

Planning Your Trip to Mid-Pacific Mexico

by Shane Christensen

Along the Pacific coast of Mexico, palm-studded jungles sweep down to meet the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean, providing spectacular backdrops for three modern resort cities, as well as smaller coastal villages. This lovely stretch of coastline, which extends from Puerto Vallarta down to Manzanillo, is known as the Mexican Riviera. Modern hotels, easy air access, and a growing array of activities and adventure tourism attractions have transformed this region into one of Mexico's premier resort areas. And for those who would like to explore the inland region, the bustling city of Guadalajara, home to some of Mexico's greatest artisans and mariachis, is only a few hours' drive away.

Travelers to Mexico should be aware of security concerns in certain parts of the country and take precautions to maximize their safety. For the most part, Mexico is safe for travelers who steer clear of drugs and those who sell them, but visitors should still exercise caution in unfamiliar areas and remain aware of their surroundings at all times. See "Safety," below, for more details; and visit the U.S. State Department's website, www.travel.state.gov, for up-to-date information on travel to Mexico.

For additional help in planning your trip and for more on-the-ground resources in Mid-Pacific Mexico, please turn to "Fast Facts," on p. 160.

1 THE REGION IN BRIEF

Puerto Vallarta, with its traditional Mexican architecture and gold-sand beaches bordered by jungle-covered mountains, is one of the most visited resort cities in Mexico. Although it has grown rapidly in recent years, Vallarta (as the locals refer to it) still maintains a small-town charm despite sophisticated hotels, great restaurants, a thriving

arts community, an active nightlife, and a growing variety of ecotourism attractions. **Manzanillo** is surprisingly relaxed, even though it's one of Mexico's most active commercial ports; it also offers great fishing and golf. And along the **Costa Alegre**, between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, pristine coves are home to unique luxury and value-priced resorts that cater to travelers seeking seclusion and privacy. Just north of Puerto Vallarta is **Punta Mita**, home of the first Four Seasons resort in Latin America and a Jack Nicklaus golf course. For a more essentially Mexican experience, head inland over the mountains to **Guadalajara**, Mexico's second-largest city and the birthplace of many of the country's traditions.

International airports at Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, and Guadalajara make getting to each easier; Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta have the most frequent connections. Distances in the region are easily managed by car and the roads are in generally good condition. **Barra de Navidad**, for example, is so close to Manzanillo that it's easy to combine several days there with a stay in Manzanillo. From Puerto Vallarta, **Bucerías**, **Yelapa**, **San Sebastian**, and **Sayulita** all offer a change of pace and scenery. Hotelito Desconocido and Las Alamanadas are both closer to Puerto Vallarta, with the remainder of the luxury coastal resorts between Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta, nearer to Manzanillo. More frequent flights fly to and from Puerto Vallarta, and many people find that Puerto Vallarta provides the best access to the coastal area.

