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Inland to Old Mexico: Taxco & Cuernavaca

It may seem as if the small towns in this region of Mexico are trying to capitalize on recent trends in travel toward spas and self-exploration, but in reality, they've helped define them. From the restorative properties of thermal waters and earth-based spa treatments to delving into the mystical and spiritual properties of gemstones and herbs, the treasures and knowledge in these towns have existed for years—and, in some cases, for centuries.

This chapter covers Taxco and Cuernavaca, two towns that feature the artistry of Old Mexico. The legendary silver city of **Taxco** is renowned for its museums, picturesque hillside colonial-era charm, and, of course, its silver shops. Verdant **Cuernavaca**, known as the land of eternal spring, has gained a reputation for its exceptional spa facilities and its wealth of cultural and historic attractions.

Other good bets in this area include the venerable thermal spas at **Ixtapan de la Sal** and their more modern counterparts in **Valle de Bravo** (both north of Taxco and southwest of Mexico City). To the Northeast of Cuernavaca, **Tepoztlán's** enigmatic charms and legendary pyramid captivate the few travelers who find their way there.

1 Taxco: Cobblestones & Silver ★★

111 miles (178km) SW of Mexico City; 50 miles (80km) SW of Cuernavaca; 178 miles (296km) NE of Acapulco

In Mexico and around the world, the town of Taxco de Alarcón—most commonly known simply as Taxco (*tahs-koh*)—is synonymous with silver. The town's geography and architecture are equally precious: Taxco sits at nearly 1,515m (5,000 ft.) on a hill among hills, and almost any point in the city offers fantastic views.

Hernán Cortez discovered Taxco as he combed the area for treasure, but its rich caches of silver weren't fully exploited for another 2 centuries. In 1751, the French prospector Joseph de la Borda—who

Taxco



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came to be known locally as José—commissioned the baroque Santa Prisca Church that dominates Taxco's *zócalo* (Plaza Borda) as a way of giving something back to the town. In the mid-1700s, Borda was considered the richest man in New Spain.

The fact that Taxco has become Mexico's most renowned center for silver design, even though it now mines only a small amount of silver, is the work of an American, William Spratling. Spratling arrived in the late 1920s with the intention of writing a book. He soon noticed the skill of the local craftsmen and opened a workshop to produce handmade silver jewelry and tableware based on pre-Hispanic art, which he exported to the United States in bulk. The workshops flourished, and Taxco's reputation grew.

Today, most of the residents of this town are involved in the silver industry in some way. Taxco is home to hundreds (some say up to 900) of silver shops and outlets, ranging from sleek galleries to small stands in front of stucco homes. You'll find silver in all of its forms here—the jewelry basics, tea sets, silverware, candelabras, picture frames, and napkin holders.

The tiny one-man factories that line the cobbled streets all the way up into the hills supply most of Taxco's silverwork. "Bargains" are relative, but nowhere else will you find this combination of diversity, quality, and rock-bottom prices. Generally speaking, the larger shops that most obviously cater to the tourist trade will have the highest prices—but they may be the only ones to offer "that special something" you're looking for. For classic designs in jewelry or other silver items, shop around, and wander the back streets and smaller venues.

You can get an idea of what Taxco is like by spending an afternoon, but there's much more to this picturesque town of 120,000 than just the Plaza Borda and the shops surrounding it. Stay overnight, wander its steep cobblestone streets, and you'll discover little plazas, fine churches, and, of course, an abundance of silver-smiths' shops.

The main part of town is relatively flat. It stretches up the hillside from the highway, and it's a steep but brief walk up. White VW minibuses, called *burritos*, make the circuit through and around town, picking up and dropping off passengers along the route, from about 7am until 9pm. These taxis are inexpensive (about 30¢), and you should use them even if you arrive by car, because parking is practically impossible. Also, the streets are so narrow—designed for two horses to navigate at a time—and steep that most visitors find

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them nerve-racking to navigate. Find a secured parking lot for your car or leave it at your hotel, and forget about it until you leave.

Warning: Self-appointed guides will undoubtedly approach you in the *zócalo* (Plaza Borda) and offer their services—they get a cut (up to 25%) of all you buy in the shops they take you to. Before hiring a guide, ask to see his SECTUR (Tourism Secretary) credentials. The Department of Tourism office on the highway at the north end of town can recommend a licensed guide.

ESSENTIALS**GETTING THERE & DEPARTING**

BY CAR From Mexico City, take Paseo de la Reforma to Chapultepec Park and merge with the Periférico, which will take you to Highway 95D on the south end of town. From the Periférico, take the Insurgentes exit and merge until you come to the sign for Cuernavaca/Tlalpan. Choose either CUERNAVACA CUOTA (toll) or CUERNAVACA LIBRE (free). Continue south around Cuernavaca to the Amacuzac interchange, and proceed straight ahead for Taxco. The drive from Mexico City takes about 3½ hours.

From Acapulco you have two options: Highway 95D is the toll road through Iguala to Taxco, or you can take the old two-lane road (95) that winds more slowly through villages; it's in good condition.

BY BUS From Mexico City, buses depart from the Central de Autobuses del Sur station (Metro: Taxqueña) and take 2 to 3 hours, with frequent departures.

Taxco has two bus stations. Estrella de Oro buses arrive at their own station on the southern edge of town. Estrella Blanca service, including *Futura* executive-class buses, and Flecha Roja buses arrive at the station on the northeastern edge of town on Avenida Los Plateros ("Ave. of the Silversmiths," formerly Av. Kennedy). Taxis to the *zócalo* cost around \$2.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **State of Guerrero Dirección de Turismo** (☎/fax 762/622-6616 or 762/622-2274) has offices at the arches on the main highway at the north end of town (Av. de los Plateros 1), which is useful if you're driving into town. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 3:30pm, Saturday and Sunday from 8am to noon. To get there from the Plaza Borda, take a ZOCALO-ARCOS *combi* and get off at the arch over the highway. As you face the arches, the tourism office is on your right.

CITY LAYOUT

The center of town is the tiny **Plaza Borda**, shaded by perfectly manicured Indian laurel trees. On one side is the imposing twin-towered, pink-stone **Santa Prisca Church**; whitewashed, red-tile buildings housing the famous silver shops and a restaurant or two line the other sides. Beside the church, deep in a crevice of the mountain, is the **wholesale silver market**—absolutely the best place to begin your silver shopping, to get an idea of prices for more standard designs. You'll be amazed at the low prices. Buying just one piece is perfectly acceptable, and buying in bulk can lower the per-piece price. One of the beauties of Taxco is that its brick-paved and cobblestone streets are completely asymmetrical, zigzagging up and down the hillsides. The plaza buzzes with vendors of everything from hammocks and cotton candy to bark paintings and balloons.

FAST FACTS

The telephone area code is **762**. The main post office, Benito Juárez 6, at the City Hall building (☎ **762/622-8596**), is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 4pm. The older branch of the post office (☎ **762/622-0501**) is on the outskirts, on the highway to Acapulco. It's in a row of shops with a black-and-white CORREO sign.

EXPLORING TAXCO

Shopping for jewelry and other items is the major pastime for tourists. Prices for silver jewelry at Taxco's more than 700 shops are about the best in the world, and everything is available, from \$1 trinkets to artistic pieces costing hundreds of dollars.

In addition, Taxco is the home of some of Mexico's finest stone sculptors and is a good place to buy masks. However, beware of so-called "antiques"—there are virtually no real ones for sale.

Taxco also offers cultural attractions. Besides the opulent, world-renowned Santa Prisca y San Sebastián Church, you can visit the Spratling Archaeology Museum, the Silver Museum, and the Humboldt House/Museo Virreyenal de Taxco.

