

The Best of Mexico



I love Mexico. I am totally besotted, head-over-heels, foolishly in love with the entire country. Because of this, I'm quick to recognize that this is not a country that can be easily categorized—the land is too big and beautiful and the culture is simply too superlative. For some, a best could be a night spent in a graveyard in Mexico City on the Day of the Dead, drinking hot chocolate and quietly talking to families cleaning graves; for others it's the crispy crunch of a ceviche tostada from a street stand in Ensenada, or grabbing a rail before vanishing into the curl at the Mexican pipeline, or dropping down a tricky single track in the shadow of a pyramid in the Yucatán, or the first touch of a masseuse's hands on shoulders burning from a week of kayaking in the Sea of Cortez, or crawling home at dawn after an all-night dancing session almost anywhere in the country.

Mexico can be all things to all people if you open yourself to it. It excels at many things, and delights all five senses—it's very much a sensualist's delight, warm, tropical, and spicy when you want it, or soothing when you don't. While its beach resorts are what seduce initially, you should head inland, even just a few miles, to get a full sense of *Mi tierra*, which means so much more than the simplistic English translation "my earth." *Mi tierra* encompasses everything from a landscape defined by the sun and storm, to childhood memories, to the prick and smell of nopales. It means love, refuge, honor, and home. And it symbolizes the very essence, if you will, of the country itself.

2 * The Best of Mexico

Calling Mexico *mi tierra* is no hyperbole. This land has a soul and a depth that demands a relationship from those who walk, work, or play upon it. As a tourist, you'll get but a hint of its richness. You can surf its waves, rescue its turtles, fly through its trees, or cycle up its dirt roads into the Sierra Madre, and at the end of it say you've tasted some of the flavor of Mexico. But

you'll want to come back again and again to get a true feeling for *mi tierra*, and to be able to call it that yourself.

While I encourage you to seek out your own favorite things in Mexico, what follows is an abbreviated list of this amazing country's best activities, places, tastes, and moments to get you started.

Best Only-in-Mexico Experiences

- o All the world may be a stage, but some parts have richer backdrops than others. Mexico's **town plazas** are the perfect settings for watching everyday life unfold. Alive with people, these open spaces are no modern product of urban planners, but are rooted in the traditional Mexican view of society. Several plazas are standouts.

One look tells you how important **Oaxaca's zócalo** (see chapter 14) is to the local citizenry; the plaza is remarkably beautiful, grand, and intimate all at once. **Mexico City's Alameda** (see chapter 3) has a dark, dramatic history—heretics were burned at the stake here during the colonial period—but today it's a people's park where lovers sit, cotton-candy vendors spin their treats, and the sound of organ grinders drifts over the changing crowd.

San Miguel de Allende's Jardín (see chapter 4) is the focal point for meeting, sitting, painting, and sketching. During festivals, it fills with dancers, parades, and elaborate fireworks. And El Centro in **Mérida** (see chapter 6) on a Sunday simply can't be beat.
- o Mexicans have such a passion for **fireworks** and such a cavalier attitude toward them that it's a good thing most buildings here are stone and cement, or the whole country would have burned down long ago. Practically every festival includes a display. The most lavish are the large constructions known as *castillos*, and the wildest are the *toros* that men carry over their shoulders while running through the streets, causing festival-goers to dive for cover. Some of the best displays go off in **San Miguel de Allende** (see chapter 4).
- o Wherever there's a seafront road, you'll find a **malecón** bordering it. This is generally a wide sidewalk for strolling, complete with vendors selling things like pinwheels and cotton candy. In some places, it has supplanted the plaza as a centerpiece of town life. The best examples are in **Puerto Vallarta** (see chapter 9), **Mazatlán** (see chapter 10), and **La Paz** (see chapter 8).
- o Nothing reveals the soul of a people like music, and Mexico boasts many kinds in many different settings. You can find brassy, belt-it-out **mariachi music** in the famous **Plaza de Garibaldi** in Mexico City (see chapter 3). For something far punkier, you can pay a visit to **MultiKulti** in Tijuana (p. 328). This collective operates out of a burnt-out movie theater off Revolución, in a roofless amphitheater that books punk bands as well as DJs and speakers like Chiapas rebel Subcommandante Marcos.