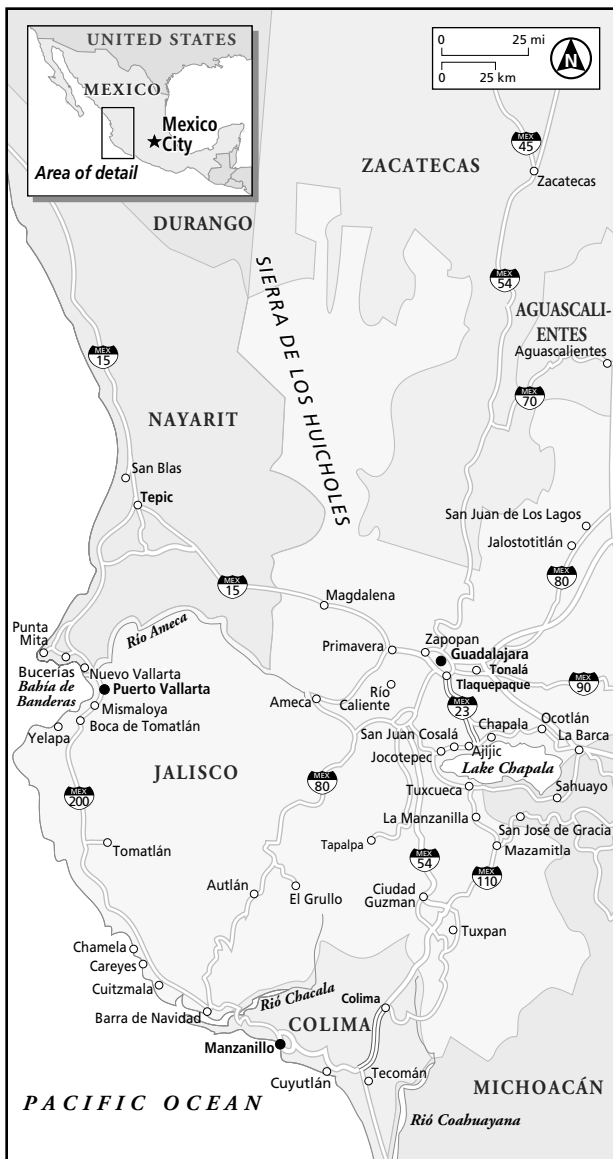
2 WHEN TO GO

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

From Puerto Vallarta south, all the way to Huatulco, Mexico 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 Puerto Vallarta on south, you can swim year-round. High mountains shield Pacific beaches from *nortes* (northerns—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.

The climate in inland Guadalajara is mostly mild. During the winter, it's a good idea to carry a sweater when going out in the evenings. The city also receives summer afternoon showers, although the rest of the day is usually hot and dry.

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.

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 17 in 2010, and March 9 in 2011.

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

National Ceramics Fair and Fiesta, Tlaquepaque, Jalisco. This pottery center outside Guadalajara hosts crafts demonstrations and contests, mariachis, dancers, and parades. June 14.

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

Mariachi Festival, Guadalajara, Jalisco. Public mariachi concerts, with groups from around the world (even Japan!). Workshops and lectures are given on the history, culture, and music of the mariachi. Plans for an extension of this festival in Puerto Vallarta are being worked out—call ☎ **800-44-MEXICO** [800/446-3942] or click on www.mariachi-jalisco.com.mx to confirm dates and performance schedules. August 29 to September 5.

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. Both Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta have great parties in the town plaza on the nights of September 15 and 16.

OCTOBER

Fiestas de Octubre (October Festivals), Guadalajara. This “most Mexican of cities” celebrates for a whole month with its mariachi music trademark. A bountiful display of popular culture and fine arts, and a spectacular spread of traditional foods, Mexican beers, and wines all add to the celebration. All month.

NOVEMBER

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.

Gourmet Festival. Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco. In this culinary capital of Mexico, chefs from around the world join local restaurateurs to create special menus, as well as host wine and tequila tastings, cooking classes, gourmet food expos, and other special events. Dates vary; contact the Tourism Board (☎ 888/384-6822 in the U.S.; www.festivalgourmet.com) for a schedule. Late November.

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

DECEMBER

The Puerto Vallarta Film Festival, Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco. Featuring a wide range of North American independent and Latin American productions, this elaborate showcase includes galas, art expos, and concerts, with celebrity attendees. Check local calendars; call ☎ 800/44-MEXICO or go to www.vallartafilmfestival.com for details. First week of 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.

In Puerto Vallarta, the celebration begins on December 1 and extends through December 12, with traditional processions to the church for a brief *misa* (Mass) and blessing. Businesses, neighborhoods, associations, and groups make pilgrimages (called *peregrinaciones*) to the church, where they exchange offerings for a brief blessing by the priest. In the final days, the processions and festivities take place around the clock, with many of the processions featuring floats, mariachis, Aztec dancers, and fireworks. Hotels frequently invite guests to participate in the walk to the church. The central plaza is filled with street vendors and a festive atmosphere, and a major fireworks exhibition takes place on December 12 at 11pm.

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 December 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.

3 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

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.

Virtually every air traveler **entering the U.S.** is required to show a passport. As of January 23, 2007, 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. In addition, effective June 1, 2009, all travelers, including U.S. and Canadian citizens, attempting to enter the United States by **land** or **sea** must have a valid passport or other WHTI compliant document.

Other valid travel documents (known as WHTI-compliant documents; visit www.travel.state.gov for more information) include the new **Passport Card** and SENTRI, NEXUS, FAST, and the U.S. Coast Guard Mariner Document. Members of the U.S. Armed Forces on active duty traveling on orders are exempt from the passport requirement. U.S. citizens may apply for the new, limited-use, wallet-size Passport Card. The card is valid only for land and sea travel between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean region, and Bermuda.