Viajes Sibely, Miguel Hidalgo 24 (☎/fax **762/622-7983** or 762/622-3808), offers daily tours to the Cacahuamilpa Caves and the ruins of Xochicalco for \$59, including transportation, ticket, and the services of a guide. It also sells bus tickets to Acapulco, Chilpancingo, Iguala, and Cuernavaca. The agency is to the left of La Hamburguesa. Another agency offering similar services is **Turismo Garlum**, next to the Santa Prisca Church (☎ **762/622-3021** or 762/622-3037). It offers daily tours to the Cacahuamilpa Caves

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and the Santa Prisca Church for \$14, which includes transportation, ticket, and the services of a guide. Both agencies are open daily from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

January 18 marks the annual celebration in honor of Santa Prisca, with public festivities and fireworks displays. **Holy Week** ♀♀ in Taxco is one of the most poignant in the country, beginning the Friday a week before Easter with processions daily and nightly. The most riveting procession, on Thursday evening, lasts almost 4 hours and includes villagers from the surrounding area carrying statues of saints, followed by hooded members of a society of self-flagellating penitents, chained at the ankles and carrying huge wooden crosses and bundles of penetrating thorny branches. On Saturday morning, the Plaza Borda fills for the **Procession of Three Falls**, reenacting the three times Christ stumbled and fell while carrying the cross.

Taxco's **Silver Fair** starts the last week in November and continues through the first week in December. It includes a competition for silver works and sculptures among the top silversmiths. At the same time, **Jornadas Alarconianas** features plays and literary events in honor of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón (1572–1639), a world-famous dramatist who was born in Taxco—and for whom Taxco de Alarcón is named. Both the silver fair and these readings were traditionally held in the spring but have been switched to the late fall. Art exhibits, street fairs, and other festivities are part of the dual celebration.

Sights in Town

Casa de la Cultura de Taxco (Casa Borda) Diagonally across from the Santa Prisca Church and facing Plaza Borda is the home José de la Borda built for his son around 1759. Now the Guerrero State Cultural Center, it houses classrooms and exhibit halls where period clothing, engravings, paintings, and crafts are on display. The center also books traveling exhibits.

Plaza Borda 1. ☎ **762/622-6617** or 762/622-6632. Fax 762/662-6634. Free admission. Tues–Sun 10am–9pm.

Humboldt House/Museo Virreyenal de Taxco Stroll along Ruiz de Alarcón (the street behind the Casa Borda) and look for the richly decorated facade of the Humboldt House, where the renowned German scientist and explorer Baron Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) spent a night in 1803. The museum houses 18th-century memorabilia pertinent to Taxco, most of which came from a secret room discovered during the recent restoration of

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the Santa Prisca Church. Signs with detailed information are in Spanish and English.

The three stories of the museum are divided by eras and by persons famous in Taxco's history. Another section presents historical information about Don Miguel Cabrera, Mexico's foremost 18th-century artist. Fine examples of clerical garments decorated with gold and silver thread hang in glass cases. Excellently restored Cabrera paintings hang throughout the museum; some were found in the displayed frames, others were haphazardly rolled up. And, of course, a small room is devoted to Humboldt and his sojourns through South America and Mexico.

Calle Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 12. ☎ 762/622-5501. Admission \$1.50 adults, \$1 students and teachers with ID. Tues–Sat 10am–7pm; Sun 9am–4pm.

Mercado Central Located to the right of the Santa Prisca Church, behind and below Bertá's, Taxco's central market meanders deep inside the mountain. Take the stairs off the street. In addition to a collection of wholesale silver shops, you'll find numerous food stands, always the best place for a cheap meal.

Plaza Borda. Shops daily 10am–8pm; food stands daily 7am–6pm.

Museo Arqueológico Guillermo Spratling A plaque in Spanish explains that most of the collection of pre-Columbian art displayed here, as well as the funds for the museum, came from William Spratling. You'd expect this to be a silver museum, but it's not—for Spratling silver, go to the Spratling Ranch Workshop (see "Nearby Attractions," below). The entrance floor and the one above display a good collection of pre-Columbian statues and implements in clay, stone, and jade. The lower floor holds changing exhibits.

Calle Porfirio A. Delgado 1. ☎ 762/622-1660. Admission \$3 adults, free for children under 12; free to all Sun. Tues–Sat 9am–6pm; Sun 8am–3pm. Leaving Santa Prisca Church, turn right and right again at the corner; continue down the street, veer right, then immediately left. The museum will be facing you.

Santa Prisca y San Sebastián Church ★★ This is Taxco's centerpiece parish church; it faces the pleasant Plaza Borda. José de la Borda, a French miner who struck it rich in Taxco's silver mines, funded the construction. Completed in 1758 after 8 years of labor, it's one of Mexico's most impressive baroque churches. The ultra-carved facade is eclipsed by the interior, where the intricacy of the gold-leafed saints and cherubic angels is positively breathtaking. The paintings by Miguel Cabrera, one of Mexico's most famous

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colonial-era artists, are the pride of Taxco. The sacristy (behind the high altar) contains more Cabrera paintings.

Guides, both children and adults, will approach you outside the church offering to give a tour, and it's worth the few pesos to get a full explanation of what you're seeing. Make sure the guide's English is passable, however, and establish whether the price is per person or per tour.

Plaza Borda. ☎ 762/622-0184. Free admission. Daily 6:30am–8pm.

Silver Museum The Silver Museum, operated by a local silversmith, is a relatively recent addition to Taxco. After entering the building next to Santa Prisca (upstairs is Sr. Costilla's restaurant, p. 147), look for a sign on the left; the museum is downstairs. It's not a traditional public museum; nevertheless, it does the much-needed job of describing the history of silver in Mexico and Taxco, as well as displaying some historic and contemporary award-winning pieces. Time spent here seeing quality silver work will make you a more discerning shopper in Taxco's silver shops. At press time, it was in the process of upgrading the exhibits.

Plaza Borda 1. ☎ 762/622-0658. Admission \$1. Daily 10am–5:30pm.

Nearby Attractions

The impressive **Grutas de Cacahuamilpa** ⚡, known as the Cacahuamilpa Caves or Grottoes (☎ 555/150-5031), are 20 minutes north of Taxco. Hourly guided tours run daily at the caverns, which are truly sensational and well worth the visit. To see them, you can join a tour from Taxco (see “Exploring Taxco,” above) or take a *combi* from the Flecha Roja terminal in Taxco; the one-way fare is \$2.50. The caves are open daily from 10am to 5pm. Admission is \$3. Note that you're unlikely to encounter an English-speaking person at the main number, which connects to a remote phone booth, and the connection is poor. For more information, see “Sights near Tepoztlán,” later in this chapter.

Los Castillo Don Antonio Castillo was one of hundreds of young men to whom William Spratling taught the silversmithing trade in the 1930s. He was also one of the first to branch out with his own shops and line of designs, which over the years have earned him a fine reputation. Castillo has shops in several Mexican cities. Now, his daughter Emilia creates her own noteworthy designs, including decorative pieces with silver fused onto porcelain. Emilia's work is for sale on the ground floor of the Posada de los Castillo, just below

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the Plazuela Bernal. Another store, featuring the designs of Don Antonio, is in Mexico City's Zona Rosa, at Amberes 41.

8km (5 miles) south of town on the Acapulco Hwy. Also at Plazuela Bernal, Taxco. ☎ 762/622-1016 or 762/622-1988 (workshop and fax). Free admission. Workshop Mon–Fri 9am–2pm and 3–6pm; open to groups at other hours by appointment only.

Spratling Ranch Workshop William Spratling's hacienda-style home and workshop on the outskirts of Taxco still bustles with busy hands reproducing unique designs. A trip here will show you what distinctive Spratling work was all about, for the designs crafted today show the same fine work. Although the prices are higher than at other outlets, the designs are unusual and considered collectible. There's no store in Taxco, and unfortunately, most of the display cases hold only samples. With the exception of a few jewelry pieces, most items are by order only. Ask about U.S. outlets.

10km (6 miles) south of town on the Acapulco Hwy. No phone. Free admission. Mon–Sat 9am–5pm. The *combi* to Iguala stops at the ranch; fare is 70¢.

WHERE TO STAY

Taxco is an overnight visitor's dream: charming and picturesque, with a respectable selection of pleasant, well-kept hotels. Hotel prices tend to rise at holiday times (especially Easter week).

MODERATE

Hacienda del Solar ★★ This hotel comprises several Mexican-style cottages, all on a beautifully landscaped hilltop with magnificent views of the surrounding valleys and the town. The decor is slightly different in each cottage, but most contain lots of beautiful handcrafts, red-tile floors, and bathrooms with handmade tiles. Several rooms have vaulted tile ceilings and private terraces with panoramic views. Others come equipped with more modern amenities, like televisions. Standard rooms have no terraces and only showers in the bathrooms; deluxe rooms have sunken tubs (with showers) and terraces. Junior suites are the largest and most luxurious accommodations. All rooms are priced the same, so if you want one of the larger ones (suites), make sure to ask for it when you check in.