Best Beach Vacations

- o **Puerto Vallarta** is the only place in Mexico where authentic colonial ambience truly mixes with resort amenities. The spectacularly wide Banderas Bay here offers 42km (26 miles) of beaches. Some, like Playa Los Muertos—the popular public beach in town—abound with palapa restaurants, beach volleyball, and parasailing. See chapter 9.
- o The best overall beach value in Mexico, **Puerto Escondido**, is principally known for its world-class surfing beach, Playa Zicatela. The surrounding beaches all have their own appeal; colorful fishing pangas dot the central town beach, parked under the shade of palms leaning so far over they almost touch the ground. Puerto Escondido offers unique accommodations at excellent prices, with exceptional budget dining and nightlife. See chapter 13.
- o The side-by-side resorts **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo** offer beach-goers the best of both worlds: Serene simplicity and resort comforts. For those in search of a back-to-basics beach, the best and most beautiful is Playa La Ropa, close to Zihuatanejo. The wide beach at Playa Las Gatas, with its restaurants and snorkeling sites, is also a great place to play. The luxury hotels in Ixtapa, on the next bay over from Zihuatanejo, front Playa Palmar, a fine, wide swath of beach. See chapter 12.
- o Despite extensive damage from October 2005's Hurricane Wilma, **Cancún's** legendary beaches are back to their own splendid selves, thanks in large part to a US\$19-million, government-sponsored beach renewal program. In terms of sheer beauty, Cancún and the coastline of the Yucatán state of Quintana Roo have always boasted Mexico's best beaches. The powdery, white-sand beaches boast water the color of a Technicolor dream; it's so clear you can see through to the coral reefs below. Cancún also offers the widest assortment of luxury beachfront hotels, and more restaurants, nightlife, and activities than any other resort destination in the country. See chapter 5.
- o Fronting some of the best beaches on Mexico's Caribbean coast, **Tulum's** small palapa hotels offer guests a little slice of paradise far from crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; at the coast, things are quiet and will remain so because all these hotels are small and must generate their own electricity. If you can pull yourself away from the beach, nearby are ruins to explore and a vast nature preserve. See chapter 6.
- o There's only one main beach at **Isla Mujeres**—Playa Norte—but it's superb. From this island, you can dive El Garrafón reef, snorkel offshore, and take a boat excursion to the Isla Contoy national wildlife reserve, which features great birding and a fabulous, uninhabited beach. See "Isla Mujeres" in chapter 6.
- o **Playa del Carmen** is Mexico's hip beach destination with a dash of third-world chic. Above all, it's easy and low key. You walk to the beach, you walk back to the hotel, you walk to one of the many good restaurants. Next day, you repeat. The beaches are white sand; the water is clear blue and perfect for swimming. If you feel the urge to be active, not far away are ancient Maya ruins, Cozumel, and the megaresort of Cancún, offering all the variety that you might want in a beach vacation. See chapter 6.
- o The state capital **La Paz** borders a lovely beach, dotted with colorful playgrounds and lively open-air restaurants.

4 ✪ The Best of Mexico

Take a cue from the local residents, though, and pass on swimming here in favor of the exquisite beaches just minutes from downtown. La Paz's beaches and the islets just offshore have transformed this tranquil town into a center for diving, sea kayaking, and other adventure pursuits. See chapter 8.

- Dramatic rock formations and crashing waves mix with wide stretches of soft

sand and a rolling break at **Los Cabos**. Though some beaches here are more appropriate for contemplation than for swimming, that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Start at Playa Palmilla by San José del Cabo, and work your way down the Corridor to the famed Playa Amor in Cabo San Lucas. See chapter 8.