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. 162 in "Fast Facts."

VISAS

For detailed information regarding visas to Mexico, visit the **National Immigration Institute** at www.inm.gob.mx.

American and Canadian tourists are not required to have 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, all travelers 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, travelers 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. If traveling by bus or car, ensure you obtain such a card and have it stamped by immigration authorities at the border. If you do not receive a stamped tourist card at the border, ensure that, when you arrive at your destination within Mexico, you immediately go to the closest National Institute of Immigration office, present your bus ticket, and request a tourist card. Travelers who fail to have their tourist card stamped may be fined, detained, or expelled from the country.

The FMT can be issued for up to 180 days. Do not assume that you will be granted the full 180 days. Sometimes officials don't ask but just stamp a time limit, so be sure to tell them you're going to stay 6 months, or at least twice as long as you intend to stay. 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.

If you plan to enter Mexico by car, please read the vehicle importation requirements on p. 12.

For information on obtaining a visa, please visit "Fast Facts," on p. 164.

TOURISM TAX

Mexican authorities impose a tourism tax (approx. \$20) for all visitors to Mexico. This fee is normally included in airline ticket prices. Visitors arriving by road (car or bus) will be asked to pay this fee at any bank in Mexico (there is a bank representative at every port of entry). The bank will stamp your tourist card. Visitors to the northern border zone (20–30km/12–19 miles from the U. S. border) and those going to Mexico on cruise ships are exempt.

For travelers entering Mexico by car at the border of Baja California, note that FMTs are issued only in Tijuana, Tecate, and Mexicali, as well as in Ensenada and Guerrero Negro. If you travel anywhere beyond the frontier zone without the FMT, you will be fined \$40. Permits for driving a foreign-plated car in Mexico are available only in Tijuana, Ensenada, Tecate, Mexicali, and La Paz.

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

10 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, 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/aduana_mexico/2008/pasajeros/139_10134.html.

What You Can Take Home from Mexico

For information on what you're allowed to bring home, contact one of the following agencies:

U.S. Citizens: U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP), 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ 877/287-8667; www.cbp.gov).

Canadian Citizens: Canada Border Services Agency (☎ 800/461-9999 in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

U.K. Citizens: HM Customs & Excise (☎ 0845/010-9000, or 020/8929-0152 from outside the U.K.; www.hmce.gov.uk).

Australian Citizens: Australian Customs Service (☎ 1300/363-263; www.customs.gov.au).

New Zealand Citizens: New Zealand Customs, The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ 04/473-6099 or 0800/428-786; 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. 21.

4 GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

GETTING TO MID-PACIFIC MEXICO

By Plane

Mexico has dozens of international and domestic airports. Among the airports in the mid-Pacific coast are Puerto Vallarta (PVR), Manzanillo (ZLO), and Mazatlán (MZT). The other major airport in Jalisco is in Guadalajara (GDL).

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.

To find out which airlines travel to mid-Pacific Mexico, please see “Airline, Hotel & Car Rental Websites,” p. 165.

By Car

Driving is not the cheapest way to get to Mexico. 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. The mid-Pacific coast is a great place to do this. Rental cars in Mexico generally are 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.)

Carrying Car Documents

You must carry your temporary car-importation permit, tourist permit (see “Entry Requirements,” earlier in this chapter), and, if you purchased it, your proof of Mexican car insurance (see below) in the car at all times. The temporary car-importation permit papers are valid for 6 months to a year, while the tourist permit is usually issued for 30 days. It’s a good idea to overestimate the time you’ll spend in Mexico so if you have to (or want to) stay longer, you’ll avoid the hassle of getting your papers extended. Whatever you do, don’t overstay either permit. Doing so invites heavy fines, confiscation of your vehicle (which will not be returned), or both. Also remember that 6 months does not necessarily equal 180 days—be sure that you return before the earlier expiration date.

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If, after reading the section that follows, you have additional questions or you want to confirm the current rules, call your nearest Mexican consulate or the Mexican Government Tourist Office. Although travel insurance companies generally are helpful, they may not have the most accurate information. 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.