Paraje del Solar s/n (Apdo. Postal 96), 40200 Taxco, Gro. ☎ 762/622-0323. Fax 762/622-0587. 27 units. \$120 double. Take Hwy. 95 toward Acapulco 4km (2½ miles) south of the town center; look for signs on the left and go straight down a narrow road until you see the hotel entrance. **Amenities:** Restaurant (with spectacular city view; see "Where to Dine," below); heated outdoor pool; tennis court; travel desk; room service; laundry service.

INEXPENSIVE

Hotel los Arcos ★ Los Arcos occupies a converted 1620 monastery. The handsome inner patio is bedecked with Puebla pottery surrounding a central fountain. The rooms are nicely but sparsely appointed, with natural tile floors and colonial-style furniture. You'll feel immersed in colonial charm and blissful quiet. To find the hotel from the Plaza Borda, follow the hill down (with Hotel Agua Escondida on your left) and make an immediate right at the Plazuela Bernal; the hotel is a block down on the left, opposite the Hotel Posada (see below).

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 4, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ☎ **762/622-1836**. Fax 762/622-7982. 21 units. \$35 double; \$30 single; \$40 triple; \$45 quad; \$50 junior suite. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Tour desk.

Hotel Posada ★ Each room in this delightful small hotel is simply but beautifully appointed with handsome carved doors and furniture; bathrooms have either tubs or showers. The manager, Don Teodoro Contreras Galindo, is a true gentleman and a fountain of information about Taxco.

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 7, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ☎/fax **762/622-1396**. 15 units. \$30 double, \$40 double with TV. No credit cards. From the Plaza Borda, go downhill a short block to the Plazuela Bernal and make an immediate right; the hotel is a block farther on the right, opposite the Hotel los Arcos (see above).

Hotel Santa Prisca ★★ *Value* The Santa Prisca, 1 block from the Plaza Borda on the Plazuela San Juan, is one of the older and nicer hotels in town. Rooms are small but comfortable, with standard bathrooms (showers only), tile floors, wood beams, and a colonial atmosphere. For longer stays, ask for a room in the adjacent new addition, where the rooms are sunnier, quieter, and more spacious. There is a reading area in an upstairs salon overlooking Taxco, as well as a lush patio with fountains.

Cenaobscuras 1, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ☎ **762/622-0080** or 762/622-0980. Fax 762/622-2938. 34 units. \$46 double, \$52 superior double; \$64 suite. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Dining-room-style restaurant and bar; room service; laundry service; safe-deposit boxes.

Hotel Victoria ★★ The Victoria clings to the hillside above town, with stunning views from its flower-covered verandas. It exudes the charm of old-fashioned Mexico. The comfortable furnishings, though slightly run-down, evoke the hotel's 1940s heyday. In front of each standard room, a table and chairs sit out on the tiled common walkway. Each deluxe room has a private terrace; each junior suite has a

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bedroom, a nicely furnished large living room, and a spacious private terrace overlooking the city. Deluxe rooms and junior suites have TVs. Even if you don't stay here, come for a drink in the comfortable bar and living room, or sit on the terrace to take in the fabulous view. Formerly known as Rancho Taxco Victoria, the hotel underwent a change in management in 2002.

Carlos J. Nibbi 5 and 7 (Apdo. Postal 83), 40200 Taxco, Gro. ☎ 762/622-0004. Fax 762/622-0010. 63 units. \$55 standard double, \$89 deluxe double; \$100 junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. From the Plazuela San Juan, go up Carlos J. Nibbi, a narrow, winding cobbled street. The hotel is at the top of the hill. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool.

WHERE TO DINE

Taxco gets a lot of day-trippers from the capital and Acapulco, most of whom choose to dine close to the Plaza Borda. Prices in this area are high for what you get. Just a few streets back, you'll find some excellent, simple *fondas* or restaurants.

VERY EXPENSIVE

Toni's ★ STEAKS/SEAFOOD High on a mountaintop, Toni's is an intimate, classic restaurant enclosed in a huge, cone-shaped *palapa* with a panoramic view of the city. Eleven candlelit tables sparkle with crystal and crisp linen. The menu, mainly shrimp or beef, is limited, but the food is superior. Try tender, juicy prime roast beef, which comes with Yorkshire pudding, creamed spinach, and baked potato. Lobster is sometimes available. To reach Toni's, it's best to take a taxi. Note that it's open for dinner only.

In the Hotel Monte Taxco. ☎ 762/622-1300. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$14–\$22. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 7pm–1am.

MODERATE

Cielito Lindo MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Cielito Lindo is probably the most popular place on the plaza for lunch. The menu is ample—there's something for every taste—but the best options are classic Mexican dishes. Chicken *mole* is an excellent choice. The tables, laid with blue-and-white local crockery, are usually packed, and plates of food disappear as fast as the waiters can bring them. You can get anything from soup to roast chicken, enchiladas, tacos, steak, and dessert, as well as frosty margaritas.

Plaza Borda 14. ☎ 762/622-0603. Breakfast \$4.90–\$7; main courses \$7.50–\$14. No credit cards. Daily 9am–11pm.

La Ventana de Taxco ★ ITALIAN The spectacular view of the city from this restaurant makes it one of the best places to dine in

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Taxco. The changing menu of standard Italian fare is also quite good. The pasta dishes are the most recommendable. Lasagna is a big favorite, and Sicilian steak is also popular.

In the Hacienda del Solar hotel, Paraje del Solar s/n. ☎/fax 762/622-0323. Breakfast \$3–\$7; main courses \$10–\$20. V, MC. Daily 8–11am and 1–10:30pm.

Sotavento Restaurant Bar Galería ★★ ITALIAN/INTERNATIONAL Paintings decorate the walls of this stylish restaurant, and a variety of linen colors dot the tables. The menu features many Italian specialties—try deliciously fresh spinach salad and large pepper steak for a hearty meal, or Spaghetti Barbara, with poblano peppers and avocado, for a vegetarian option.

Juárez 8, next to City Hall. No phone. Main courses \$3–\$8. No credit cards. Tues–Sun 1pm–midnight. From the Plaza Borda, walk downhill beside the Hotel Agua Escondida, then follow the street as it bears left (don't go right on Juan Ruiz de Alarcón) about 1 block. The restaurant is on the left just after the street bends left.

Sr. Costilla's MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL The offbeat decor at “Mr. Ribs” includes a ceiling decked out with an assortment of cultural curios. Several tiny balconies hold a few minuscule tables that afford a view of the plaza and church, and they fill up long before the large dining room does. The menu is typical of Carlos Anderson restaurants (you may have encountered them in your Mexican travels), with Spanglish sayings and a large selection of everything from soup, steaks, sandwiches, and spareribs to desserts and coffee. The restaurant serves wine, beer, and drinks.

Plaza Borda 1 (next to Santa Prisca, above Plaza de las Artesanías). ☎/fax 762/622-3215. Main courses \$8–\$20. MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

INEXPENSIVE

Restaurante Ethel MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL This family-run place is opposite the Hotel Santa Prisca, 1 block from the Plaza Borda. It has colorful cloths on the tables and a tidy, homey atmosphere. The hearty daily *comida corrida* consists of soup or pasta, meat (perhaps a small steak), dessert, and good coffee.

Plazuela San Juan 14. ☎ 762/622-0788. Breakfast \$4.45–\$5.55; main courses \$5.15–\$6.30; *comida corrida* (served 1–5pm) \$5.80. No credit cards. Daily 9am–9pm.

TAXCO AFTER DARK

Paco's (no phone) is the most popular place overlooking the square for cocktails, conversation, and people-watching, all of which continue until midnight daily. Taxco's version of a disco, **Windows**, is

high up the mountain in the **Hotel Monte Taxco** (☎ 762/622-1300). The whole city is on view, and music runs the gamut from the hit parade to hard rock. For a cover of \$6.70, you can dance away Saturday night from 10pm to 3am.