Best Hostels

- While Mexico doesn't have the quantity of backpacker hostels that Europe does, there are still outposts of civilized group communalism happening in places, like the **Oasis** (p. 450) in Puerto Vallarta where \$130 will get you a safe cozy bunk, or the **Paulina Youth Hostel** (p. 625) in a modernized colonial-era building, newly remodeled and upgraded, in the heart of Oaxaca city.
- In Puerto Escondido, check out the **Hotel Mayflower** (p. 600). Like the best hostels anywhere, you probably won't get any sleep and the accommodations are less than, ahem, resortlike, but the ambience is totally casual, and it's affordable if not dirt cheap. Most important, it's popular with travelers from all over the world who come to share travel tips, stories, and food.

Best Hotels That Don't Feel Like Hotels

Mexico is filled to the brim with wonderful small hotels. Some are B&Bs with just a half dozen rooms, while others are slightly larger and boast world-class restaurants and spas. In both cases, the experience of staying at a small hotel is the polar opposite of staying at one of the country's massive resorts. The boutique hotels sometimes cost a little more but are well worth it; they bring home the essence of the place where you're staying, melding both historical ambience with creature comforts.

- **Casa Natalia** (p. 371), in Baja's San José, is a perfect example, since it manages to

be both high-end and minimalist, and soothing and seductive.

- Over in La Paz, **Angel Azul** (p. 421), is inexpensive and down-home friendly, but with great amenities, as are **Casa Bentley** (p. 435), in Todos Santos; **La Casona** (p. 96), in Mexico City; **Casa Catrina** (p. 628), in Oaxaca; the **Melville** (p. 496) and **Casa de las Leyendas** (p. 495) in Mazatlán; and **Posada Corazon** (p. 162) and **Villa Scorpio** (p. 161), in San Miguel de Allende. There are more, of course. Delve into the "Sleeping" sections of each chapter for info.

Best Resorts

- One of the dangers of visiting the Pacific Coast in late summer is the chance that your trip will involve a hurricane. If you're lucky, you'll be trapped at **Majahuitas** (p. 454), an impossibly perfect all-inclusive miniresort snuggled into a tiny protected cove on the cusp of Puerto Vallarta's Cabo Corrientes. It's

Best Caffeinated Concoctions

Chocolate and coffee are Mexican specialties, the former native and the latter imported. Oaxaca is the center for all things chocolate in Mexico, from the casual evening hot cocoa drink, unique for its cinnamon overtones at places like **La Soledad** (p. 634) to seven kinds of mole served at restaurants all over the city.

When it comes to coffee, it seems the entire country is searching for the best buzz. Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, and Oaxaca are hot spots for local organic growers and roasters and have excellent small coffee bars, although you won't find super cheap cups, since much of the country's coffee is still grown for export.

totally off the grid, every grid—electrical, mental, and cosmological. This rustic yet high-end spot is so remote, the only mechanical sound you'll hear is the occasional put-put of a water taxi passing off shore. That's a very good thing.

- In Cancún, **El Rey del Caribe** (p. 192) is another grid-free possibility, a hacienda-style hotel in the jungle, smothered in orchids, with a vegetarian-friendly menu, solar-powered electricity, and a full-service spa. It perfectly straddles the line between old and new Mexico. You want tai chi classes with your cable channels? *No problema.*
- **La Casa Que Canta** (p. 564) is one of the *world's* best resorts, in my opinion.

On the bay of Zihuatanejo, nestled amid banana trees and palms framing the sea, it's a romantic never-never land, complete with infinity pools and blue-flash sunsets.

- **One&Only Palmilla** (p. 385) is currently the most popular Mexican resort with the Hollywood crowd; the completely renovated Palmilla has regained its spot as the most deluxe hotel in this seaside playground known for sumptuous accommodations and great golf. The exceptional spa, fitness center, and yoga garden, as well as a restaurant under the direction of renowned chef Charlie Trotter, are added bonuses.

Best Eating

Don't worry. Eating from street stands is an essential part of visiting Mexico and it's safe if you take precautions (see "Health & Safety," in "Basics")—plus you'll never find a cheaper, better sidewalk meal this side of Bangkok.