Car Documents

To drive your car into Mexico, you’ll need a **temporary car-importation permit**, which is granted after you provide a required list of documents (see below). The permit can be obtained through Banco del Ejército (Banjercito) officials at the *aduana* (Mexican Customs) building after you cross the border into Mexico.

The following requirements for border crossing were accurate at press time:

- **A valid driver’s license**, issued outside of Mexico.
- **Current, original car registration and a copy of the original car title.** If the registration or title is in more than one name and not all the named people are traveling with you, a notarized letter from the absent person(s) authorizing use of the vehicle for the trip is required; have it ready. The registration and your credit card (see below) must be in the same name.

- **Original immigration documentation.** This is either your tourist permit (FMT) or the original immigration booklet, FM2 or FM3, if you hold more permanent status.
- **Processing fee and posting of a bond.** With an international credit card, you are required to pay a \$27 car-importation fee. The credit card must be in the same name as the car registration. Mexican law also requires the posting of a bond at a Banjercito office to guarantee the export of the car from Mexico within a time period determined at the time of the application. For this purpose, American Express, Visa, or MasterCard credit card holders will be asked to provide credit card information; others will need to make a cash deposit of \$200 to \$400, depending on the make/model/year of the vehicle. In order to recover this bond or avoid credit card charges, travelers must go to any Mexican Customs office immediately before leaving Mexico.

If you receive your documentation at the border, Mexican officials will make two copies of everything and charge you for the copies. For up-to-the-minute information, a great source is the Customs office in Nuevo Laredo, or *Módulo de Importación Temporal de Automóviles, Aduana Nuevo Laredo* (☎ 867/712-2071).

Important reminder: Someone else may drive, but the person (or relative of the person) whose name appears on the car-importation permit must *always* be in the car. (If stopped by police, a nonregistered family member driving without the registered driver must be prepared to prove familial relationship to the registered driver—no joke.) Violation of this rule subjects the car to impoundment and the driver to imprisonment, a fine, or both. You can drive a car with foreign license plates only if you have a foreign (non-Mexican) driver's license.

Mexican Auto Insurance (Seguros de Auto)

Liability auto insurance is legally required in Mexico. U.S. insurance is invalid; to be insured in Mexico, you must purchase Mexican insurance. Any party involved in an accident who has no insurance may be sent to jail and have his or her car impounded until all claims are settled. This is true even if you just drive across the border to spend the day. U.S. companies that broker Mexican insurance are commonly found at the border crossing, and several quote daily rates.

You can also buy car insurance through **Sanborn's Mexico Insurance**, P.O. Box 52840, 2009 S. 10th, McAllen, TX (☎ 800/222-0158; fax 800/222-0158 or 956/686-0732; www.sanbornsinsurance.com). The company has offices at all U.S. border crossings. Its policies cost the same as the competition's do, but you get legal coverage (attorney and bail bonds if needed) and a detailed mile-by-mile guide

14 for your proposed route. Most of the Sanborn's border offices are open Monday through Friday; a few are staffed on Saturday and Sunday. **AAA** auto club (www.aaa.com) also sells insurance.

Returning to the U.S. with Your Car

You *must* return the car documents you obtained when you entered Mexico when you cross back with your car, or within 180 days of your return. (You can cross as many times as you wish within the 180 days.) If the documents aren't returned, heavy fines are imposed (\$250 for each 15 days you're late), your car may be impounded and confiscated, or you may be jailed if you return to Mexico. You can return the car documents only to a Banjercito official on duty at the Mexican *aduana* building *before* you cross back into the United States. Some border cities have Banjercito officials on duty 24 hours a day, but others do not; some do not have Sunday hours.

By Ship

Numerous cruise lines serve Mexico. Some (such as Carnival and Royal Caribbean) cruise to Puerto Vallarta with likely stops in Cabo San Lucas and Mazatlán. Others travel to Manzanillo, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, and Acapulco. Several cruise-tour specialists sometimes offer last-minute discounts on unsold cabins. One such company is **CruisesOnly** (☎ 800/278-4737; www.cruisesonly.com).

By Bus

Greyhound-Trailways (or its affiliates) offers service from around the United States to the Mexican border, where passengers disembark, cross the border, and buy a ticket for travel into Mexico. Many border crossings have scheduled buses from the U.S. bus station to the Mexican bus station.