Completely different in tone is **Berta's** (no phone), next to the Santa Prisca Church. Opened in 1930 by a lady named Berta, who made her fame on a drink of the same name (tequila, soda, lime, and honey), it's the traditional gathering place of the local gentry and more than a few tourists. Spurs and old swords decorate the walls, and a saddle is casually slung over the banister on the stairs leading to the second-floor room, where tin masks leer from the walls. A Berta (the drink, of course) costs about \$2; rum, the same. It's open daily from 11am to around 10pm.

National drinks (not beer) are two-for-one nightly between 6 and 8pm at the terrace bar of the **Hotel Victoria** (☎ 762/622-0004), where you can also drink in the fabulous view.

2 Cuernavaca: Land of Eternal Spring ★★

64 miles (102km) S of Mexico City; 50 miles (80km) N of Taxco

Often called the “land of eternal spring,” Cuernavaca is known these days as much for its rejuvenating spas and spiritual sites as it is for its perfect climate and flowering landscapes. If springtime is when the earth experiences its annual rebirth, then what better setting for a personal renaissance? Spa services are easy to find, but more than that, Cuernavaca exudes a sense of deep connection with its historical and spiritual heritage. Its palaces, walled villas, and elaborate haciendas are home to museums, spas, and extraordinary guesthouses.

Wander the traditional markets and you'll see crystals, quartz, onyx, and tiger's eye, in addition to tourist trinkets. These stones come from the Tepozteco Mountains—for centuries considered an energy source—which cradle Cuernavaca to the north and east. This area is where Mexico begins to narrow, and several mountain ranges converge. East and southeast of Cuernavaca are two volcanoes, also potent symbols of earth energy, *Ixaccihuatl* (the Sleeping Woman) and the recently active *Popocatepetl* (the Smoking Mountain). The geography and the wisdom of the ancient inhabitants, passed down through the years, have given a restorative energy to this privileged place.

Cuernavaca, capital of the state of Morelos, is also a cultural treasure, with a past that closely follows the history of Mexico—it was always considered a sanctuary for residents of the capital city. So

Cuernavaca



divine are the landscape and climate that both the Aztec ruler Moctezuma and colonial Emperor Maximilian built private retreats here. Today, the roads between Mexico City and Cuernavaca are jammed almost every weekend, when city residents seek the same respite. As a result, restaurants and hotels may be full as well. Cuernavaca even has a large American colony, plus many students attending the numerous language and cultural institutes.

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Emperor Charles V gave Cuernavaca to Hernán Cortez as a fief, and in 1532 the conquistador built a palace (now the Museo de Cuauhnahuac), where he lived on and off for half a dozen years before returning to Spain. Cortez introduced sugar cane cultivation to the area, and African slaves were brought in to work in the cane fields, by way of Spain's Caribbean colonies. His sugar hacienda at the edge of town is now the impressive Hotel de Cortez. The economics of sugar cane production failed to serve the interests of the indigenous farmers, and there were numerous uprisings in colonial times.

After Mexico gained independence from Spain, powerful landowners from Mexico City gradually dispossessed the remaining small landholders, imposing virtual serfdom on them. This condition led to the rise of Emiliano Zapata, the great champion of agrarian reform, who battled the forces of wealth and power, defending the small farmer with the cry of “¡Tierra y Libertad!” (Land and Liberty!) during the Mexican Revolution following 1910.

Today, Cuernavaca's popularity has brought with it an influx of wealthy foreigners and industrial capital. With this commercial growth, the city has also acquired the less desirable by-products of increased traffic, noise, and air pollution.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

BY CAR From Mexico City, take Paseo de la Reforma to Chapultepec Park and merge with the Periférico, which will take you to Highway 95D, the toll road on the far south of town that goes to Cuernavaca. From the Periférico, take the Insurgentes exit and continue until you come to signs for Cuernavaca/Tlalpan. Choose either the Cuernavaca Cuota (toll) or the old Cuernavaca Libre (free) road on the right. The free road is slower and very windy, but is more scenic.

BY BUS *Important note:* Buses to Cuernavaca depart directly from the Mexico City airport. The trip takes an hour. The Mexico City Central de Autobuses del Sur exists primarily to serve the Mexico City–Cuernavaca–Taxco–Acapulco–Zihuatanejo route, so you'll have little trouble getting a bus. Pullman has two stations in Cuernavaca: downtown, at the corner of Abasolo and Netzahualcoyotl (☎ 777/318-0907 and 777/312-6063), 4 blocks south of the center of town; and Casino de la Selva (☎ 777/312-9473), less conveniently located at Plan de Ayala 14, near the railroad station.

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Autobuses Estrella Blanca, Elite, Futura, and Flecha Roja also depart from the Central del Sur (☎ 777/312-2626), with 33 buses daily from Mexico City. They arrive in Cuernavaca at Morelos 329, between Arista and Victoria, 6 blocks north of the town center. Here, you'll find frequent buses to Toluca, Chalma, Ixtapan de la Sal, Taxco, Acapulco, the Cacahuamilpa Caves, Querétaro, and Nuevo Laredo.

Estrella de Oro (☎ 777/312-3055), Morelos 900, serves Iguala, Chilpancingo, Acapulco, and Taxco.

Auttransportes Oro (☎ 777/320-2748 or 777/320-2801), Bulevar Cuauhnahuac Km 2.5, Col. Buganvilias, serves Puebla and Izucar de Matamoros, among other destinations.

Estrella Roja (☎ 777/318-5934), a second-class station at Galeana and Cuauhtemotzin in Cuernavaca, about 8 blocks south of the town center, serves Cuautla, Yautepec, Oaxtepec, and Izúcar de Matamoros.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Cuernavaca's **State Tourist Office** is at Av. Morelos Sur 187, between Jalisco and Tabasco (☎ 777/314-3881, ☎/fax 777/314-3872 or 777/314-3920; www.morelostravel.com), half a block north of the Estrella de Oro bus station and about a 15- to 20-minute walk south of the cathedral. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm. There's also a **City Tourism kiosk** (☎ 777/318-7561 or 777/318-6498), on Morelos beside the El Calvario Church. It's open daily from 10am to 4pm.

CITY LAYOUT

In the center of the city are two contiguous plazas. The smaller and more formal, across from the post office, has a Victorian gazebo (designed by Gustave Eiffel, of Eiffel Tower fame) at its center. This is the **Alameda**. The larger, rectangular plaza with trees, shrubs, and benches is the **Plaza de Armas**. These two plazas are known collectively as the **zócalo** and form the hub for strolling vendors selling balloons, baskets, bracelets, and other crafts from surrounding villages. It's all easy-going, and one of the great pleasures of the town is hanging out at a park bench or table in a nearby restaurant. On Sunday afternoons, orchestras play in the gazebo. At the eastern end of the Alameda is the **Cortez Palace**, the conquistador's residence, now the Museo de Cuauhnahuac.

Note: The city's street-numbering system is extremely confusing. It appears that the city fathers, during the past century or so,

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imposed a new numbering system every 10 or 20 years. An address given as “no. 5” may be in a building that bears the number “506,” or perhaps “Antes no. 5” (former no. 5).



FAST FACTS: Cuernavaca

American Express The local representative is **Viajes Marín**, Edificio las Plazas, Loc. 13 (☎ **777/314-2266** or 777/318-9901; fax 777/312-9297; www.giga.com/~vmarin). It's open daily from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm.

Area Code The telephone area code is **777**.

Banks Bank tellers (9am–3 or 5pm, depending on the bank), ATMs, and *casas de cambio* change money. The closest bank to the *zócalo* is **Bancomer**, Matamoros and Lerdo de Tejada, cater-cornered to Jardín Juárez (across López Rayón from the Alameda). Most banks are open until 6pm Monday through Friday and a half day on Saturday.

Elevation Cuernavaca sits at 1,533m (5,058 ft.).

Hospital **Clínica Londres**, Calle Cuauhtémoc 305, Col Lomas de la Selva (☎ **777/311-2482**, 777/311-2483, or 777/311-2484).

Internet Access **Cyber K@fé**, in La Plazuela, Las Casas 24, Plaza San Agustín, Local 18, Col. Centro (☎ **777/318-4332**), across from the Cortez Palace, offers access for \$2.50 per hour, in addition to full computer services and monthly fee programs. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm, Sunday from noon to 5pm.

Pharmacy **Farmacias del Ahorro** (☎ **777/322-2277**) offers hotel delivery service, but you must ask the front desk of your hotel to place the order, because the pharmacy requires the name of a hotel employee. It has 12 locations around the city, but the individual pharmacies have no phone. They are open daily from 7am to 8pm.