- Ensenada's **Mariscos La Guerrerense** (p. 346) makes ceviche like nowhere else—13 types from shrimp to octopus, clam, and sea urchin, all on small crunchy tortillas and served with a whole zoo of startling homemade sauces. They keep the fish on ice and have been on the same street corner for nearly 50 years, for a good reason.
- **Hangman's** in San José del Cabo (p. 373) is an example of what happens when a street stand grows up and puts on a tarp roof. Off the beaten path yet populated with locals and visiting surfers in the know, it feels more like a circus setting than a place to eat. Amazing turkey tacos, charro beans, and flor de calabaza sauces are all on the menu. It doesn't get more real or savory than this.
- In the Yucatán on Isla Mujeres, the **Playa Lancheros Restaurant** (p. 226) is the sort of place where everyone digs in with their fingers, plucking apart spiced fish prepared in the Tikin Xic

6 * The Best of Mexico

style (like whole red snappers rubbed with bitter orange and chiles and baked in wood-fired ovens).

- In Oaxaca, everyone stops by **Tlayudas del Libres** (p. 636) after a night of drinking for amazing *tlayudas*, huge handmade tortillas crisped on live coals, plastered with black beans (seasoned with avocado leaf) and salsa, and topped with *tasajo* (half-dried salted beef).

- **El Tacón de Marlín**, next to the airport in Puerto Vallarta (p. 457), has amazing smoked marlin, stuffed into a grilled burrito with sweet-sour mayo dressing and a side of jicama. After tasting one, you might want to book another flight just to know you'll be coming back for more soon.

Best Reasons to Stay Up 'til Dawn

- Mexico has countless amazing bars and clubs, but let's start with Mexico City's **Pervert Lounge** (p. 109). Doesn't the name just say it all? Here you can dance to electronica, acid-jazz, and trip-hop until dawn with models and geeks, students, and bohos. It's a tiny place, totally decked out in Barbie dolls, trash containers, stuffed animals, and assorted pack rat craziness.
- In Cancún, the party scene has been taken to a whole new level at places like **Coco Bongo** (p. 201). Foam, lasers, neon confetti, and trapeze artists are all mixed up with a deafening soundtrack and thousands of sweating strangers pressed up against you.
- Acapulco's **Palladium** (p. 531) is another madhouse that's open way-late—this one comes with a dress-to-impress look and view of the bay that is the perfect backdrop to grooving and grinding.
- Mazatlán is where **Señor Frog's** (p. 502) insanity began: Super-tall drinks, conga lines, table dancing, thong contests, they've got it all. There are Señor Frog's all over Mexico these days, and they differ in quality—this is the country's best.
- In Cabo San Lucas, **Squid Roe** (p. 403) or the **Giggling Marlin** (p. 403) are the places to stop by for a fast tray of vodka-Jello before you get hung by your ankles in the harness for some gravity-defying tequila shots. (It's the marlin's revenge, get it?) Both are definitely places to party 'til you, well . . . you know.

Best Sightseeing

- The **Museo Nacional de Antropología** in Mexico City (p. 117) is like the Louvre—except the art and culture here are way older. This is where you should come if you really want to touch the soul of Mexico. Its staggering 53,000-plus item collection shouldn't be missed.
- For what many consider the best art library in Mexico, head to the **Instituto de Artes Graficas de Oaxaca** (p. 644). This world-class collection of artist (and Oaxaca native) Francisco Toledo has more than 30,000 volumes on art, movies, and architecture, which Toledo has essentially donated to local citizens to use.
- Prefer to sightsee outdoors? Then check out the cliff-divers of Acapulco's **La Quebrada** cliff in Old Town (p. 538). Every night on the half-hour, starting at 7:30, the divers step onto the small platform over the sea, torches in hand, and

Best Archaeological Sites ✨ 7

leap into the darkness. This is an iconic tourist stop, so retro yet still so real (because if they time it wrong and miss the swell, then, ouch).

