob.mx).

### What You Can Take Home from Mexico

**U.S. Citizens:** Returning U.S. citizens who have been away for at least 48 hours are allowed to bring back, once every 30 days, \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. You'll pay a flat rate of duty on the next \$1,000 worth of purchases. Any dollar amount beyond that is subject to duties at whatever rates apply. On mailed gifts, the duty-free limit is \$200. Be sure to keep your receipts for purchases accessible to expedite the declaration process. **Note:** If you owe duty, you are required to pay on your arrival in the United States—either by cash, personal check, government or traveler's check, or money order (and, in some locations, a Visa or MasterCard).

To avoid paying duty on foreign-made personal items you owned before your trip, bring along a bill of sale, insurance policy, jeweler's appraisal, or receipts of purchase. Or before you leave, you can register with Customs items that can be readily identified by a permanently

**10** affixed serial number or marking—think laptop computers, cameras, and CD players. Take the items to the nearest Customs office or register them with Customs at the airport from which you're departing. You'll receive, at no cost, a Certificate of Registration, which allows duty-free entry for the life of the item.

For specifics on what you can bring back and the corresponding fees, download the invaluable free pamphlet "Know Before You Go" online at [www.cbp.gov](http://www.cbp.gov) (click on "Travel," and then click on "Know Before You Go"). Or contact the **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP)**, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ **877/287-8667**) and request the pamphlet.

**Canadian Citizens:** For a clear summary of Canadian rules, write for the booklet "I Declare," issued by the **Canada Border Services Agency** (☎ **800/461-9999** in Canada, or 204/983-3500; [www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/cpr-crp-eng.html](http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/cpr-crp-eng.html)).

**U.K. Citizens:** For information, contact **HM Revenue & Customs** at ☎ **0845/010-9000** (from outside the U.K., 44/2920501261), or consult their website at [www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk).

**Australian Citizens:** A helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is "Know Before You Go." For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ☎ **1300/363-263** (or 61262756666 outside Australia), or log on to [www.customs.gov.au](http://www.customs.gov.au).

**New Zealand Citizens:** Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: "New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4." For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs Service**, The Customhouse, 6140 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ **006493005399** or 0800/428-786 (0800/4 CUSTOMS); [www.customs.govt.nz](http://www.customs.govt.nz)).

## Medical Requirements

No special vaccinations are required for entry into Mexico. For other medical requirements and health-related recommendations, see "Health," p. 19.

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## 3 GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

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### GETTING THERE

#### By Plane

Mexico has dozens of international and domestic airports. Among the airports in the southern Pacific coast region are Acapulco (ACA),

Huatulco (HUX), Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo (ZIH), and Puerto Escondido (PXM).

The main departure points in North America for international airlines are Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Houston, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Orlando, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Raleigh/Durham, San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, and Washington, D.C.

### Arriving at the Airport

**Immigration and customs** clearance at Mexican airports is generally efficient. Expect longer lines during peak seasons, but you can usually clear immigration and customs within an hour. For more on what to expect when passing through Mexican customs, see “Customs,” p. 9.

### By Car

Driving is not the cheapest way to get to Mexico, and it is definitely not the easiest way to get to the southern Pacific coast. While driving is a convenient way to see the country, you may think twice about taking your own car south of the border once you’ve pondered the bureaucracy involved. One option is to rent a car once you arrive and tour around a specific region. Rental cars in Mexico are generally clean and well maintained, although they are often smaller than rentals in the U.S., may have manual rather than automatic transmission, and are comparatively expensive due to pricey mandatory insurance. Discounts are often available for rentals of a week or longer, especially when you make arrangements in advance online or from the United States. Be careful about estimated online rates, which often fail to include the price of the mandatory insurance. (See “Car Rentals,” later in this chapter, for more details.)

To check on road conditions or to get help with any travel emergency while in Mexico, call ☎ **01-800/482-9832**, or 55/5089-7500 in Mexico City. English-speaking operators staff both numbers.

In addition, check with the **U.S. Department of State** (see “Safety,” later in this chapter) for warnings about dangerous driving areas.

### By Ship

Numerous cruise lines serve Mexico. Some (such as Carnival) cruise to Acapulco, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, and Manzanillo. Several cruise-tour specialists sometimes offer last-minute discounts on unsold cabins. One such company is **CruisesOnly** (☎ **800/278-4737**; [www.cruisesonly.com](http://www.cruisesonly.com)).

## GETTING AROUND

Mexico has two large private national carriers: **Mexicana** (☎ **800/531-7921**; [www.mexicana.com](http://www.mexicana.com)) and **AeroMéxico** (☎ **866/275-6419**;

www.aeromexico.com), in addition to several up-and-coming low-cost carriers. Mexicana and AeroMéxico offer extensive connections to the United States as well as within Mexico.

Up-and-coming low-cost carriers include **Aviaca** (www.aviaca.com), **Click Mexicana** (www.click.com.mx), **InterJet** (www.interjet.com.mx), and **Volaris** (www.volaris.com.mx). Regional carriers include **Aerovega** (www.oaxaca-mio.com/aerovega.htm), **Aero Tucán** (www.aero-tucan.com), and **AeroMéxico Connect** (www.amconnect.com). The regional carriers can be expensive, but they go to difficult-to-reach places. In each applicable section of this book, we've mentioned regional carriers with all pertinent telephone numbers.

Because major airlines may book some regional carriers, check your ticket to see if your connecting flight is on one of these smaller carriers—they may use a different airport or a different counter.

**AIRPORT TAXES** Mexico charges an airport tax on all departures. Passengers leaving the country on international flights pay about \$24 in dollars or the peso equivalent. It has become a common practice to include this departure tax in your ticket price. Taxes on each domestic departure within Mexico are around \$17, unless you're on a connecting flight and have already paid at the start of the flight.

**RECONFIRMING FLIGHTS** Although Mexican airlines say it's not necessary to reconfirm a flight, it's still a good idea. To avoid getting bumped on popular, possibly overbooked flights, check in for an international flight 1½ hours in advance of travel.

## By Car

Most Mexican roads are not up to U.S. standards of smoothness, hardness, width of curve, grade of hill, or safety markings. Driving at night is dangerous—the roads are rarely lit; trucks, carts, pedestrians, and bicycles usually have no lights; and you can hit potholes, animals, rocks, dead ends, or uncrossable bridges without warning.

The spirited style of Mexican driving sometimes requires keen vision and reflexes. Be prepared for new customs, as when a truck driver flips on his left turn signal when there's not a crossroad for miles. He's probably telling you the road's clear ahead for you to pass. Another custom that's very important to respect is turning left. Never turn left by stopping in the middle of a highway with your left-turn signal on. Instead, pull onto the right shoulder, wait for traffic to clear, and then proceed across the road.

**GASOLINE** There's one government-owned brand of gas and one gasoline station name throughout the country—**Pemex** (Petroleras Mexicanas). There are two types of gas in Mexico: *magna*, 87-octane unleaded gas, and *premio* 93 octane. In Mexico, fuel and oil are sold

by the liter, which is slightly more than a quart (1 gal. equals about 3.8L). Many franchise Pemex stations have bathroom facilities and convenience stores—a great improvement over the old ones. Gas stations accept both credit and debit cards for gas purchases.

**TOLL ROADS** Mexico charges some of the highest tolls in the world for its network of new toll roads, so they are rarely used. Generally, though, using toll roads cuts travel time. Older toll-free roads are generally in good condition, but travel times tend to be longer.

**BREAKDOWNS** If your car breaks down on the road, help might already be on the way. Radio-equipped green repair trucks, run by uniformed English-speaking officers, patrol major highways during daylight hours. These “**Green Angels**” perform minor repairs and adjustments free, but you pay for parts and materials.

Your best guide to repair shops is the Yellow Pages. For repairs, look under *Automóviles y Camiones: Talleres de Reparación y Servicio*; auto-parts stores are under *Refacciones y Accesorios para Automóviles*. To find a mechanic on the road, look for the sign TALLER MECÁNICO.

Places called *vulcanizadora* or *llantera* repair flat tires, and it is common to find them open 24 hours a day on the most traveled highways.