Population Cuernavaca has 400,000 residents.

Post Office The *correo* (☎ **777/312-4379**) is on the Plaza de Armas, next door to Café los Arcos. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Spanish Lessons Cuernavaca is known for its Spanish-language schools. Generally, the schools will help students find lodging with a family or provide a list of places to stay. Rather

than make a long-term commitment in a family living situation, try it for a week, then decide. Contact the **Center for Bilingual Multicultural Studies**, San Jerónimo 304 (Apdo. Postal 1520), 62000 Cuernavaca, Morelos (☎ 777/317-1087 or 777/317-2488, www.spanish.com.mx); **Instituto de Idioma y Cultura en Cuernavaca** (☎ 777/317-8947; fax 777/317-0455; www.idiomaycultura.com); or **Universal Centro de Lengua y Comunicación Social A.C. (Universal Language School)**, J.H. Preciado 171 (Apdo. Postal 1-1826), 62000 Cuernavaca, Morelos (☎ 777/318-2904 or 777/312-4902; www.universal-spanish.com). Note that the whole experience, from classes to lodging, can be quite expensive; the school may accept credit cards for the class portion.

EXPLORING CUERNAVACA

On weekends, the whole city (including the roads, hotels, and restaurants) fills with people from Mexico City. This makes weekends more hectic, but also more fun. You can spend 1 or 2 days sightseeing pleasantly enough. If you've come on a day trip, you may not have time to make all the excursions listed below, but you'll have enough time to see the sights in town. Also notable is the traditional public market, or *mercado*, adjacent to the Cortez Palace. It's open daily from 10am to 10pm, and the colorful rows of stands are a lively place for testing your bargaining skills as you purchase pottery, silver jewelry, crystals, and other trinkets. Note that the Cuauhnahuac museum, a key attraction, is closed on Monday.

Catedral de la Asunción de María ✨ *Moments* As you enter the church precincts and pass down the walk, try to imagine what life in Mexico was like in the old days. Construction on the church began in 1529, a mere 8 years after Cortez conquered Tenochtitlán (Mexico City) from the Aztec, and was completed in 1552. The churchmen could hardly trust their safety to the tenuous allegiance of their new converts, so they built a fortress as a church. The skull and crossbones above the main door is a symbol of the Franciscan order, which had its monastery here. The monastery is still here, in fact, and open to the public; it's on the northwest corner of the church property. Also visible on the exterior walls of the main church are inlaid rocks, placed there in memory of the men who lost their lives during its construction.

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Once inside, wander through the various sanctuaries and the courtyard, and pay special attention to the impressive frescoes painted on the walls, in various states of restoration. The frescoes date to the 1500s and have a distinct Asian style.

The main church sanctuary is stark, even severe, with an incongruous modern feeling (it was refurbished in the 1960s). Frescoes on these walls, discovered during the refurbishing, depict the persecution and martyrdom of St. Felipe de Jesús and his companions in Japan. No one is certain who painted them. In the churchyard, you'll see gravestones marking the tombs of the most devout—or wealthiest—of the parishioners. Being buried on the church grounds was believed to be the most direct route to heaven.

At the corner of Hidalgo and Morelos (3 blocks southwest of the Plaza de Armas). Free admission. Daily 8am–2pm and 4–10pm.

Jardín Borda Across Morelos Street from the cathedral is the Jardín Borda (Borda Gardens). José de la Borda, the Taxco silver magnate, ordered a sumptuous vacation house built here in the late 1700s. When he died in 1778, his son Manuel inherited the land and transformed it into a botanical garden. The large enclosed garden next to the house was a huge private park, laid out in Andalusian style, with little kiosks and an artificial pond. Maximilian found it worthy of an emperor and took it over as his private summer house in 1865.

The gardens were completely restored and reopened in October 1987 as the Jardín Borda Centro de Artes. In the gateway buildings, several galleries hold changing exhibits and large paintings showing scenes from the life of Maximilian and from the history of the Borda Gardens. One portrays the initial meeting between Maximilian and La India Bonita, a local maiden who became his lover.

On your stroll through the gardens, you'll see the little man-made lake on which Austrian, French, and Mexican nobility rowed small boats in the moonlight. Ducks have taken the place of dukes, however. There are rowboats for rent. The lake is now artfully adapted as an outdoor theater, with seats for the audience on one side and the stage on the other. A cafe serves refreshments and light meals, and a weekend market inside the jardín sells arts and crafts.

Morelos 271, at Hidalgo. ☎ 777/318-1038 or 777/318-1052. Fax 777/318-3706. Admission \$1.50; free to all Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–5:30pm.

Jardín Botánico y Museo de Medicina Tradicional y Herbolaria ★★ This museum of traditional herbal medicine, in the south Cuernavaca suburb of Acapantzingo, occupies a former resort

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residence built by Maximilian, the Casa del Olvido. During his brief reign, the Austrian-born emperor came here for trysts with La India Bonita, his Cuernavacan lover. The building was restored in 1960, and the house and gardens now preserve the local wisdom of folk medicine. The shady gardens are lovely to wander through, and you shouldn't miss the 200 orchids growing near the rear of the property. However, the lovers' house, the little dark-pink building in the back, is closed. Take a taxi, or catch *combi* no. 6 at the mercado on Degollado. Ask to be dropped off at Matamoros near the museum. Turn right on Matamoros and walk 1½ blocks; the museum will be on your right.

Matamoros 14, Acapantzingo. ☎ 777/312-5955, 777/312-3108, or 777/314-4046. www.cib.uaem.mx. Free admission. Daily 9am–4:30pm.

Museo Casa Robert Brady ☞☞ This museum in a private home contains more than 1,300 works of art. Among them are pre-Hispanic and colonial pieces; oil paintings by Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo; and handcrafts from America, Africa, Asia, and India. Robert Brady, an Iowa native with a degree in fine arts from the Art Institute of Chicago, assembled the collections. He lived in Venice for 5 years before settling in Cuernavaca in 1960. Through his years and travels, he assembled this rich mosaic of contrasting styles and epochs. The wildly colorful rooms are exactly as Brady left them. Admission includes a guide in Spanish; English and French guides are available if requested in advance.

Calle Netzahualcoyotl 4 (between Hidalgo and Abasolo). ☎ 777/318-8554. Fax 777/314-3529. www.geocities.com/bradymuseum/bradyspanish.html. Admission \$2.50. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm.

Museo de Cuauhnahuac The museum is in the Cortez Palace, the former home of the greatest of the conquistadors, Hernán Cortez. Construction started in 1530 on the site of a Tlahuica Indian ceremonial center and was finished by the conquistador's son Martín. The palace later served as the legislative headquarters for the state of Morelos. It's in the town center, at the eastern end of the Alameda/Plaza de Armas.

In the east portico on the upper floor is a large Diego Rivera mural commissioned by Dwight Morrow, U.S. ambassador to Mexico in the 1920s. It depicts the history of Cuernavaca from the coming of the Spaniards to the rise of Zapata (1910). On the lower level, the excellent bookstore stocks books on Mexican art, architecture, and literature; some English titles are available. It's open daily from 10am to 8pm.

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Tour guides in front of the Palace offer their services in the museum, and at other points of interest in Cuernavaca, for about \$10 per hour. Make sure you see official SECTUR (Tourism Secretary) credentials before hiring one of these guides. This is also a central point for taxis in the downtown area.

In the Cortez Palace, Leyva 100. ☎ 777/312-8171. www.morelostravel.com/cultura/museo7.html. Admission \$3.30; free to all Sun. Tues–Sun 9am–6pm.

ACTIVITIES AND EXCURSIONS

GOLF

With its perpetually springlike climate, Cuernavaca is an ideal place for golf. The **Tabachines Golf Club and Restaurant**, Km 93.5 Carr. Mexico-Acapulco (☎ 777/314-3999), the city's most popular course, is open for public play. Percy Clifford designed this 18-hole course, surrounded by beautifully manicured gardens blooming with bougainvillea, gardenias, and other flowers. The elegant restaurant is a popular place for breakfast, lunch, and especially Sunday brunch. Greens fees are \$80 during the week and \$160 on weekends. American Express, Visa, and MasterCard are accepted. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 7am to 6pm; tee times are available from 7am to 2pm.