In each applicable section in this book, we've listed bus arrival information.

GETTING AROUND

By Plane

Mexico has two large private national carriers: **Mexicana** (☎ 800/531-7921; 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 **Aviacsa** (www.aviacsa.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 many kilometers. 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** (Petrobras 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 restroom 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.

16 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 “Mexican Auto Insurance,” in “Getting to Mid-Pacific Mexico,” 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. For a list of car-rental firms operating in this region, turn to “Airline, Hotel & Car Rental Websites,” p. 165.

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.

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.

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, and around Mexico City. Fares for short trips within towns are generally preset by zone and are quite reasonable compared with U.S. rates. (Los Cabos is one exception; another is taxi service to the north side of the bay from Puerto Vallarta. Travelers are better off renting a car than paying these exorbitant taxi fares—about \$100 for a one-way trip to Punta Mita.) 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.

5 MONEY & COSTS

The Value of the Mexican Peso vs. Other Popular Currencies

Peso	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 to check up-to-the-minute rates.

In general, Mexico is considerably cheaper than most U.S. and European destinations, although prices vary significantly depending on the specific location. The most expensive destinations are those with the largest number of foreign visitors, such as Puerto Vallarta. The least expensive are those off the beaten path and in small rural villages. 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). The current exchange rate for the U.S. dollar, and the one used in this book, is 13 pesos; at that rate, an item that costs 13 pesos would be equivalent to US\$1.

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.

Many establishments that deal with tourists, especially in coastal resort areas, quote prices in dollars. To avoid confusion, they use the abbreviations “Dlls.” for dollars and “M.N.” (*moneda nacional*, or national currency) for pesos. **Note:** Establishments that quote their prices primarily in U.S. dollars are listed in this guide with U.S. dollars. Prices in this book are listed in the currency advertised by the establishment.

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.

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.

Tips A Few Words About Prices

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. (Exceptions are Cancún, Cozumel, and Los Cabos, where the IVA is 10%; as ports of entry, they receive a break on taxes.) Hotels charge the usual 15% IVA, plus a locally administered bed tax of 2% (in most areas), for a total of 17%. In Cancún, Los Cabos, and Cozumel, hotels charge the 10% IVA plus 2% room tax. 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.

Banks in Mexico are rapidly expanding and improving services. 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 be used only 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. 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. **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.

In Mexico, Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are the most accepted credit 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.

6 HEALTH

As of July 3, 2009, the WHO had reported nearly 90,000 A(H1N1) (“swine flu”) cases around the world, including 382 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, the **CDC** website at www.cdc.gov, or the website of the **World Health Organization** at www.who.int.

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.



Treating & Avoiding Digestive Trouble

It's called "travelers' diarrhea" or *turista*, the Spanish word for "tourist": persistent diarrhea, often accompanied by fever, nausea, and vomiting, that 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 practically eliminated this ailment, especially in well-developed resort areas such as Puerto Vallarta. 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; active-culture 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.

How to Prevent It: 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 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. In addition, something as simple as **clean hands** can go a long way toward preventing *turista*.

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

health care in other cities may not be of the same quality. 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 Mexico pharmacies; however, be aware that you may need a copy of your prescription or need to obtain a prescription from a local doctor.

COMMON AILMENTS

SUN 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—persistent **diarrhea**, often accompanied by fever, nausea, and vomiting—used to attack many travelers to Mexico. Widespread improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, and education have greatly diminished this ailment, but visitors should still take precautions to avoid this ailment, such as drinking only bottled water and purified ice, and regularly washing your hands. See “Treating & Avoiding Digestive Trouble,” above, for more information on this ailment.

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,

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.

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 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.

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 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) will pick you up and fly you to the hospital of your choice, virtually anywhere, in a medically equipped and staffed

Tips 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.

aircraft—24 hours a 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.

I list additional **emergency numbers** in “Fast Facts,” p. 162.

7 SAFETY

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, drug-related violence and organized crime have escalated significantly.

That said, this stretch of the Mexican Pacific Coast is one of the safer regions of Mexico. Precautions are necessary, but travelers should be realistic. You can generally trust a person whom you approach for

26 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.

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

CRIME IN RESORT TOWNS

A number of rapes have been reported in 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 can be havens for drug dealers and petty criminals.