**MINOR ACCIDENTS** When possible, many Mexicans drive away from minor accidents, or try to make an immediate settlement, to avoid involving the police. If the police arrive while the involved persons are still at the scene, the cars will likely be confiscated and both parties will likely have to appear in court. Both parties may also be taken into custody until liability is determined. Foreigners who don't speak fluent Spanish are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain their version of the event. Three steps may help the foreigner who doesn't wish to do as the Mexicans do: If you were in your own car, notify your Mexican insurance company, whose job it is to intervene on your behalf. If you were in a rental car, notify the rental company immediately and ask how to contact the nearest adjuster. (You did buy insurance with the rental, right?) Finally, if all else fails, ask to contact the nearest Green Angel, who may be able to explain to officials that you are covered by insurance. See also “Getting There,” earlier in this chapter.

**CAR RENTALS** You'll get the best price if you reserve a car at least a week in advance in the United States. U.S. car-rental firms include **Advantage** (☎ 800/777-5500 in the U.S. and Canada; www.advantage.com); **Avis** (☎ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., 800/879-2847 in Canada; www.avis.com); **Budget** (☎ 800/527-0700 in the U.S. and Canada; www.budget.com); **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131 in the U.S. and Canada; www.hertz.com); **National** (☎ 800/227-7368 in the U.S. and Canada; www.nationalcar.com); and **Thrifty** (☎ 800/847-4389 in the

## **Warning!** Bus Hijackings

The U.S. Department of State notes that bandits target long-distance buses traveling at night, but daylight robberies have occurred as well. First-class buses on toll (*cuota*) roads sustain a markedly lower crime rate than second-class and third-class buses that travel the less secure “free” (*libre*) highways.

U.S. and Canada; [www.thrifty.com](http://www.thrifty.com)), which often offers discounts for rentals in Mexico. For European travelers, **Kemwel Holiday Auto** (☎ 877/820-0665; [www.kemwel.com.au/car-hire-guides/Mexico.cfm](http://www.kemwel.com.au/car-hire-guides/Mexico.cfm)) and **Auto Europe** (☎ 800/223-5555; [www.autoeurope.com](http://www.autoeurope.com)) can arrange Mexican rentals, sometimes through other agencies.

Cars are easy to rent if you are 25 or older and have a major credit card, valid driver’s license, and passport with you. Without a credit card, you must leave a cash deposit, usually a big one. One-way rentals are usually simple to arrange, but they are more costly.

Car-rental costs are high in Mexico because cars are more expensive. The condition of rental cars has improved greatly over the years, and clean new cars are the norm. You will pay the least for a manual car without air-conditioning. Prices may be considerably higher if you rent around a major holiday. Also double-check charges for insurance—some companies will increase the insurance rate after several days. Always ask for detailed information about all charges you will be responsible for.

Car-rental companies usually write credit card charges in U.S. dollars.

**DEDUCTIBLES** Be careful—these vary greatly; some are as high as \$2,500 which comes out of your pocket immediately in case of damage.

**INSURANCE** Insurance is offered in two parts: **Collision and damage** insurance covers your car and others if the accident is your fault, and **personal accident** insurance covers you and anyone in your car. Read the fine print on the back of your rental agreement and note that insurance may be invalid if you have an accident while driving on an unpaved road.

**DAMAGE** Inspect your car carefully and note every damaged or missing item, no matter how minute, on your rental agreement, or you may be charged.

## **By Taxi**

Taxis are the preferred way to get around almost all of Mexico’s resort areas. Fares for short trips within towns are generally preset by zone,

and are quite reasonable compared with U.S. rates. For longer trips or excursions to nearby cities, taxis can generally be hired for around \$15 to \$20 per hour, or for a negotiated daily rate. A negotiated one-way price is usually much less than the cost of a rental car for a day, and a taxi travels much faster than a bus. For anyone who is uncomfortable driving in Mexico, this is a convenient, comfortable alternative. A bonus is that you have a Spanish-speaking person with you in case you run into trouble. Many taxi drivers speak at least some English. Your hotel can assist you with the arrangements.

## By Bus

Mexican buses run frequently, are readily accessible, and can transport you almost anywhere you want to go. Taking the bus is much more common in Mexico than in the U.S., and the executive and first-class coaches can be as comfortable as business class on an airline. Buses are often the only way to get from large cities to other nearby cities and small villages. Don't hesitate to ask questions if you're confused about anything, but note that little English is spoken in bus stations.

Dozens of Mexican companies operate large, air-conditioned, Greyhound-type buses between most cities. Classes are *segunda* (second), *primera* (first), and *ejecutiva* (deluxe), which goes by a variety of names. Deluxe buses often have fewer seats than regular buses, show video movies, are air-conditioned, and make few stops. Many run express from point to point. They are well worth the few dollars more. In rural areas, buses are often of the school-bus variety, with lots of local color.

Whenever possible, it's best to buy your reserved-seat ticket, often using a computerized system, a day in advance on long-distance routes and especially before holidays.

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## 4 MONEY & COSTS

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### The Value of the Mexican Peso vs. Other Popular Currencies

Pesos	US\$	Can\$	UK£	Euro (€)	Aus\$	NZ\$
100	\$7.55	C\$8.90	£4.98	€5.60	A\$10.09	NZ\$12.92

Frommer's lists exact prices in the local currency. The currency conversions quoted above were correct at press time. However, rates fluctuate, so before departing consult a currency exchange website such as [www.oanda.com/convert/classic](http://www.oanda.com/convert/classic) to check up-to-the-minute rates.

## Money Matters

The **universal currency sign (\$)** is used to indicate pesos in Mexico. The use of this symbol in this book, however, denotes U.S. currency.

In general, the southern region of Mexico is considerably cheaper, not just than most U.S. and European destinations, but also than many other parts of Mexico, although prices vary significantly depending on the specific location. The most expensive destinations are those with the largest number of foreign visitors, such as Cancún. The least expensive are those off the beaten path and in small rural villages, particularly in the poorer states of Tabasco and Chiapas. In the major cities, prices vary greatly depending on the neighborhood. As you might imagine, tourist zones tend to be much more expensive than local areas.

The currency in Mexico is the **peso**. Paper currency comes in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 pesos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos, and 20 and 50 **centavos** (100 centavos = 1 peso).

Getting **change** is a problem. Small-denomination bills and coins are hard to come by, so start collecting them early in your trip. Shopkeepers and taxi drivers everywhere always seem to be out of change and small bills; that's doubly true in markets. There seems to be an expectation that the customer should provide appropriate change, rather than the other way around.

Many establishments that deal with tourists, especially in coastal resort areas, quote prices in U.S. dollars. To avoid confusion, they use the abbreviations "Dlls." for dollars and "M.N." (*moneda nacional*, or national currency) for pesos.

Don't forget to have enough pesos to carry you over a weekend or Mexican holiday, when banks are closed. In general, avoid carrying the U.S. \$100 bill, the bill most commonly counterfeited in Mexico and therefore the most difficult to exchange, especially in smaller towns. Because small bills and coins in pesos are hard to come by in Mexico, the \$1 bill is very useful for tipping. **Note:** A tip of U.S. coins, which cannot be exchanged into Mexican currency, is of no value to the service provider.

*Casas de cambio* (exchange houses) are generally more convenient than banks for money exchange because they have more locations and longer hours; the rate of exchange may be the same as at a bank or



slightly lower. Before leaving a bank or exchange-house window, count your change in front of the teller before the next client steps up.

Large airports have currency-exchange counters that often stay open whenever flights are operating. Though convenient, they generally do not offer the most favorable rates.

A hotel's exchange desk commonly pays less favorable rates than banks; however, when the currency is in a state of flux, higher-priced hotels are known to pay higher rates than banks, in an effort to attract dollars. **Note:** In almost all cases, you receive a better rate by changing money first, then paying.

The bottom line on exchanging money: Ask first, and shop around. Banks generally pay the top rates.

You'll avoid lines at airport ATMs by exchanging at least some money—just enough to cover airport incidentals and transportation to your hotel—before you leave home (though don't expect the exchange rate to be ideal). You can exchange money at your local American Express or Thomas Cook office or at your bank. American Express also dispenses traveler's checks and foreign currency via [www.americanexpress.com](http://www.americanexpress.com) or ☎ **800/221-7282**.

**Banks** in Mexico have expanded and improved services. Except in the smallest towns, they tend to be open weekdays from 9am until 5pm, and often for at least a half day on Saturday. In larger resorts and cities, they can generally accommodate the exchange of dollars (which used to stop at noon) anytime during business hours. Some, but not all, banks charge a 1% fee to exchange traveler's checks. But you can pay for most purchases directly with traveler's checks at the establishment's stated exchange rate. Don't even bother with personal checks drawn on a U.S. bank—the bank will wait for your check to clear, which can take weeks, before giving you your money.