Also in Cuernavaca is the **Club de Golf Hacienda San Gaspar**, Av. Emiliano Zapata, Col. Cliserio Alanis (☎ 777/319-4424), an 18-hole golf course designed by Joe Finger. It's surrounded by more than 3,000 trees and has two artificial lagoons, plus beautiful panoramic views of Cuernavaca, the Popocatepetl and Iztacihuatl volcanoes, and the Tepozteco Mountains. Greens fees are \$45 on weekdays, \$89 on weekends; carts cost an additional \$28 for 18 holes, and a caddy is \$17 plus tip. American Express, Visa, and MasterCard are accepted. Additional facilities include a gym with whirlpool and sauna, pool, four tennis courts, and a restaurant and snack bar. It's open Wednesday through Monday from 7am to 7pm.

LAS ESTACAS

Either a side trip from Cuernavaca or a destination on its own, Las Estacas, Km 6.5 Carretera Tlaltizapán–Cuautla, Morelos (☎ 777/312-4412 or 777/312-7610 in Cuernavaca, or 734/345-0077 or 734/345-0159; www.lasestacas.com) is a natural water park. Its clear spring waters reputedly have healing properties. In addition to the crystal-clear rivers, Las Estacas has two pools, wading pools for children, horseback riding, and a traditional-style spa (or *balneario*), open daily from 8am to 6pm. Several restaurants serve simple food, such as quesadillas, fruit with yogurt, sandwiches, and *tortas*.

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Admission is \$15 for adults, \$7.50 for children under 4 feet tall. There is also a trailer park and a small, basic hotel that charges \$91 to \$114 for a double room; rates include the entrance fee to the *balneario* and breakfast. Cheaper lodging options are also available; you can rent an adobe or straw hut with two bunk beds for \$14. Visit the website for other options. MasterCard and Visa are accepted. On weekends, the place fills with families. Las Estacas is 36km (23 miles) east of Cuernavaca. To get there, take Highway 138 to Yautepec, then turn right on the first exit past Yautepec.

PYRAMIDS OF XOCHICALCO 🏛️

This beautiful ceremonial center provides clues to the history of the whole region. Artifacts and inscriptions link the site to the mysterious cultures that built Teotihuacán and Tula, and some of the objects found here make it appear as though the residents were also in contact with the Mixtec, Aztec, Maya, and Zapotec. The most impressive building in Xochicalco is the *pirámide de la serpiente emplumada* (pyramid of the plumed serpent), with its magnificent reliefs of plumed serpents twisting around seated priests. Underneath the pyramid is a series of tunnels and chambers with murals on the walls. There is also an observatory, where from April 30 to August 15 you can follow the trajectory of the sun as it shines through a hexagonal opening. The pyramids (☎ 777/314-3920 for information from the State Tourism Office) are 36km (23 miles) southwest of Cuernavaca. They're open daily from 10am to 6pm. Admission is \$3.50.

WHERE TO STAY

Because so many residents of Mexico City come down for a day or two, tourist traffic at the hotels may be heavy on weekends and holidays. Reservations during these times are recommended.

EXPENSIVE

Camino Real Sumiya 🏡🏡 About 11km (7 miles) south of Cuernavaca, this unusual resort, whose name means “the place of peace, tranquillity, and longevity,” was once the home of Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton. Using materials and craftsmen from Japan, she constructed the estate in 1959 for \$3.2 million on 30 wooded acres. The main house, a series of large connected rooms and decks, overlooks the grounds and contains restaurants and the lobby. Sumiya's charm is in its relaxing atmosphere, which is best midweek (escapes from Mexico City tend to fill it on weekends). The guest rooms, which cluster in three-story buildings bordering manicured

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lawns, are simple in comparison to the striking Japanese architecture of the main house. Rooms have subtle Japanese accents, with austere but comfortable furnishings and scrolled wood doors. Hutton built a kabuki-style theater and exquisite Zen meditation garden, which are now used only for special events. The theater contains vividly colored silk curtains and gold-plated temple paintings protected by folding cedar and mahogany screens. Strategically placed rocks in the garden represent the *chakras*, or energy points of the human body.

Cuernavaca is an inexpensive taxi ride away. Taxis to the Mexico City airport cost \$112 one-way. From the freeway, take the Atlacomulco exit and follow signs to Sumiya. Ask directions in Cuernavaca if you're coming from there; the route to the resort is complicated.

Interior Fracc. Sumiya s/n, Col. José Parres, 62550 Jiutepec, Mor. ☎ **800/7-CAMINO** in the U.S., or 777/329-9888. Fax 777/329-9889. www.caminoreal.com/sumiya. 163 units. \$200 double or single; \$385 suite. Low-season packages and discounts available. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; poolside snack bar; outdoor pool; golf privileges nearby; 10 tennis courts; business center; convention facilities with simultaneous translation capabilities; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, dual-line phones with dataport, hair dryer, iron, safe, ceiling fans.

Las Mañanitas *Overrated* This has been Cuernavaca's most renowned luxury lodging for years. Although it is impeccably maintained, Las Mañanitas has an overly formal feeling to it, which takes away from some guests' comfort. The rooms are formal in a style that was popular 15 years ago, with gleaming polished molding and brass accents, large bathrooms, and rich fabrics. There are several sections. Rooms in the original mansion, called terrace suites, overlook the restaurant and inner lawn; the large rooms in the patio section each have a secluded patio; and those in the luxurious, expensive garden section each have a patio overlooking the pool and emerald lawns. Thirteen rooms have fireplaces, and the hotel also has a heated pool in the private garden. The hotel is one of only two in Mexico associated with the prestigious Relais & Châteaux chain. Transportation to and from the Mexico City airport can be arranged through the hotel for \$240 round-trip. The restaurant overlooking the gardens is one of the country's premier dining places (see "Where to Dine," below). It's open to nonguests for lunch and dinner only.

Ricardo Linares 107 (5½ long blocks north of the Jardín Borda), 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ☎ **777/314-1466** or 777/312-4646. Fax 777/318-3672. www.lasmananitas.com.mx. 21 units. Weekday \$190–\$390 double, weekend \$220–\$425 double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; concierge; room service; laundry service. *In room:* TV upon request, hair dryer.

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Misión Del Sol Resort & Spa ★★★ *Finds* This adults-only hotel and spa offers an experience that rivals any in North America or Europe—and is an exceptional value. You feel a sense of pure peace from the moment you enter the resort, which draws on the mystical wisdom of the ancient cultures of Mexico, Tibet, Egypt, and Asia. Guests and visitors are encouraged to wear light-hued clothes to contribute to the harmonious flow of energy.

Architecturally stunning adobe buildings that meld with the natural environment hold the guest rooms, villas, and common areas. Streams border the extensive garden areas. Group activities such as reading discussions, chess club, and painting workshops take place in the salon, where films are shown on weekend evenings. Rooms are large and peaceful; each looks onto its own garden or stream and has three channels of ambient music. Some have air-conditioning. Bathrooms are large, with sunken tubs, and the dual-headed showers have river rocks set into the floor, as a type of reflexology treatment. Beds contain magnets for restoring proper energy flow; all linens are 100% cotton. A recessed seating area with a sofa offers a comfortable place for reading or relaxing. Villas have two separate bedrooms, plus a living/dining area and a meditation room. Airport transfers from Mexico City are available for \$180 one-way.

The spa has a menu of 32 services, with an emphasis on water-based treatments. Elegant relaxation areas are interspersed among the treatment rooms and whirlpool. The Oratorium is a special structure (built with rounded corners and a domed ceiling with skylight) used for meditation: A flowing stream, bamboo, and verdant plants surround it.

Av. General Diego Díaz Gonzalez 31. Col. Parres. 62550, Cuernavaca, Mor. ☎ **800/999-9100** toll-free inside Mexico, or 777/321-0999. Fax 777/321-1195. www.misiondelsol.com.mx. 42 units, plus 12 villas. \$262 deluxe double; \$551 villa (up to 4 persons), \$610 Villa Magnolia (up to 4 persons). Special spa and meal packages available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Children under 15 not accepted. **Amenities:** Restaurant (creative vegetarian/international); 2 tennis courts; well-equipped gym; spa services, including massages, body wraps, scrubs, facial treatments, *temazcal* (pre-Hispanic sweat lodge), Janzu, phototherapy; daily meditation, yoga, tai chi classes/sessions; Ping-Pong table. *In room:* Safe-deposit box, robes.