- The **Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino** (p. 121) was Patino's home but is now a rambling display case for a huge collection of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo art; the **Frida Kahlo Museum** in Kahlo's original home, as well as the **Leon Trotsky Museo**, in the house where he was assassinated, also showcase the museum-in-a-house style of museum that's so popular in Mexico. All of these *museos* are in Mexico City; see chapter 3.
- At the other end of the country, just a few miles from San Diego, the **Centro Cultural Tijuana** (p. 332) is the kind of place one should expect from a unique border city like Tijuana—a rich and well used performance space and museum. It

helps that the building itself is brilliant, a fat Death Star–like structure (boasting an OMNIMAX theater) where everyone from ballet divas to border outsider artists makes appearances.

- Acapulco's **La Casa de las Máscaras**, the House of Masks (p. 537), gives a whole new depth to the masks that lucha libre wrestlers wear. Here you'll see more than 1,000 samples of the still vibrant mask-making tradition in Mexico on display. You don't have to limit your masked endeavors to this museum, though. From Mexico City's **Arena Mexico to carnaval** in Mazatlán, masks pop up all over the place. To fully understand the Mexican psyche, why not try one on yourself? Masks are on sale at almost all markets throughout the country.

Best Archaeological Sites

- **Teotihuacán** is so close to Mexico City, yet centuries away. You can feel the majesty of the past in a stroll down the pyramid-lined Avenue of the Dead, from the Pyramid of the Sun to the Pyramid of the Moon. Imagine what a fabulous place this must have been when the walls were stuccoed and painted brilliant colors. See chapter 3.
- A grand ceremonial city built on a mountaintop overlooking the valley of Oaxaca, **Monte Albán** offers the visitor panoramic vistas; a fascinating view of a society in transition, reflected in the contrasting methods of pyramid construction; and intriguing details in ornamentation. See chapter 14.
- No matter how many times you see **Uxmal**, the splendor of its stone carvings is awe-inspiring. A stone rattle-snake undulates across the facade of the Nunnery complex, and 103 masks of the rain god Chaac project out from the Governor's Palace. See chapter 6.

Best Way to Secure Good Karma

Between June and November, sea turtles return to the beaches of their birth to lay their eggs in nests on the sand. With poaching and natural predators threatening these species, communities along Mexico's Pacific coast have established protected nesting areas. Many are open for public viewing and participation in the egg collection and baby-turtle release processes. Turtles are found along the Yucatán coast, in Baja Sur, in Puerto Vallarta, and along the Costa Chica up to Oaxaca.

8 * The Best of Mexico

- Stand beside the giant serpent head at the foot of El Castillo pyramid at **Chichén Itzá** and you can't help but marvel at the architects and astronomers who positioned the building

so precisely that shadow and sunlight form a serpent's body slithering from the peak to the earth at each equinox (Mar 21 and Sept 21). See chapter 6.

Best Overall Playing Outside

- Want to get your game on? **Valle de Bravo**, a couple of hours west of Mexico City (p. 139), is the best place in the country for **mountain biking**, **hang gliding**, **rock climbing** that almost equals Everest, **sailing**, and **horseback riding**. All that, and you'll also get Aztec sweat lodges in fab modern architecture après-play.
- If that doesn't get your heart pumping, try the ultimate free fall, **sky diving** into a picture-postcard-worthy landscape over **Cabo San Lucas** (p. 410).
- If being jet-propelled over the ocean by the wind is your thing, **Los Barriles** (p. 430) in southern Baja has become a mecca for **windsurfing** in recent years.
- From Cabo San Lucas to La Paz, and continuing north, the Sea of Cortez is a sea **kayaker's** dream. It has dozens of tiny coves and impressive inlets to pull into

and explore, under the watchful gaze of sea lions and dolphins. Professional outfitters provide gear, guides, and instruction for novices. See chapter 8.