Travelers to Mexico can easily withdraw money from **ATMs** in most major cities and resort areas. The U.S. Department of State recommends caution when you're using ATMs in Mexico, stating that they should only be used during business hours and in large protected facilities, but this pertains primarily to Mexico City, where crime remains a significant problem. In most resorts in Mexico, the use of ATMs is perfectly safe—just use the same precautions you would at any ATM. Universal bank cards (such as the Cirrus and PLUS systems) can be used. This is a convenient way to withdraw money and avoid carrying too much with you at any time. The exchange rate is generally more favorable than at *casas de cambio*. Most machines offer Spanish/English menus and dispense pesos, but some offer the option of withdrawing dollars.

The **Cirrus** (☎ **800/424-7787**; [www.mastercard.com](http://www.mastercard.com)) and **PLUS** (☎ **800/843-7587**; [www.visa.com](http://www.visa.com)) networks span the globe. Go to

## **Tips** A Few Words About Prices

Prices in this book have been converted to the U.S. dollar at 13 pesos. Most hotels in Mexico—except places that receive little foreign tourism—quote prices in U.S. dollars. Thus, currency fluctuations are unlikely to affect the prices most hotels charge.

Mexico has a **value-added tax** of 15% (*Impuesto de Valor Agregado*, or IVA; pronounced “ee-bah”) on most everything, including restaurant meals, bus tickets, and souvenirs. Hotels charge the usual 15% IVA, plus a locally administered bed tax of 2% (in most areas), for a total of 17%. The prices quoted by hotels and restaurants do not necessarily include IVA. You may find that upper-end properties (three or more stars) quote prices without IVA included, while lower-priced hotels include IVA. Ask to see a printed price sheet and ask if the tax is included.

your bank card’s website to find ATM locations at your destination. Be sure you know your daily withdrawal limit before you depart. **Note:** Many banks impose a fee every time you use a card at another bank’s ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions (although seldom more than \$2 in Mexico) than for domestic ones. In addition, the bank from which you withdraw cash may charge its own fee. For international withdrawal fees, ask your bank.

Credit cards are another safe way to carry money. They also provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can withdraw cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs, but high fees make credit-card cash advances a pricey way to get cash. Keep in mind that you’ll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time. Also, note that many banks now assess a 1% to 3% “transaction fee” on **all** charges you incur abroad (whether you’re using the local currency or your native currency).

In Mexico, Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are the most accepted cards. You’ll be able to charge most hotel, restaurant, and store purchases, as well as almost all airline tickets, on your credit card. Pemex gas stations have begun to accept credit card purchases for gasoline, though this option may not be available everywhere and often not at night—check before you pump. You can get cash advances of several hundred dollars on your card, but there may be a wait of 20 minutes to 2 hours. Charges will be made in pesos, then

converted into dollars by the bank issuing the credit card. Generally you receive the favorable bank rate when paying by credit card. However, be aware that some establishments in Mexico add a 5% to 7% surcharge when you pay with a credit card. This is especially true when using American Express. Many times, advertised discounts will not apply if you pay with a credit card.

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## 5 HEALTH

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### GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

In most of Mexico's resort destinations, you can usually find health care that meets U.S. standards. Care in more remote areas is limited. Standards of medical training, patient care, and business practices vary greatly among medical facilities in beach resorts throughout Mexico. Puerto Vallarta has first-rate hospitals, for example, but other cities along the Pacific Coast generally do not. In recent years, some U.S. citizens have complained that certain health-care facilities in beach resorts have taken advantage of them by overcharging or providing unnecessary medical care.

Prescription medicine is broadly available at Mexican pharmacies; however, be aware that you may need a copy of your prescription or to obtain a prescription from a local doctor.

Contact the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT)**; ☎ 716/754-4883 or, in Canada, 416/652-0137; [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)) for tips on travel and health concerns in the countries you're visiting and for lists of local, English-speaking doctors. The United States **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (☎ 800/CDC INFO; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) provides up-to-date information on health hazards by region or country, and offers tips on food safety. **Travel Health Online** ([www.tripprep.com](http://www.tripprep.com)), sponsored by a consortium of travel medicine practitioners, may also offer helpful advice on traveling abroad. You can find listings of reliable medical clinics overseas at the **International Society of Travel Medicine** ([www.istm.org](http://www.istm.org)).

### SWINE FLU

As of June 12, 2009, the WHO had reported nearly 30,000 A(H1N1) ("swine flu") cases in 74 countries, including 145 deaths, with Mexico among the most heavily affected countries. The number of cases continued to rise worldwide, and it was too early to tell how far or for how long the virus would spread. The **World Health Organization (WHO)** pandemic alert reached level 6 at press time, signaling pandemic, although with moderate severity. According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, the symptoms of this contagious virus are

similar to those of seasonal flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Many people who have been infected with this virus also reported diarrhea and vomiting. Like seasonal flu, severe symptoms and death have occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus. It is important to note, however, that most cases of influenza are not the A(H1N1) virus. For the latest information regarding the risks of swine flu when traveling to Mexico, and what to do if you get sick, please consult the **U.S. State Department's** website at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov), the **CDC** website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), or the website of the **World Health Organization** at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

## COMMON AILMENTS

**SUN/ELEMENTS/EXTREME WEATHER EXPOSURE** Mexico is synonymous with sunshine; most of the country is bathed in intense sunshine for much of the year. Avoid excessive exposure, especially in the tropics where UV rays are more dangerous. The hottest months in Mexico's south are April and May, but the sun is intense most of the year.

**DIETARY RED FLAGS** Travelers' diarrhea (locally known as *turista*, the Spanish word for "tourist")—persistent diarrhea, often accompanied by fever, nausea, and vomiting—used to attack many travelers to Mexico. (Some in the U.S. call this "Montezuma's revenge," but you won't hear it called that in Mexico.) Widespread improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, and education have greatly diminished this ailment, especially in well-developed resort areas. Most travelers make a habit of drinking only bottled water, which also helps to protect against unfamiliar bacteria. In resort areas, and generally throughout Mexico, only purified ice is used. If you do come down with this ailment, nothing beats Pepto Bismol, readily available in Mexico. Imodium is also available in Mexico and is used by many travelers for a quick fix. A good high-potency (or "therapeutic") vitamin supplement and even extra vitamin C can help; yogurt is good for healthy digestion.

Since dehydration can quickly become life-threatening, the Public Health Service advises that you be careful to replace fluids and electrolytes (potassium, sodium, and the like) during a bout of diarrhea. Drink Pedialyte, a rehydration solution available at most Mexican pharmacies, or natural fruit juice, such as guava or apple (stay away from orange juice, which has laxative properties), with a pinch of salt added.

The U.S. Public Health Service recommends the following measures for preventing travelers' diarrhea: **Drink only purified water** (boiled water, canned or bottled beverages, beer, or wine). **Choose**

## **Tips** Over-the-Counter Drugs in Mexico

Antibiotics and other drugs that you'd need a prescription to buy in the States are often available over the counter in Mexican pharmacies. Mexican pharmacies also carry a limited selection of common over-the-counter cold, sinus, and allergy remedies.

**food carefully.** In general, avoid salads (except in first-class restaurants), uncooked vegetables, undercooked protein, and unpasteurized milk or milk products, including cheese. Choose food that is freshly cooked and still hot. Avoid eating food prepared by street vendors. In addition, something as simple as **clean hands** can go a long way toward preventing *tourista*.

**HIGH-ALTITUDE HAZARDS** Travelers to certain regions of Mexico occasionally experience **elevation sickness**, which results from the relative lack of oxygen and the decrease in barometric pressure that characterizes high elevations (more than 1,500m/5,000 ft.). Symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue, headache, insomnia, and even nausea. Mexico City is at 2,240m (7,349 ft.) above sea level, as are a number of other central and southern cities, such as San Cristóbal de las Casas (even higher than Mexico City). At high elevations, it takes about 10 days to acquire the extra red blood corpuscles you need to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. To help your body acclimate, drink plenty of fluids, avoid alcohol, and don't overexert yourself during the first few days. If you have heart or lung trouble, consult your doctor before flying above 2,400m (7,872 ft.).

**BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS** **Mosquitoes** are prevalent along the coast. *Repelente contra insectos* (insect repellent) is a must, and it's not always available in Mexico. If you'll be in these areas and are prone to bites, bring along a repellent that contains the active ingredient DEET. Avon's Skin So Soft also works extremely well. Another good remedy to keep the mosquitoes away is to mix citronella essential oil with basil, clove, and lavender essential oils. If you're sensitive to bites, pick up some antihistamine cream from a drugstore at home.