MODERATE

Hotel Posada María Cristina ★★ The María Cristina's high walls conceal many delights: a small swimming pool, lush gardens with fountains, a good restaurant, and patios. Guest rooms vary in size; all are exceptionally clean and comfortable, with firm beds and colonial-style furnishings. Bathrooms have inlaid Talavera tiles and

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skylights. Suites are only slightly larger than normal rooms; junior suites have Jacuzzis. La Calandria, the handsome little restaurant on the first floor, overlooks the gardens and serves excellent meals based on Mexican and international recipes. Even if you don't stay here, consider having a meal. The Sunday brunch (\$13 per person) is especially popular. The hotel is half a block from the Palacio de Cortez.

Leyva 20, at Abasolo (Apdo. Postal 203), 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ☎ 777/318-6984 or 777/318-5767. Fax 777/312-9126 or 777/318-2981. www.maria-cristina.com. 19 units. \$110 double; \$135–\$160 suite or cabaña. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant and bar; outdoor pool; concierge; tour desk. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryers, ceiling fans.

INEXPENSIVE

Hotel Juárez Its rates and location (downtown, 1 block from the Casa Borda) make the Juárez a good choice for those intent on exploring the town's cultural charms. Each of the two-story hotel's simple rooms is old-fashioned but well kept.

Netzahualcoyotl 19, 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ☎ 777/314-0219. 12 units. \$30 double. No credit cards. Limited street parking. From the Cathedral, go east on Hidalgo, then turn right on Netzahualcoyotl. The hotel is about 1 block down on the left. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; tour desk. *In room:* TV, fan.

WHERE TO DINE
VERY EXPENSIVE

Restaurant Las Mañanitas *Overrated* MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Las Mañanitas has set the standard for sumptuous, leisurely dining in Cuernavaca, but it has reached the point where its reputation surpasses the reality. Though the setting is exquisite and the service superb, the food is not as noteworthy as one would expect. Tables are on a shaded terrace with a view of gardens, strolling peacocks, and softly playing violinists or a romantic trio. The ambience is lovely, and the service extremely attentive. When you arrive, you can enjoy cocktails in the cozy *sala* or on lounge chairs on the lawn; when you're ready to dine, a waiter will present you with a large blackboard menu listing a dozen or more daily specials. The cuisine is Mexican with an international flair, drawing on seasonal fruits and vegetables and offering a full selection of fresh seafood, beef, pork, veal, and fowl, but in standard preparations. Try cream of watercress soup, filet of red snapper in curry sauce, and black-bottom pie, the house specialty.

In Las Mañanitas hotel, Ricardo Linares 107, 5½ long blocks north of the Jardín Borda. ☎ 777/314-1466 or 777/312-4646. www.lasmananitas.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$16–\$32. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–5pm and 7–11pm.

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MODERATE

Casa Hidalgo ★★★ GOURMET MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL In a beautifully restored colonial building across from the Palacio de Cortez, this is a relatively recent addition to Cuernavaca dining. The food is more sophisticated and innovative than that at most places in town. Specialties include cream of Brie soup, smoked rainbow trout, and the exquisite Spanish-inspired filet Hidalgo—breaded and stuffed with serrano ham and *manchego* cheese. There are always daily specials, and bread is baked on the premises. Tables on the balcony afford a view of the action in the plaza below. The restaurant is accessible by wheelchair.

Calle Hidalgo 6. ☎ 777/312-2749. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses \$13–\$20. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 1:30–11pm; Fri–Sat 1:30pm–midnight; Sun 1:30–11:30pm. Valet parking available.

Restaurant La India Bonita ★★ MEXICAN Housed among the interior patios and portals of the restored home of former U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow, La India Bonita is a gracious haven where you can enjoy the setting as well as the food. Specialties include *mole poblano* (chicken with a sauce of bitter chocolate and fiery chiles) and *fillet a la parrilla* (charcoal-grilled steak). There are also several daily specials. A breakfast mainstay is *desayuno Maximiliano*, a gigantic platter featuring enchiladas.

Morrow 15 (between Morelos and Matamoros), Col. Centro, 2 blocks north of the Jardín Juárez. ☎ 777/318-6967 or 777/312-5021. Breakfast \$4.15–\$6.50; main courses \$6.70–\$14. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 9am–9pm; Sun 9am–6pm.

Restaurant Vienés ★ VIENNESE This tidy, somewhat Viennese-looking place, a block from the Jardín Juárez, is a legacy of this city's Viennese immigrant heritage. The menu features old-world specialties such as grilled trout with vegetables and German potato salad. For dessert there's apple strudel followed by Viennese coffee. A daily "executive menu" offers a complete fixed-priced meal for \$8.50. Next door, the restaurant runs a pastry and coffee shop, **Los Pasteles del Vienés**. Although the menu is identical, the atmosphere in the coffee shop is much more leisurely, and the tempting pastries are on display in glass cases.

Lerdo de Tejada 12 (between Morelos and Morrow). ☎ 777/314-3404. Breakfast \$3–\$5; main courses \$6–\$9. Daily 8am–10pm. AE, MC, V.

INEXPENSIVE

La Universal ★★ (Value) MEXICAN/PASTRIES This is a busy place, partly because of its great location (overlooking both the

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Alameda and Plaza de Armas), partly because of its traditional Mexican specialties, and partly because of its reasonable prices. It's open to the street and has many outdoor tables, usually filled with older men discussing the day's events or playing chess. These tables are perfect for watching the parade of street vendors and park life. The specialty is a Mexican grilled sampler plate, including *carne asada*, enchilada, pork cutlet, and grilled green onions, beans and tortillas, for \$10. A full breakfast special (\$4) is served Monday through Friday from 9:30am to noon. There's also a popular happy hour on weekdays from 8pm to 10pm.

Gurrero 2. (☎ 777/318-6732 or 777/318-5970. Breakfast \$4–\$7.50; main courses \$4–\$15; *comida corrida* \$8.90. AE, MC, V. Daily 9:30am–midnight.

CUERNAVACA AFTER DARK

Cuernavaca has a number of cafés right off the Jardín Juárez where people gather to sip coffee or drinks till the wee hours. The best are La Parroquia and La Universal (see “Where to Dine,” above). There are band concerts in the Jardín Juárez on Thursday and Sunday evenings.

A recent—and welcome—addition is **La Plazuela**, a short, pedestrian-only stretch of a bricked street across from the Cortez Palace. Here, coffee shops alternate with tattoo parlors and live-music bars—something is always going on. It's geared toward a 20-something, university crowd.

Harry's Grill, Gutenberg 5 at Salazar, just off the main square (☎ 777/312-7639), is dependable for nocturnal fun. It offers the Carlos Anderson chain's usual good food and craziness, with Mexican revolutionary posters and flirtatious waiters. Although it serves full dinners, I'd recommend you go for drinks. The restaurant is open daily from 1pm to 11pm; the bar, Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday from 10pm to 3am. Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are accepted.

3 Tepoztlán ★★

72km (45 miles) S of Mexico City; 45km (28 miles) NE of Cuernavaca

Tepoztlán is one of the strangest and most beautiful towns in Mexico. Largely undiscovered by foreign tourists, it occupies the floor of a broad, lush valley whose walls were formed by bizarrely shaped mountains that look like the work of some abstract expressionist giant. The mountains are visible from almost everywhere in town; even the municipal parking lot has a spectacular view.

Tepoztlán is small and steeped in legend and mystery—it is adjacent to the alleged birthplace of Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec serpent god—and comes about as close as you're going to get to an unspoiled, magical mountain hideaway. Though the town is tranquil during the week, escapees from Mexico City overrun it on the weekends, especially Sunday. Most Tepoztlán residents, whether foreigners or Mexicans, tend to be mystically or artistically oriented—although some also appear to be just plain disoriented.

Aside from soaking up the ambience, two things you must do are climbing up to the **Tepozteco pyramid** and hitting the **weekend crafts market**. In addition, for those interested in holistic medicine, Tepoztlán offers a variety of treatments, cures, diets, massages, and sweat lodges. Some of these are available at hotels; for some, you have to ask around. Many locals swear that the valley possesses mystical curative powers and is one of the world's most important centers of positive energy.