CRIME NATIONWIDE

Kidnappings

Kidnapping—including the kidnapping of non-Mexicans—continues at alarming rates. The U.S. Department of State Travel Alert for Mexico states the following, which applies to all travelers: “In recent years, dozens of U.S. citizens have been kidnapped across Mexico and many cases remain unresolved. U.S. citizens who believe they are being targeted for kidnapping or other crimes should notify Mexican officials and the nearest American consulate or the Embassy as soon as possible. U.S. citizens should make every attempt to travel on main roads during daylight hours, particularly the toll (*cuota*) roads, which are generally more secure. U.S. citizens are encouraged to stay in well-known tourist destinations and tourist areas of the cities with more adequate security, and provide an itinerary to a friend or family member not traveling with them. U.S. citizens should avoid traveling alone, and should carry a GSM-enabled cellphone that functions internationally.”

So-called “express kidnappings”—an attempt to get quick cash in exchange for the release of an individual—have occurred in almost all the large cities in Mexico and appear to target not only the wealthy, but the middle class. Car theft and carjackings are also a common occurrence.

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 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,

28 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 shoeshine 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.

8 SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

In addition to the destination-specific resources listed below, please visit 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.

While much of Mexico is socially conservative, Puerto Vallarta is not. Popular with many gay travelers, Puerto Vallarta offers gay-friendly accommodations, bars, clubs, and activities. For more information, visit **MexGay Vacations** at www.mexgay.com.

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.

However, Puerto Vallarta is an exception, as it is becoming more and more accessible to travelers with disabilities. The city renovated the majority of its downtown sidewalks and plazas with ramps that accommodate wheelchairs (as well as baby strollers). Even the airport has ramps adjacent to all stairways, and special wheelchair lifts. A local citizen with disabilities deserves the credit for this impressive task—hopefully setting the stage for greater accessibility in other towns and resorts.

FAMILY TRAVEL

If you have trouble getting your kids out of the house in the morning, dragging them to a foreign country 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. Some of the best family destinations include Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. 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 highchairs 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, turn to p. 9.

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.

SENIOR TRAVEL

Mexico is a popular country for retirees. This is particularly the case in Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlán. For decades, North Americans have been living indefinitely in Mexico by returning to the border and re-crossing 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.

Some of the most popular places for long-term stays are Guadalajara, Lake Chapala, Ajijic, and Puerto Vallarta—all in the state of Jalisco.

AIM-Adventures in Mexico, Apartado Postal 31-70, 45050 Guadalajara, Jalisco, is a well-written, informative newsletter for prospective retirees. 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), offers a "Retire in Mexico" orientation tour.

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. www.hostels.com/mx.html offers a list of hostels in Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, Guadalajara, and many other cities throughout Mexico.

9 SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The diverse geography of the Mexican Riviera and its wealth of eco- and adventure-tour options have made it a natural favorite of travelers interested in ecotourism. From Mazatlán to Manzanillo, this stretch of Mexico's Pacific Coast presents one of the country's most ecologically stunning landscapes. The Costa Alegre, extending between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, has been designated an "Ecological Tourism Corridor" by the state of Jalisco. This largely undeveloped coastline includes the spectacular beaches, jungles, and surrounding mountains of Barra de Navidad Bay, Tenacatita Bay, Careyes Coast, Chamela Bay, and the Majahuas Coast, and is home to an ecological reserve protecting the region's land and marine life. The Hotel Desconocido (p. 102), located along this coast, is one of Mexico's most prominent ecotourism resorts.

For hands-on activities with local sea life while in Puerto Vallarta, consider **Dolphin Adventure** (p. 74). Hiking, boating, snorkeling, and scuba diving are all popular activities in Puerto Vallarta and the nearby resorts.

AMTAVE (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.) is an active association in Mexico of eco- and adventure-tour operators dedicated to the operation and promotion of ecotourism and adventure travel in Mexico. They publish an annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, and for quality and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact AMTAVE (☎ 800/509-7678; www.amtave.org).

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 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

General Resources for Green Travel

In addition to the resources for Mid-Pacific Mexico 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.

- **Responsible Travel** (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) 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) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism. The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)** (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). **The Green Directory** (www.thegreendirectory.com.au), **Green Pages** (www.thegreenpages.com.au), and **Eco Directory** (www.ecodirectory.com.au) offer sustainable travel tips and directories of green businesses.