Most readers won't ever see an *alacrán* (scorpion). But if one stings you, go immediately to a doctor. The one lethal scorpion found in some parts of Mexico is the *Centruroides*, part of the Buthidae family, characterized by a thin body, thick tail, and triangular-shaped sternum. Most deaths from these scorpions result within 24 hours of the

sting as a result of respiratory or cardiovascular failure, with children and elderly people most at risk. Scorpions are not aggressive (they don't hunt for prey), but they may sting if touched, especially in their hiding places. In Mexico, you can buy scorpion toxin antidote at any drugstore. It is an injection, and it costs around \$25. This is a good idea if you plan to camp in a remote area, where medical assistance can be several hours away.

**TROPICAL ILLNESSES** You shouldn't be overly concerned about tropical diseases if you stay on the normal tourist routes and don't eat street food. However, both dengue fever and cholera have appeared in Mexico in recent years. Talk to your doctor or to a medical specialist in tropical diseases about precautions you should take. You can also get medical bulletins from the U.S. Department of State and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (see "General Availability of Health Care," earlier in this chapter). You can protect yourself by taking some simple precautions: Watch what you eat and drink; don't swim in stagnant water (ponds, slow-moving rivers, or wells); and avoid mosquito bites by covering up, using repellent, and sleeping under netting. The most dangerous areas seem to be on Mexico's west coast, away from the big resorts.

On occasion, coastal waters from the Gulf of Mexico can become contaminated with rapid growth in algae (phytoplankton), leading to a phenomenon known as harmful algal bloom or a "red tide." The algal release of neurotoxins threatens marine life and can cause rashes and even flu-like symptoms in exposed humans. Although red tides happen infrequently, you should not enter the water if you notice a reddish-brown color or are told there is a red tide.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET SICK AWAY FROM HOME

Any English-speaking embassy or consulate staff in Mexico can provide a list of area doctors who speak English. The U.S. Embassy's consular section, for example, keeps a list of reliable English-speaking doctors. If you get sick in Mexico, consider asking your hotel concierge to recommend a local doctor—even his or her own. You can also try the emergency room at a local hospital or urgent care facility. Many hospitals also have walk-in clinics for emergency cases that are not life-threatening; you may not get immediate attention, but you won't pay emergency room prices.

For travel to Mexico, you may have to pay all medical costs upfront and be reimbursed later. Medicare and Medicaid do not provide coverage for medical costs outside the U.S. (that means neither Medicare nor Medicaid reimburses for emergency health care in Mexico, either). Before leaving home, find out what medical services your



## Smoke-Free Mexico?

In early 2008, the Mexican president signed into law a nationwide smoking ban in workplaces and public buildings, and on public transportation. Under this groundbreaking law, private businesses are permitted to allow public smoking only in enclosed ventilated areas. Hotels may maintain up to 25% of guest rooms for smokers. Violators face stiff fines, and smokers refusing to comply could receive up to 36-hour jail sentences. Despite some uncertainty over how thoroughly the legislation is being followed and enforced throughout different parts of the country, they place Mexico—where a significant percentage of the population smokes—at the forefront of efforts to curb smoking and improve public health in Latin America. So before you light up, be sure to ask about the application of local laws in Mexican public places and businesses you visit.

health insurance covers. To protect yourself, consider buying medical travel insurance.

Very few health insurance plans pay for medical evacuation back to the U.S. (which can cost \$10,000 and more). A number of companies offer global medical evacuation services. If you're ever hospitalized more than 150 miles from home, **MedjetAssist** (☎ 800/527-7478; [www.medjetassist.com](http://www.medjetassist.com)) will pick you up and fly you to the hospital of your choice, virtually anywhere, in a medically equipped and staffed aircraft—24 hours day, 7 days a week. Annual memberships are \$250 individual, \$385 family; you can also purchase short-term memberships.

It is generally less expensive and more reliable to contract a U.S.-based company for a medical evacuation from Mexico to the U.S. than to contract a Mexican-based company. Contact the consular affairs section of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City or nearest consulate for suggestions.

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## 6 SAFETY

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Although the vast majority of visitors to Mexico return home unharmed, it should be noted that taxi robberies, kidnappings, highway carjackings,

and other crimes have beset tourists as well as locals in recent years. And in border regions and some other parts of Mexico—including Acapulco and the state of Guerrero—drug-related violence and organized crime have escalated significantly.

Throughout Mexico, precautions are necessary, but travelers should be realistic. You can generally trust a person whom you approach for help or directions, but be wary of anyone who approaches you offering the same. The more insistent the person is, the more cautious you should be.

Exercise caution when you're in unfamiliar areas, and be aware of your surroundings at all times. Leave valuables and irreplaceable items in a safe place, or don't bring them at all. A significant number of pick-pocket incidents, purse snatchings, and hotel-room thefts do occur. Use hotel safes when available. And remember that public transportation is a popular place for wallet thefts and purse snatchings.

Enjoy the ocean, but don't swim alone in isolated beach areas because of strong currents and powerful waves. Try to swim where a lifeguard is present. All beaches in Mexico are public by law, and it is best not to be out on the beaches at night. In Acapulco, it's best to avoid swimming outside the bay area. According to the U.S. State Department, several people have died while swimming in rough surf at the Revolcadero Beach near Acapulco. Several people have also drowned in the area of Zipolite Beach in Puerto Angel, Oaxaca because of sudden waves and strong currents.

Before you travel to any notable hot spots in Mexico (see below), consult [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov) for the U.S. Department of State's country specific information and travel alerts.

## CRIME IN RESORT TOWNS

There have been a number of rapes reported in Mexico's resort areas, usually at night or in the early morning. Armed street crime is a serious problem in all the major cities. Some bars and nightclubs, especially in resort cities such as Acapulco, can be havens for drug dealers and petty criminals.

## HIGHWAY SAFETY

Travelers should exercise caution while traveling Mexican highways, avoiding travel at night, and using toll (*cuota*) roads rather than the less secure free (*libre*) roads whenever possible. It is also advised that you should not hike alone in backcountry areas nor walk alone on less-frequented beaches, ruins, or trails.

Travelers are advised to cooperate with official checkpoints when traveling on Mexican highways. Avoid driving along coastal roads at night, and try not to drive alone.



Bus travel should take place during daylight hours on first-class conveyances. Although bus hijackings and robberies have occurred on toll roads, buses on toll roads have a markedly lower rate of incidents than second-class and third-class buses that travel the less secure “free” highways.

## BRIBES & SCAMS

As is the case around the world, there are the occasional bribes and scams in Mexico, targeted at people believed to be naive, such as telltale tourists. For years, Mexico was known as a place where bribes—called *mordidas* (bites)—were expected; however, the country is rapidly changing. Frequently, offering a bribe today, especially to a police officer, is considered an insult, and it can land you in deeper trouble.

When you are crossing the border, should the person who inspects your car ask for a tip, you can ignore this request—but understand that the official may suddenly decide that a complete search of your belongings is in order. If you sense you’re being asked for a bribe, understand that although it may be common, offering a bribe to a public official to avoid a ticket or other penalty is officially a crime in Mexico.

Many tourists have the impression that everything works better in Mexico if you “tip”; however, in reality, this only perpetuates the *mordida* tradition. If you are pleased with a service, feel free to tip. But you shouldn’t tip simply to attempt to get away with something illegal or inappropriate—whether it is evading a ticket that’s deserved or a car inspection as you’re crossing the border.

Whatever you do, avoid impoliteness; you won’t do yourself any favors if you insult a Mexican official. Extreme politeness, even in the face of adversity, rules Mexico. In Mexico, *gringos* have a reputation for being loud and demanding. By adopting the local custom of excessive courtesy, you’ll have greater success in negotiations of any kind. Stand your ground, but do it politely.

As you travel in Mexico, you may encounter several types of scams, which are typical throughout the world. One involves some kind of a distraction or feigned commotion. While your attention is diverted, for example, a pickpocket makes a grab for your wallet. In another common scam, an unaccompanied child pretends to be lost and frightened and takes your hand for safety. Meanwhile the child or an accomplice plunders your pockets. A third involves confusing currency. A shoe-shine boy, street musician, guide, or other individual might offer you a service for a price that seems reasonable—in pesos. When it comes time to pay, he or she tells you the price is in dollars, not pesos. Be very clear on the price and currency when services are involved.

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## 7 SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

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In addition to the destination-specific resources listed below, please visit [Frommers.com](http://Frommers.com) for additional specialized travel resources.

### GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Mexico is a conservative country, with deeply rooted Catholic religious traditions. Public displays of same-sex affection are rare and still considered shocking for men, especially outside of urban or resort areas. Women in Mexico frequently walk hand in hand, but anything more would cross the boundary of acceptability. However, gay and lesbian travelers are generally treated with respect and should not experience harassment, assuming they give the appropriate regard to local customs.

Acapulco is one of Mexico's most gay friendly resort cities, including hotels, bars and clubs that cater to the community. For more information, visit **MexGay Vacations** at [www.mexgay.com](http://www.mexgay.com). Information about gay-friendly accommodations is available at [www.gayplaces2stay.com](http://www.gayplaces2stay.com).

**The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA;** ☎ **800/448-8550** or 954/776-2626; [www.iglta.org](http://www.iglta.org)) is the trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry, and offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses and tour operators.

Many agencies offer tours and travel itineraries specifically for gay and lesbian travelers. Among them are **Above and Beyond Tours** (☎ **800/397-2681**; [www.abovebeyondtours.com](http://www.abovebeyondtours.com)); **Now, Voyager** (☎ **800/255-6951**; [www.nowvoyager.com](http://www.nowvoyager.com)); and **Olivia Cruises & Resorts** (☎ **800/631-6277**; [www.olivia.com](http://www.olivia.com)).

**Gay.com Travel** (☎ **415/834-6500**; [www.gay.com/travel](http://www.gay.com/travel) or [www.outandabout.com](http://www.outandabout.com)) is an excellent online successor to the popular *Out & About* print magazine. It provides regularly updated information about gay-owned, gay-oriented, and gay-friendly lodging, dining, sightseeing, nightlife, and shopping establishments in every important destination worldwide. British travelers should click on the "Travel" link at [www.gaybritain.co.uk/flash5/player.asp](http://www.gaybritain.co.uk/flash5/player.asp) for advice and gay-friendly trip ideas.

The Canadian website **GayTraveler** ([www.gaytraveler.ca](http://www.gaytraveler.ca)) offers ideas and advice for gay travel all over the world.

The following travel guides are available at many bookstores, or you can order them from any online bookseller: *Spartacus International*

*Gay Guide, 35th Edition* (Bruno Gmünder Verlag; [www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide](http://www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide)), and the *Damron* guides ([www.damron.com](http://www.damron.com)), with separate, annual books for gay men and lesbians.

For more gay and lesbian travel resources, see [www.frommers.com/planning](http://www.frommers.com/planning).

## TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Mexico may seem like one giant obstacle course to travelers in wheelchairs or on crutches. At airports, you may encounter steep stairs before finding a well-hidden elevator or escalator—if one exists. Airlines will often arrange wheelchair assistance to the baggage area. Porters are generally available to help with luggage at airports and large bus stations, once you've cleared baggage claim.

Mexican airports are upgrading their services, but it is not uncommon to board from a remote position, meaning you either descend stairs to a bus that ferries you to the plane, which you board by climbing stairs, or you walk across the tarmac to your plane and ascend the stairs. Deplaning presents the same problem in reverse.

Escalators (and there aren't many in the country) are often out of order. Stairs without handrails abound. Few restrooms are equipped for travelers with disabilities; when one is available, access to it may be through a narrow passage that won't accommodate a wheelchair or a person on crutches. Many deluxe hotels (the most expensive) now have rooms with bathrooms designed for people with disabilities. Those traveling on a budget should stick with one-story hotels or hotels with elevators. Even so, there will probably still be obstacles somewhere. Generally speaking, no matter where you are, someone will lend a hand, although you may have to ask for it.

Most disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling. There are more options and resources out there than ever before.

Organizations that offer a vast range of resources and assistance to travelers with disabilities include **MossRehab** ([www.mossresourcenet.org](http://www.mossresourcenet.org)); the **American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)**; ☎ 800/232-5463; [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org)); and **SATH (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality)**; ☎ 212/447-7284; [www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org)). **AirAmbulanceCard.com** (☎ 800/631-6565) is now partnered with SATH and allows you to pre-select top-notch hospitals in case of an emergency.

**Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com)) offers a comprehensive database on travel agents from around the world with experience in accessible travel; destination-specific access information; and links to such resources as service animals, equipment rentals, and access guides.

Many travel agencies offer customized tours and itineraries for travelers with disabilities. Among them are **Flying Wheels Travel**

**28** (☎ 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com) and **Accessible Journeys** (☎ 800/846-4537 or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com).

**Flying with Disability** (www.flying-with-disability.org) is a comprehensive information source on airplane travel. **Avis Rent a Car** (☎ 888/879-4273) offers services for customers with special travel needs. These include specially outfitted vehicles with swivel seats, spinner knobs, and hand controls; mobility scooter rentals; and accessible bus service. Be sure to reserve well in advance.

Also check out the quarterly magazine *Emerging Horizons* (www.emerginghorizons.com), available by subscription (\$16.95 inside the U.S.; \$21.95 outside the U.S.).

The “Accessible Travel” link at **Mobility-Advisor.com** (www.mobility-advisor.com) offers a variety of travel resources to people with disabilities.

**British travelers** should contact **Holiday Care** (☎ 0845/124-9971 in the U.K. only; www.holidaycare.org.uk) to access a wide range of travel information and resources for people with disabilities and elderly people.

For more on organizations that offer resources to travelers with disabilities, go to **www.frommers.com/planning**.

## FAMILY TRAVEL

If you have trouble getting your kids out of the house in the morning, dragging them thousands of miles away may seem like an insurmountable challenge. But family travel can be immensely rewarding, giving you new ways of seeing the world through the eyes of children.

Children are considered the national treasure of Mexico, and Mexicans will warmly welcome and cater to your children. Many parents were reluctant to bring young children into Mexico in the past, primarily due to health concerns, but I can't think of a better place to introduce children to the exciting adventure of exploring a different culture. Hotels can often arrange for a babysitter.

Before leaving, ask your doctor which medications to take along. Disposable diapers cost about the same in Mexico but are of poorer quality. You can get Huggies Supreme and Pampers identical to the ones sold in the United States, but at a higher price. Many stores sell Gerber's baby foods. Dry cereals, powdered formulas, baby bottles, and purified water are easily available in midsize and large cities or resorts.

Cribs may present a problem; only the largest and most luxurious hotels provide them. However, rollaway beds are often available. Child seats or high chairs at restaurants are common.

Consider bringing your own car seat; they are not readily available for rent in Mexico.

Every country's regulations differ, but in general children traveling abroad should have plenty of documentation on hand, particularly if they're traveling with someone other than their own parents (in which case a notarized form letter from a parent is often required). For details on entry requirements for children traveling abroad, go to the U.S. Department of State website ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)); click on "International Travel," "Travel Brochures," and "Foreign Entry Requirements."

Recommended family travel websites include **Family Travel Forum** ([www.familytravelforum.com](http://www.familytravelforum.com)), a comprehensive site that offers customized trip planning; **Family Travel Network** ([www.familytravelnetwork.com](http://www.familytravelnetwork.com)), an online magazine providing travel tips; and **TravelWithYourKids.com** ([www.travelwithyourkids.com](http://www.travelwithyourkids.com)), a comprehensive site written by parents for parents, offering sound advice for long-distance and international travel with children.

For a list of more family-friendly travel resources, visit [www.frommers.com/planning](http://www.frommers.com/planning).

To locate accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that are particularly kid friendly, refer to the "Kids" icon throughout this guide.

## WOMEN TRAVELERS

Mexicans in general, and men in particular, are nosy about single travelers, especially women. If a taxi driver or anyone else with whom you don't want to become friendly asks about your marital status, family, and so forth, my advice is to make up a set of answers (regardless of the truth): "I'm married, traveling with friends, and I have three children." Saying you are single and traveling alone may send the wrong message. U.S. television—widely viewed now in Mexico—has given many Mexican men the image of American single women as being sexually promiscuous. Check out the award-winning website **Journeywoman** ([www.journeywoman.com](http://www.journeywoman.com)), a "real-life" women's travel information network where you can sign up for a free e-mail newsletter and get advice on everything from etiquette and dress to safety; or the travel guide *Safety and Security for Women Who Travel*, by Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer (Travelers' Tales, Inc.), offering common-sense tips on safe travel.

For general travel resources for women, go to [www.frommers.com/planning](http://www.frommers.com/planning).