If you have a car, Tepoztlán provides a great starting point for traveling this region of Mexico. Within 90 minutes are Las Estacas, Taxco, las Grutas de Cacahuamilpa, and Xochicalco (some of the prettiest ruins in Mexico). Tepoztlán is 20 minutes from Cuernavaca and only an hour south of Mexico City, which—given its lost-in-time feel—seems hard to believe.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Car** From Mexico City, the quickest route is 95 (the toll road) to Cuernavaca; just before the Cuernavaca city limits, you'll see the clearly marked turnoff to Tepoztlán on 95D and Highway 115. The slower, free federal highway 95D, direct from Mexico City, is also an option, and may be preferable if you're departing from the western part of the city. Take 95D south to Km 71, where the exit to Tepoztlán on Highway 115 is clearly indicated.

By Bus From Mexico City, buses to Tepoztlán run regularly from the Terminal de Sur and the Terminal Poniente. The trip takes an hour.

In addition, you can book round-trip transportation to the Mexico City airport through **Marquez Sightseeing Tours** (☎ 777/320-9109 and 777/315-5875; marquez tours@hotmail.com) and two hotels: the **Posada del Tepozteco** (☎ 739/395-0010), and **Casa Iccemayan** (☎ 739/395-0899). The round-trip cost varies between \$125 and \$200.

EXPLORING TEPOZTLAN

Tepoztlán's **weekend crafts market** is one of the best in central Mexico. More crafts are available on Sunday, but if you can't stand the multitudes, Saturday is quite good, too. Vendors sell all kinds of ceramics, from simple fired clay works resembling those made with pre-Hispanic techniques, to the more commercial versions of Majolica and pseudo-Talavera. There are also puppets, carved wood figures, and some textiles, especially thick wool Mexican sweaters and jackets made out of *jerga*. Very popular currently is the "hippie"-style jewelry that earned Tepoztlán its fame in the '60s and '70s. The market is also remarkable for its food stands, where you can get everything from *carne asada* to *sopes*, *quesadillas*, *caldos*, and much more.

The other primary activity is hiking up to **Tepozteco pyramid**. The climb is steep but not difficult. Dense vegetation shades the trail (actually a long natural staircase), which is beautiful from bottom to top. Once you arrive at the pyramid you are treated to remarkable views and, if you are lucky, a great show by a family of *coatis* (tropical raccoons), who visit the pyramid most mornings to beg for food; they especially love bananas. The pyramid is a Tlahuica construction that predates the Náhuatl (Aztec) domination of the area. It was the site of important celebrations in the 12th and 13th centuries. The main street in Tepoztlán, Avenida 5 de Mayo, takes you to the path that leads you to the top of the Tepozteco. The trail begins where the name of Avenida 5 de Mayo changes to Camino del Tepozteco. The hike is about an hour each way, but if you stop and take in the scenery and really enjoy the trail, it can take up to 2 hours each way.

Also worth visiting is the **former convent Dominico de la Navidad**, just east of the main plaza. Built between 1560 and 1588, it is now a museum.

SIGHTS NEAR TEPOZTLAN

Many nearby places are easily accessible by car. Tour services also offer trips to these areas, and will provide pick-up service from your hotel. One good service is **Marquez Sightseeing Tours**, located in Cuernavaca (☎ 777/320-9109 or 777/315-5875). Marquez has four- and seven-passenger vehicles, very reasonable prices, and a large variety of set tours. The utterly dependable owner, Arturo Marquez Diaz, speaks better than passable English and will allow you to design your own tour. He also offers transportation to and from Mexico City airport for approximately \$150.

Two tiny, charming villages, **Santo Domingo Xocotitlán** and **Amatlán**, are only a 20-minute drive from Tepoztlán and can be reached by minibuses, which depart regularly from the center of town. There is nothing much to do in these places except wander around absorbing the marvelous views of the Tepozteco Mountains and drinking in the magical ambience.

Las Grutas de Cacahuamilpa ☞, known as the Cacahuamilpa Caves or Grottoes (☎ 555/150-5031), is an unforgettable system of caverns with a wooden walkway for easy access and viewing. You'll see spectacular rock formations, which are lit up as you pass from chamber to chamber. Admission for 2 hours is \$3.50; a guide for groups, which can be assembled on the spot, costs an additional \$8. The caverns are open daily from 10am to 5pm, and are 90 minutes from Tepoztlán.

Located 40 minutes southeast of Tepoztlán is **Las Estacas**, a small, lush, ecological resort with a cold-water spring that is reputed to have curative powers. The ruins of **Xochicalco** (see "Cuernavaca," earlier in this chapter), and the colonial town of **Taxco** (see section 1 of this chapter) are easily accessible from Tepoztlán.

WHERE TO STAY

The town gets very busy on the weekends, so if your stay will include Friday or Saturday night, make reservations well in advance. Tepoztlán has a number of places to stay, but unfortunately, most are very basic, so-so accommodations. There are, however, a jewel of a small hotel and a good option for budget travelers.

Hotel Nilayam ☞ Formerly Hotel Tepoztlán, this holistic-oriented retreat is in a colonial building, but the decor has been brightened up considerably. Suites, with hydromassage tubs and terraces, are the most spacious option. Stays here encourage self-exploration: The gracious, helpful staff offers complete detox programs and a full array of services, including yoga, reflexology, spinal-column exercises, meditation, music therapy, and more. The hotel has a great view of the mountain. The restaurant, **El Chalchi**, features a creative menu of vegetarian cuisine.

Industrias 6, Tepoztlán, Mor. ☎ 739/395-0522. Fax 739/395-0522. www.hotelnilayam.com. 36 units. \$85 double; \$175 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool; tennis court; spa services; private *temazcal* (sweat lodge). *In room:* TV.

Posada del Tepozteco ☞☞ This property looks out over the town and down the length of the spectacular valley; the views from just about anywhere are superb. Rooms are tastefully furnished in

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rustic Mexican style. All but the least expensive have terraces and views. All suites have small whirlpool tubs. The grounds are exquisitely landscaped, and the atmosphere intimate and romantic.

Paraiso 3 (2 blocks from the town center), Tepoztlán, Mor. ☎ 739/395-0010. Fax 739/395-0323. www.tepozteco.com or www.posadadeltepozteco.com. 20 units. \$145–\$225 double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant with stunning view; small outdoor pool.

WHERE TO DINE

In addition to the two choices listed below, **El Chalchi** restaurant at the **Hotel Nilayam** (see above) offers some of the best vegetarian fare in the area. It's 3 blocks from the main square, and it's open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with main courses priced around \$5.

El Ciruelo Restaurant Bar ☞ MEXICAN GOURMET This picturesque restaurant, surrounded by beautiful flowering gardens and adobe walls, offers a sampling of Tepoztlán's essence in one place. The service is positively charming, and the food divine. House specialties include chalupas of goat cheese, chicken with *huitlacoche*, and a regional treat—milk candies.

Zaragoza 17, Barrio de la Santísima, in front of the church. ☎ 739/395-1203. Dinner \$7.50–\$25. AE. Sun–Thurs 1–7pm; Fri–Sat 1pm–midnight.

Restaurant Axitla ★★☆☆ *Finds* GOURMET MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Axitla is not only the best restaurant in Tepoztlán, but also one of the finest in Mexico for showcasing the country's cuisine. Gourmet Mexican delicacies are made from scratch using the freshest local ingredients. Specialties include chicken breast stuffed with wild mushrooms in a *chipotle chile* sauce, *chiles en nogada*, and exceptional *mole*. There are also excellent steaks and fresh seafood.

As if the food weren't enough—and believe me, it is—the setting will make your meal even more memorable. The restaurant is at the base of the Tepozteco Pyramid, surrounded by 3 acres of junglelike gardens that encompass a creek and lily ponds. The views of the Tepozteco Mountains are magnificent. Memo and Laura, the gracious owners, speak excellent English and are marvelous sources of information about the town and the whole area.

Avenida del Tepozteco, at the foot of the trail to the pyramid. ☎ 739/395-0519. Lunch \$5–\$10; dinner \$5–\$20. MC, V. Wed–Sun 10am–7pm.