- The coral reefs off the island of **Cozumel**, Mexico's premier **diving** destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. See chapter 6.
- The Yucatán's coastal reef is part of the second-largest reef system in the world and affords excellent diving. Especially beautiful is the **Chinchorro Reef**, 32km (20 miles) offshore from Majahual or Xcalak. You can also dive in the clear, cool water of the many caverns and **cenotes** (sinkholes, or natural wells) that dot the interior. See chapter 6. Other excellent dive sites are in and around **Puerto Vallarta** and off **Los Cabos**. See chapters 9 and 8.

Best Biking

- Not all the joys of Mexico are on the sands. Some are out in the mud on a mountain, weaving between the cornfields, sliding sideways on tricky single-track, and climbing into the Sierras. **San Miguel de Allende** (p. 177), has more than 1,280km (800 miles) of tracks that crisscross the high plateau.
- Over in Baja, the contrast between resort and reality get put into stark display on a 2-hour climb out of **Los Cabos** (p. 407), that finishes with a screaming downhill run back to town. You'll ride

with Club Cactus, a loose assortment of shredders and shlubs, locals and tourists. Nobody gets left behind, since it's all in good fun.

- Like a little brew with your biking? The annual **Rosarito fun ride** (p. 314) attracts thousands of cyclists of every shape and size to ride the free highway (closed to cars for this event) along the mountains bordering the sea with the final goal—plenty of cerveza—being a definite motivating factor.

Best Surfing

- There's a good reason why the first tourists who explored Mexico's beaches were mainly surfers from California. The waves all along the Pacific Coast, from Puerto Escondido in the south to Ensenada in Baja Norte, are beyond outstanding. There are bone-crushers and gentle newbie-friendly sandy bottom breaks, pocket rocket shore breaks, and long board point breaks. They are as diverse as you might expect from a 1,600km (thousand-mile) open ocean coastline. Better yet, the water is mostly bathtub warm, the crowds are small, and the locals are generally welcoming since, unlike in California, there are still plenty of waves for everyone here. The best view for watching the pros do what you can only dream of has to be Puerto Escondido's **Zicatela Beach**, aka the "Mexican pipeline" (p. 612).
- In Cabo, **Old Man's**, **Zipper's**, and **La Roca** (p. 379) are less intimidating. Across the Sea of Cortez in Nayarit and Sinaloa, there are literally scores of breaks, running for hundreds of miles, starting north of Mazatlán (p. 509) and continuing south to Sayulita and Punta de Mita.

Best Shopping

- Whatever you're looking for, you'll undoubtedly find it at **Mexico City's La Lagunilla** (p. 127), or Thieves Market. It's one of the biggest flea markets in the world and has been going for decades. You'll find everything from antiques, coins, clothes, toys, farm equipment, serapes, branding irons, retablas, stuffed animals, photos, to rugs here—it goes on and on. Just watch out for pickpockets: It's called Thieves Market for a reason.
- Oaxaca's "Los Baules" de Juana Cata** (p. 648) is an amazing little store with the absolute best textile art you'll find anywhere, including high-end private collections. The pieces—felt hats, shawls, pants, and so on—are unique, expensive, and live up to the standards of the most artistic state of Mexico. You can truly wear a piece of history if you buy something from here.
- The **valley of Oaxaca** produces the best weavings and naturally dyed textiles in Mexico; it's also famous for its pottery (especially the black pottery), and colorful, imaginative woodcarvings. See chapter 14.
- Latin American art is surging in popularity and recognition, and **Mexico City's galleries** feature artwork by some of Mexico's best masters and emerging stars, with **Oaxaca**, **Puerto Vallarta**, and **San Miguel de Allende galleries** also offering excellent selections. See chapters 3, 4, 9, and 14.
- One of the last indigenous cultures to remain faithful to their customs, language, and traditions, the Huichol Indians come down from the Sierra Madre to sell their unusual art to **Puerto Vallarta** boutiques. Inspired by visions received during spiritual ceremonies, the Huichol create their art with colorful yarn or beads pressed into wax. See "Shopping" in chapter 9.