## SENIOR TRAVEL

Mexico is a popular country for retirees. For decades, North Americans have been living indefinitely in Mexico by returning to the border and recrossing with a new tourist permit every 6 months. Mexican

immigration officials have caught on, and now limit the maximum time in the country to 6 months within any year. This is to encourage even partial residents to acquire proper documentation.

**AIM-Adventures in Mexico**, Apartado Postal 31–70, 45050 Guadalajara, Jalisco, is a well-written, informative newsletter for prospective retirees. Issues have evaluated retirement in Pacific Mexico destinations such as Puerto Angel, Puerto Escondido and Huatulco, Oaxaca, Taxco. Subscriptions are \$29 to the United States.

**Sanborn Tours**, 2015 S. 10th St., P.O. Drawer 519, McAllen, TX 78505-0519 (☎ **800/395-8482**; [www.sanborns.com](http://www.sanborns.com)), offers a “Retire in Mexico” orientation tour.

Mention the fact that you’re a senior citizen when you make your travel reservations. Although all the major U.S. airlines have canceled their senior discount and coupon book programs, many hotels still offer lower rates for seniors. In most cities, people older than 60 qualify for reduced admission to theaters, museums, and other attractions, and discounted fares on public transportation.

Members of **AARP**, 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ **888/1687-2277**; [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* ([www.aarpmagazine.org](http://www.aarpmagazine.org)) and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (☎ **800/454-5768**; [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org)) arranges study programs for those age 55 and older. **ElderTreks** (☎ **800/741-7956**; U.K. 0808/234-1714; international 416/588-5000; [www.eldertreks.com](http://www.eldertreks.com)) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older.

Recommended publications offering travel resources and discounts for seniors include: the quarterly magazine *Travel 50 & Beyond* ([www.travel50andbeyond.com](http://www.travel50andbeyond.com)) and the bestselling paperback *Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50 2005–2006, 16th Edition* (McGraw-Hill), by Joann Rattner Heilman.

For more information and resources on travel for seniors, see [www.frommers.com/planning](http://www.frommers.com/planning).

## STUDENT TRAVEL

Because Mexicans consider higher education a luxury rather than a birthright, there is no formal network of student discounts and programs. Most Mexican students travel with their families rather than with other students, so student discount cards are not commonly recognized.

However, more hostels have entered the student travel scene. **Hostels.com.mx** offers a list that includes hostels in Acapulco, Oaxaca, and Puerto Escondido.

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## 8 SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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**Sustainable tourism** is conscientious travel. It means being careful with the environments you explore and respecting the communities you visit. Two overlapping components of sustainable travel are **ecotourism** and **ethical tourism**. The **International Ecotourism Society (TIES)** defines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. TIES suggests that ecotourists follow these principles:

- Minimize environmental impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation and for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates.
- Support international human rights and labor agreements.

You can find some eco-friendly travel tips and statistics, as well as touring companies and associations—listed by destination under “Travel Choice”—at the **TIES** website, **www.ecotourism.org**. Also check out **www.ecotravel.com**, which lets you search for sustainable touring companies in several categories (water-based, land-based, spiritually oriented, and so on).

While much of the focus of ecotourism is about reducing impacts on the natural environment, ethical tourism concentrates on ways to preserve and enhance local economies and communities, regardless of location. You can embrace ethical tourism by staying at a locally owned hotel or shopping at a store that employs local workers and sells locally produced goods.

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas; the site is run by a spokesperson for ethical tourism in the travel industry. **Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) promotes ethical tourism practices, and manages an extensive directory of sustainable properties and tour operators around the world.

In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** ([www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism. The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)**

32 [www.aito.co.uk](http://www.aito.co.uk)) is a group of specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.

**Volunteer travel** has become increasingly popular among those who want to venture beyond the standard group-tour experience to learn languages, interact with locals, and make a positive difference while on vacation. Volunteer travel usually doesn't require special skills—just a willingness to work hard—and programs vary in length from a few days to a number of weeks. Some programs provide free housing and food, but many require volunteers to pay for travel expenses, which can add up fast.

For general information on volunteer travel, visit **[www.volunteerabroad.org](http://www.volunteerabroad.org)** and **[www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)**. Specific volunteer options in Mexico are listed under “Special Interest Trips,” later in this chapter.

Before you commit to a volunteer program, it's important to make sure any money you're giving is truly going back to the local community, and that the work you'll be doing will be a good fit for you. **Volunteer International** ([www.volunteerinternational.org](http://www.volunteerinternational.org)) has a helpful list of questions to ask to determine the intentions and the nature of a volunteer program.

## SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN SOUTHERN PACIFIC MEXICO

The coast of Oaxaca State is one of Mexico's most diverse regions, with more indigenous languages spoken than any other state in Mexico. Economically though, Oaxaca is also one of Mexico's least developed states. The region depends largely on tourism, yet despite the huge government investment at Huatulco with hopes to duplicate Cancún, tourism has yet to really boom along the coast. This can be great for the independent traveler looking to avoid crowds. The Oaxaca Coast is isolated from the interior, cut off by the Sierra Madre del Sur mountain range. It's a treacherous and tortuous 8-hour journey over a twisting mountain highway from the capital of Oaxaca City, a jewel in Mexico's tourism cache, and a 5-hour drive south of Acapulco.

This piece of Pacific Coast, known as “El País de la Tortuga,” or Turtle Country, is home to 10 of the world's 11 varieties of sea turtle. For decades, the primary source of income for the coastal Oaxaqueño villages was sea turtle poaching. The communities just south of Puerto Escondido are said to have killed 1,000 turtles a day in the 1980s, which threatened the very existence of the entire species. A heavily enforced federal law passed in 1990 made the killing of turtles illegal. While this immediately halted the slaughter, it left dozens of villages without any means of monetary support practically overnight.



The town of **Mazunte**, approximately 64km (40 miles) south of Puerto Escondido, was one such community. In 1991 the government turned the town's shuttered cannery into the **Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga** (Mexican Center for the Turtle; Spanish-only website, [www.centromexicanodelatortuga.org](http://www.centromexicanodelatortuga.org), or [www.tomzap.com/turtle.html](http://www.tomzap.com/turtle.html)), with the intention of attracting tourism. Today, this is Mexico's premier turtle research center and sanctuary. Visitors tour the facility with a researcher or volunteer whose main focus is to discuss the fragility of the turtle life cycle and foster respect for their ecosystem which is shared by the coastal Oaxaqueño communities.

A sea turtle reaches reproductive age at 15, which means the turtle population on the Oaxca Coast will only have the potential to grow after 2009. Thus, much emphasis is placed on caring for the turtles' nests. While traveling throughout this region you will likely see armed troops shuttling back and forth to the beaches to prevent looters and poachers from stealing eggs. Near Puerto Escondido, Playa Escobilla is a favorite nesting ground. Here, visitors can make overnight trips from July to September, when the turtles heave themselves on shore to lay their eggs. The cost is a mere 20 pesos (\$1.80) and must be arranged in person at the **Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga**.

Turtle tourism isn't the only eco-tourism to be found in the region. The coast here is also a magnet for migratory birds, and visitors can bird watch in two nearby lagoons. The presence of birds will permeate any trip to the region, even if the traveler does not intentionally seek them out. You can hear them singing even while you swim in the ocean, they're that prevalent. **Parque Nacional Lagunas Chacahua** is a 32km-long (20 miles) brackish mangrove lagoon which was over-fished by locals some 30 years ago and subsequently protected by the government. Today, you can take a noisy motorboat tour with one of the former fishermen, who will ferry you to the isolated towns and beaches on the lagoon. In Puerto Escondido, contact either **Rutas de Aventura**, run by Gustavo Boltjes at the Hotel Santa Fe (☎ 954/588-0457; Spanish-only website [www.rutasdeaventura.com.mx](http://www.rutasdeaventura.com.mx)), or **Agencia de Viajes Dimar**, for Michael Malone's Hidden Voyages Ecotours (☎ 954/582-0734; [www.viajesdimar.com](http://www.viajesdimar.com)).

**AMTAVE (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.)** is an active association of ecotourism and adventure tour operators. It publishes an annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, quality, and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact **AMTAVE** (☎ 55/5688-3883; [www.amtave.org](http://www.amtave.org)).

## General Resources for Green Travel

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In addition to the resources for the Southern Pacific Coast listed above, the following websites provide valuable wide-ranging information on sustainable travel. For a list of even more sustainable resources, as well as tips and explanations on how to travel greener, visit [www.frommers.com/planning](http://www.frommers.com/planning).