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 or the **American Cetacean Society**, www.acsonline.org, for further discussion on the topic.

Bullfighting is considered an important part of Latin culture, but before you attend a *correo*, you should know that, in all likelihood, the

- **Carbonfund** (www.carbonfund.org), **TerraPass** (www.terrapass.org), and **Carbon Neutral** (www.carbonneutral.org) provide info on “carbon offsetting,” or offsetting the greenhouse gas emitted during flights.
- **Greenhotels** (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) offers more green accommodations ratings. The **Hotel Association of Canada** (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) lists sustainable eating and drinking choices around the U.S.; also visit 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). For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** (www.wdcs.org).
- **Volunteer International** (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 and www.idealists.org.

bulls (at least four) will undergo torture, shed lots of blood, and die before a team of horses drags their carcasses unceremoniously out of the ring. That said, a bullfight is a portal into understanding Mexico’s Spanish colonial past, and traditional machismo is on full display. Bullfights take place in towns as different as Tijuana and Puerto Vallarta, and they afford a colorful spectacle like no other, with a brass band playing; the costumed matador’s macho stare; men shaking their heads at less-than-perfect swipes of the cape; and overly made-up, bloodthirsty women chanting “*Ole*,” waving their white hankies, and

34 throwing roses, jackets, and hats at the matador's feet. There is also the extremely miniscule chance that, if the bull puts up a good enough fight or pierces his horn through the matador's leg, he will be spared for breeding purposes. It does happen, if only rarely. To read more about the implications of attending a bullfight, visit www.peta.org, the website of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

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

10 SPECIAL-INTEREST TRIPS

ACADEMIC TRIPS & LANGUAGE CLASSES

For Spanish-language instruction, **IMAC** (☎ **866/306-5040**; www.spanish-school.com.mx) offers programs in Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, and Playa del Carmen. For information about studying Spanish in conjunction with a local university in Puerto Vallarta, visit **Spanish Abroad** (☎ **888/722-7623**; www.spanishabroad.com/puertovallarta).

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). 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, Ste. 402, Albuquerque, NM 87108 (☎ **505/266-1540**; 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.

ADVENTURE & WELLNESS TRIPS

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).

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*.

VOLUNTEER & WORKING TRIPS

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.

11 STAYING CONNECTED

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 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,

36 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 PINs 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), which features push-to-talk service. **Cellular Abroad** (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.

INTERNET & E-MAIL

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; its Hotspot Finder holds the world's largest directory of public wireless hotspots.

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 **FedEx Office** (formerly Kinko's) or **OfficeMax**, which offer computer stations with fully loaded software (as well as Wi-Fi).

12 TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

MEXICO'S HOTEL RATING SYSTEM

The hotel rating system in Mexico is called "Stars and Diamonds." Hotels may qualify to earn one to five stars or diamonds. Many hotels that have excellent standards are not certified, but all rated hotels adhere to strict standards. The guidelines relate to service, facilities, and hygiene more than to prices.

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), 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): 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. Manzanillo has a Las Brisas property, Las Hadas Manzanillo.
- **Fiesta Americana** and **Fiesta Inn** (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 Exploreal hotels. Mid-Pacific Mexico's offerings include Fiesta Americana Grand Guadalajara Country Club, the Fiesta Americana Guadalajara, the Fiesta Inn Guadalajara, and the Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta.
- **Hoteles Camino Real** (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. In mid-Pacific Mexico, Camino Real has 3 hotels: the Camino Real Guadalajara, Camino Real Guadalajara Expo, and the Camino Real Manzanillo.
- **NH Hoteles** (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. NH Hoteles has only one property in mid-Pacific Mexico, the NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta.
- **Quinta Real Grand Class Hotels and Resorts** (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. The only Quinta Real hotel on the mid-Pacific coast is the Quinta Real Guadalajara.

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) 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.

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, I have provided information on independent services that I have found to be reputable.

You'll find the most extensive inventory of homes at **Vacation Rentals by Owner (VRBO)**; www.vrbo.com). They have more than 33,000 homes and condominiums worldwide, including a large selection in Mexico. Another good option is **VacationSpot** (☎ 888/903-7768; 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.