- **Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas; the site is run by a spokesperson for ethical tourism in the travel industry. **Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) promotes ethical tourism practices, and manages an extensive directory of sustainable properties and tour operators around the world.
- In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** ([www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism. The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)** ([www.aito.co.uk](http://www.aito.co.uk)) is a group of specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.
- In Canada, **www.greenlivingonline.com** offers extensive content on how to travel sustainably, including a travel and transport section and profiles of the best green shops and services in Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary.
- In Australia, the national body which sets guidelines and standards for ecotourism is **Ecotourism Australia** ([www.ecotourism.org.au](http://www.ecotourism.org.au)). **The Green Directory** ([www.thegreendirectory.com.au](http://www.thegreendirectory.com.au)), **Green Pages** ([www.thegreenpages.com.au](http://www.thegreenpages.com.au)), and **Eco Directory** ([www.ecodirectory.com.au](http://www.ecodirectory.com.au)) offer sustainable travel tips and directories of green businesses.

## ANIMAL RIGHTS ISSUES

The Pacific Coast presents many opportunities to swim with dolphins. The capture of wild dolphins was outlawed in Mexico in 2002. The only dolphins added to the country's dolphin swim programs since then were born in captivity. This law may have eased concerns about the death and implications of capturing wild dolphins, but the controversy is not over. Marine biologists who run the dolphin swim

- **Carbonfund** ([www.carbonfund.org](http://www.carbonfund.org)), **TerraPass** ([www.terrapass.org](http://www.terrapass.org)), and **Carbon Neutral** ([www.carbonneutral.org](http://www.carbonneutral.org)) provide info on “carbon offsetting,” or offsetting the greenhouse gas emitted during flights.
- **Greenhotels** ([www.greenhotels.com](http://www.greenhotels.com)) recommends green-rated member hotels around the world that fulfill the company’s stringent environmental requirements. **Environmentally Friendly Hotels** ([www.environmentallyfriendlyhotels.com](http://www.environmentallyfriendlyhotels.com)) offers more green accommodation ratings. The **Hotel Association of Canada** ([www.hacgreenhotels.com](http://www.hacgreenhotels.com)) has a Green Key Eco-Rating Program, which audits the environmental performance of Canadian hotels, motels, and resorts.
- **Sustain Lane** ([www.sustainlane.com](http://www.sustainlane.com)) lists sustainable eating and drinking choices around the U.S.; also visit [www.eatwellguide.org](http://www.eatwellguide.org) for tips on eating sustainably in the U.S. and Canada.
- For information on animal-friendly issues throughout the world, visit **Tread Lightly** ([www.treadlightly.org](http://www.treadlightly.org)). For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** ([www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)).
- **Volunteer International** ([www.volunteerinternational.org](http://www.volunteerinternational.org)) has a list of questions to help you determine the intentions and the nature of a volunteer program. For general info on volunteer travel, visit [www.volunteerabroad.org](http://www.volunteerabroad.org) and [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org).

programs say the mammals are thriving and that the programs provide a forum for research, conservation, education, and rescue operations. Animal rights advocates maintain that keeping these intelligent mammals in captivity is nothing more than exploitation. Their argument is that these private dolphin programs don’t qualify as “public display” under the Marine Mammal Protection Act because the entry fees bar most of the public from participating.

Visit the website of the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** at [www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org) or the **American Cetacean Society**, [www.acs.online.org](http://www.acs.online.org), for further discussion on the topic.

**Bullfighting** is considered an important part of Latin culture, but you should know, before you attend a *correo*, that the bulls (at least four) will ultimately be killed in a gory spectacle. This is not the case in some countries, such as France and Portugal, but the Mexicans follow the Spanish model. That said, a bullfight is a portal into understanding Mexico's Spanish colonial past, although nowadays bullfights are more of a tourist attraction, especially in tourist laden Cancún. To read more about the implications of attending a bullfight, visit [www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org), the website of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) (or see specifically: [www.peta.org/mc/factsheet\\_display.asp?ID=64](http://www.peta.org/mc/factsheet_display.asp?ID=64)).

For information on animal-friendly issues throughout the world, visit **Tread Lightly** ([www.treadlightly.org](http://www.treadlightly.org)).

## 9 SPECIAL INTEREST TRIPS & ESCORTED GENERAL INTEREST TOURS

### ACADEMIC TRIPS & LANGUAGE CLASSES

For Spanish-language instruction, **Instituto de Lenguajes Puerto Escondido** (☎ 954/582 2055; [www.puertoschool.com](http://www.puertoschool.com)) combines language classes with ecotours, active excursions, workshops and even surf classes. Homestays are available.

To explore your inner Frida or Diego while in Mexico, look into **Mexico Art Tours**, 1233 E. Baker Dr., Tempe, AZ 85282 (☎ 888/783-1331 or 480/730-1764; [www.mexicanarttours.com](http://www.mexicanarttours.com)). Typically led by Jean Grimm, a specialist in the arts and cultures of Mexico, these unique tours feature compelling speakers who are themselves respected scholars and artists. Itineraries include visits to Chiapas, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Puebla, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende, and Veracruz—and other cities. Special tours involve archaeology, architecture, interior design, and culture—such as a Day of the Dead tour.

The **Archaeological Conservancy**, 5301 Central Ave. NE, Suite 402, Albuquerque, NM 87108 (☎ 505/266-1540; [www.americanarchaeology.com](http://www.americanarchaeology.com)), presents various trips each year, led by an expert, usually an archaeologist. The trips change from year to year and space is limited; make reservations early.

**ATC Tours and Travel**, Av. 16 de Septiembre 16, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chis. (☎ 967/678-2550 or 678-2557; fax 967/678-3145; www.atctours.com), a Mexico-based tour operator with an excellent reputation, offers specialist-led trips, primarily in southern Mexico. In addition to trips to the ruins of Palenque and Yaxchilán (extending into Belize and Guatemala by river, plane, and bus if desired), ATC runs horseback tours to Chamula or Zinacantán, and day trips to the ruins of Toniná around San Cristóbal de las Casas; birding in the rainforests of Chiapas and Guatemala (including in the El Triunfo Reserve of Chiapas); hikes to the shops and homes of textile artists of the Chiapas highlands; and walks from the Lagos de Montebello in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, with camping and canoeing. The company can also prepare custom itineraries.

## ADVENTURE & WELLNESS TRIPS

**Oaxaca Reservations/Zapotec Tours**, 4955 North Claremont Ave., Suite B, Chicago, IL 60625 (☎ 800/446-2922 or 773/506-2444; fax 773/506-2445; www.oaxacainfo.com), offers a variety of tours to Oaxaca City and the Oaxaca coast (including Puerto Escondido and Huatulco). Its specialty trips include Day of the Dead in Oaxaca and the Food of the Gods Tour of Oaxaca. The coastal trips emphasize nature, while the Oaxaca City tours focus on the immediate area, with visits to weavers, potters, markets, and archaeological sites. This is also the U.S. contact for several hotels in Oaxaca City that offer a 10% discount for reserving online.

**Trek America**, P.O. Box 189, Rockaway, NJ 07866 (☎ 800/221-0596 or 973/983-1144; fax 973/983-8551; www.trekamerica.com), organizes lengthy, active trips that combine trekking, hiking, van transportation, and camping in the Yucatán, Chiapas, Oaxaca, the Copper Canyon, and Mexico's Pacific coast, and a trip that covers Mexico City, Teotihuacán, Taxco, Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, and Acapulco.

## FOOD & WINE TRIPS

If you're looking to eat your way through Mexico, sign up with **Culinary Adventures**, 6023 Reid Dr. NW, Gig Harbor, WA 98335 (☎ 253/851-7676; fax 253/851-9532; www.marilyntausend.com). It runs a short but select list of cooking tours in Mexico. Culinary Adventures features well-known cooks, with travel to regions known for excellent cuisine. Destinations vary each year. The owner, Marilyn Tausend, is the author of *Cocinas de la Familia* (Family Kitchens), *Savoring Mexico*, and *Mexican*, and co-author of *Mexico the Beautiful Cookbook*.

For numerous links to volunteer and internship programs throughout Mexico involving teaching, caring for children, providing health care, feeding the homeless, and doing other community and public service, visit [www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com).

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## 10 STAYING CONNECTED

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### TELEPHONES

Mexico's telephone system is slowly but surely catching up with modern times. Most telephone numbers have 10 digits. Every city and town that has telephone access has a two-digit (Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara) or three-digit (everywhere else) area code. In Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara, local numbers have eight digits; elsewhere, local numbers have seven digits. To place a local call, you do not need to dial the area code. Many fax numbers are also regular phone numbers; ask whoever answers for the fax tone (*"me da tono de fax, por favor"*).

The **country code** for Mexico is **52**.

**To call Mexico:** If you're calling Mexico from the United States:

1. Dial the international access code: 011 from the U.S.; 00 from the U.K., Ireland, or New Zealand; or 0011 from Australia.
2. Dial the country code: 52.
3. Dial the two- or three-digit area code, then the eight- or seven-digit number. For example, if you wanted to call the U.S. consulate in Acapulco, the entire number would be 011-52-744-469-0556. If you wanted to dial the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, the entire number would be 011-52-55-5209-9100.

**To make international calls:** To make international calls from Mexico, dial 00, then the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Next, dial the area code and number. For example, to call the British Embassy in Washington, you would dial 00-1-202-588-7800.

**For directory assistance:** Dial ☎ **040** if you're looking for a number inside Mexico. **Note:** Listings usually appear under the owner's name, not the name of the business, and your chances to find an English-speaking operator are slim.

**For operator assistance:** If you need operator assistance in making a call, dial ☎ **090** to make an international call, and ☎ **020** to call a number in Mexico.

**Toll-free numbers:** Numbers beginning with 800 within Mexico are toll-free, but calling a U.S. toll-free number from Mexico costs the same as an overseas call. To call an 800 number in the U.S., dial 001-880 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. To call an 888 number in the U.S., dial 001-881 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. For a number with an 887 prefix, dial 882; for 866, dial 883.

## CELLPHONES

**Telcel** is Mexico's expensive, primary cellphone provider. It has upgraded its systems to GSM and offers good coverage in much of the country, including the major cities and resorts. Most Mexicans buy their cellphones without a specific coverage plan and then pay as they go or purchase pre-paid cards with set amounts of air-time credit. These cellphone cards with scratch-off pin numbers can be purchased in Telcel stores as well as many newspaper stands and convenience stores.

Many U.S. and European cellphone companies offer networks with roaming coverage in Mexico. Rates can be very high, so check with your provider before committing to making calls this way. An increasing number of Mexicans, particularly among the younger generation, prefer the less expensive rates of **Nextel** ([www.nextel.com.mx](http://www.nextel.com.mx)), which features push-to-talk service. **Cellular Abroad** ([www.cellularabroad.com](http://www.cellularabroad.com)) offers cellphone rentals and purchases as well as SIM cards for travel abroad. Whether you rent or purchase the cellphone, you need to purchase a SIM card that is specific for Mexico.

To call a Mexican cellular number in the same area code, dial 044 and then the number. To dial the cellular phone from anywhere else in Mexico, first dial 01, and then the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number. To place an international call to a cellphone (for example, from the U.S.), you now must add a "1" after the country code; for example, 011-52-1 + 10-digit number.

## VOICE-OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL (VOIP)

If you have Web access while traveling, consider a broadband-based telephone service (in technical terms, **Voice over Internet Protocol**, or **VoIP**) such as Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) or Vonage ([www.vonage.com](http://www.vonage.com)), which allow you to make free international calls from your laptop or in a cybercafe. Neither service requires the people you're calling to have that service (though fees apply if they do not). Check the websites for details.

## INTERNET & E-MAIL

### With Your Own Computer

Wireless Internet access is increasingly common in Mexico's major cities and resorts. Mexico's largest airports offer Wi-Fi access provided

for a fee by Telcel's Prodigy Internet service. Most five-star hotels now offer Wi-Fi in the guest rooms, although you will need to check in advance whether this service is free or for a fee. Hotel lobbies often have Wi-Fi, as well. To find public Wi-Fi hotspots in Mexico, go to [www.jiwire.com](http://www.jiwire.com); its Hotspot Finder holds the world's largest directory of public wireless hotspots.

### Without Your Own Computer

Many large Mexican airports have **Internet kiosks**, and quality Mexican hotels usually have business centers with Internet access. You can also check out such copy stores as **Kinko's** or **OfficeMax**, which offer computer stations with fully loaded software (as well as Wi-Fi).

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## 11 TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

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### MEXICO'S HOTEL RATING SYSTEM

The hotel rating system in Mexico is called "Stars and Diamonds." Stars are given for the quality of the facilities, and diamonds for the service. Hotels may qualify to earn one to five stars or diamonds. The guidelines relate to service, facilities, and hygiene more than to prices. Many, but not all, hotels in Mexico volunteer to be part of this strict rating system.

Five-diamond hotels meet the highest requirements for rating: The beds are comfortable, bathrooms are in excellent working order, all facilities are renovated regularly, infrastructure is top-tier, and services and hygiene meet the highest international standards.

Five-star hotels usually offer similar quality, but with lower levels of service and detail in the rooms. For example, a five-star hotel may have less luxurious linens or, perhaps, room service during limited hours rather than 24 hours.

Four-star hotels are less expensive and more basic, but they still guarantee cleanliness and basic services such as hot water and purified drinking water. Three-, two-, and one-star hotels are at least working to adhere to certain standards: Bathrooms are cleaned and linens are washed daily, and you can expect a minimum standard of service. Two- and one-star hotels generally provide bottled water rather than purified water.

The nonprofit organization Calidad Mexicana Certificada, A.C., known as **Calmecac** ([www.calmecac.com.mx](http://www.calmecac.com.mx)), is responsible for hotel ratings; visit their website for additional details about the rating system.



## HOTEL CHAINS

In addition to the major international chains, you'll run across a number of less-familiar brands as you plan your trip to Mexico. They include:

- **Brisas Hotels & Resorts** ([www.brisas.com.mx](http://www.brisas.com.mx)). These were the hotels that originally attracted jet-set travelers to Mexico. Spectacular in a retro way, these properties offer the laid-back luxury that makes a Mexican vacation so unique.
- **Fiesta Americana** and **Fiesta Inn** ([www.posadas.com](http://www.posadas.com)). Part of the Mexican-owned Grupo Posadas company, these hotels set the country's midrange standard for facilities and services. They generally offer comfortable, spacious rooms and traditional Mexican hospitality. Fiesta Americana hotels offer excellent beach-resort packages. Fiesta Inn hotels are usually more business oriented. Grupo Posadas also owns the more luxurious Caesar Park hotels and the eco-oriented Explorea hotels.
- **Hoteles Camino Real** ([www.caminoreal.com](http://www.caminoreal.com)). Once known as the premier Mexican hotel chain, Camino Real still maintains a high standard of service at its properties, although the company was sold in 2005, and many of the hotels that once formed a part of it have been sold off or have become independent. Its beach hotels are traditionally located on the best beaches in the area. This chain also focuses on the business market. The hotels are famous for their vivid and contrasting colors.
- **NH Hoteles** ([www.nh-hotels.com](http://www.nh-hotels.com)). The NH hotels are noted for their family-friendly facilities and quality standards. The beach properties' signature feature is a pool, framed by columns, overlooking the sea.
- **Quinta Real Grand Class Hotels and Resorts** ([www.quintareal.com](http://www.quintareal.com)). These hotels, owned by Summit Hotels and Resorts, are noted for architectural and cultural details that reflect their individual regions. At these luxury properties, attention to detail and excellent service are the rule. Quinta Real is the top line Mexican hotel brand.

## HOUSE RENTALS & SWAPS

House and villa rentals and swaps are becoming more common in Mexico, but no single recognized agency or business provides this service exclusively for Mexico. In the chapters that follow, we have provided information on independent services that we have found to be reputable.

You'll find the most extensive inventory of homes at **Vacation Rentals by Owner (VRBO)**; ([www.vrbo.com](http://www.vrbo.com)). They have more than

## **Finds** Boutique Lodgings

Mexico lends itself beautifully to the concept of small, private hotels in idyllic settings. They vary in style from grandiose estate to palm-thatched bungalow. **Mexico Boutique Hotels** ([www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com](http://www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com)) specializes in smaller places to stay with a high level of personal attention and service. Most options have less than 50 rooms, and the accommodations consist of entire villas, *casitas*, bungalows, or a combination.

33,000 homes and condominiums worldwide, including a large selection in Mexico. Another good option is **VacationSpot** (☎ 888/903-7768; [www.vacationspot.com](http://www.vacationspot.com)), owned by Expedia and a part of its sister company Hotels.com. It has fewer choices, but the company's criteria for adding inventory is much more selective and often includes on-site inspections. They also offer toll-free phone support.

For tips on surfing for hotel deals online, visit [www.frommers.com](http://www.frommers.com).