

PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO MID-PACIFIC MEXICO

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by Shane Christensen

Along the Pacific coast of Mexico, palm-studded jungles sweep down to meet the deep blue of the Pacific

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

Travelers to Mexico should be aware of security concerns in certain parts of the country and take precautions to maximize their safety. For the most part, mid-Pacific Mexico is safe for travelers who steer clear of drugs and those who sell them, but visitors should still exercise caution in unfamiliar areas and remain aware of their surroundings at all times. For detailed information about safety concerns and precautions, see "Crime & Safety" (p. 24). Also visit the U.S. State Department's website, www.travel.state.gov, for up-to-date information on travel to Mexico.

For additional assistance in planning your trip and for on-the-ground resources in mid-Pacific Mexico, please see chapter 7, "Fast Facts."

THE REGION IN BRIEF

Puerto Vallarta, with its traditional Mexican architecture and gold-sand beaches bordered by jungle-covered mountains, is one of the most visited resort cities in Mexico. Although it has grown rapidly in recent years, Vallarta (as the locals refer to it) has managed to preserve its small-town charm. Just north of Puerto Vallarta is **Punta Mita**, home of the first Four Seasons resort in Latin America and a Jack Nicklaus golf course.

One of Mexico's most active commercial ports, **Manzanillo** is surprisingly relaxed, and also offers great fishing and golf. And along the **Costa Alegre**, between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, pristine coves are home to unique luxury and value-priced resorts that cater to travelers seeking seclusion and privacy.

For a more traditional Mexican experience, head inland over the mountains to **Guadalajara**, Mexico's second-largest city and the birthplace of many of the country's traditions.

International airports at Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, and Guadalajara make getting to this region relatively easy; Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta have the most frequent connections. Distances in the region are easily managed by car and the roads are in generally good condition. **Barra de Navidad**, for example, is so close to Manzanillo that it's easy to combine several days there with a stay in Manzanillo. Outside Puerto Vallarta, **Bucerías**, **Yelapa**, **San Sebastian**, and **Sayulita** all offer a change of pace and scenery. **Hotelito Desconocido** (p. 100) and **Las Alamandas** (p. 100) are both closer to Puerto Vallarta, while the remainder of the luxury coastal resorts between Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta are nearer to Manzanillo. Flights to and from Puerto Vallarta are more frequent, however, and many people find that Puerto Vallarta provides the best access to the coastal area.

WHEN TO GO

Seasons

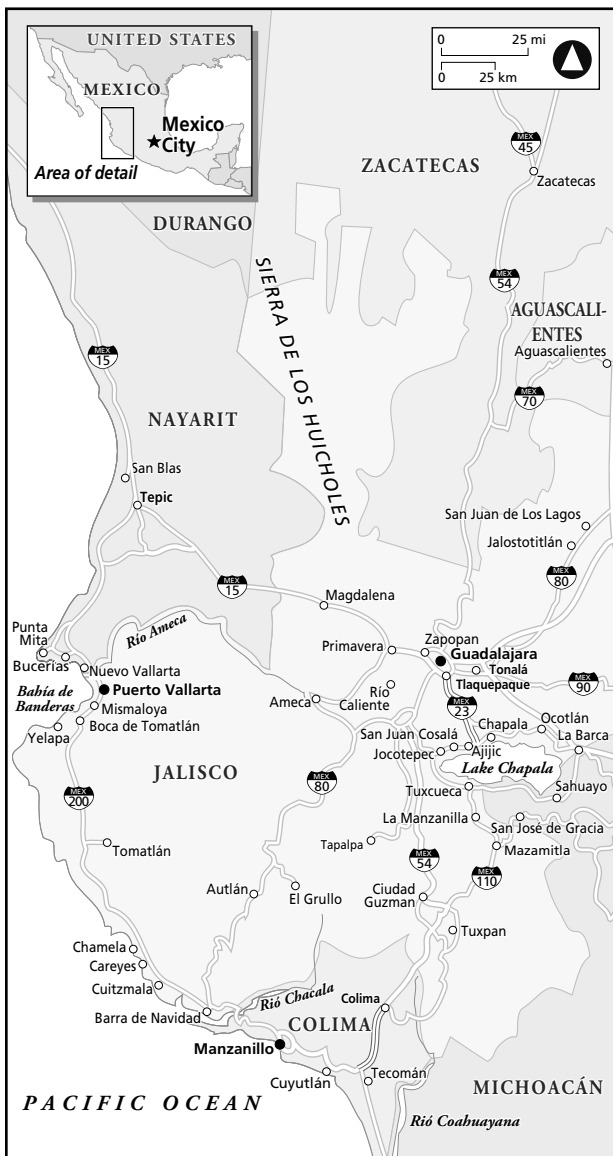
Mexico has two principal travel seasons: high and low. High season begins around December 20 and continues through Easter, although in some places high season can begin as early as mid-November. Low season begins the day after Easter and continues through mid-December; during low season, prices may drop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

Mexico's Mid-Pacific Coast

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PLANNING YOUR TRIP

When to Go



Climate

The region extending from Puerto Vallarta south all the way to Huatulco offers one of the world's most perfect winter climates—dry and balmy with temperatures ranging from the 80s during the day to the 60s at night. Here, you can swim year-round. High mountains shield Pacific beaches from *nortes* (northerns—freezing blasts out of Canada via the Texas Panhandle).

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

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

Calendar of Events

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

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

JANUARY

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

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

FEBRUARY

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

Día de la Constitución (Constitution Day), nationwide. This national holiday is in honor of the current Mexican constitution, signed in 1917 as

a result of the revolutionary war of 1910. It's celebrated through small parades. February 5.

Carnaval. Carnaval takes place the 3 days preceding Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent.

Ash Wednesday. The start of Lent and time of abstinence. It's a day of reverence nationwide, but some towns honor it with folk dancing and fairs. Lent begins on February 22 in 2012 and February 13 in 2013.

MARCH

Benito Juárez's Birthday. This national holiday celebrating one of Mexico's most beloved leaders is observed through small hometown celebrations. March 21.

APRIL

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

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

MAY

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

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

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

Feast of San Isidro, nationwide. A blessing of seeds and work animals honors the patron saint of farmers. May 15.

Restaurant Week, Puerto Vallarta. In this resort city known as having the best restaurants in the country after Mexico City, some 40 participating restaurants offer fixed-price tasting menus for discounts of up to 50%. For more details, visit www.virtualvallarta.com/restaurantweek. Mid- to late May.

JUNE

Día de la Marina (Navy Day), various towns. All coastal towns celebrate the holiday, with naval parades and fireworks. June 1.

Corpus Christi. This day, celebrated nationwide, honors the Body of Christ (the Eucharist) with processions, Masses, and food. *Mulitas* (mules), handmade from dried cornhusks and painted, are traditionally sold outside all churches on that day to represent a prayer for fertility.

Dates vary, but celebrations take place on the Thursday following “Holy Trinity” Sunday.

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

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

AUGUST

Assumption of the Virgin Mary. This day is celebrated throughout the country with special Masses and, in some places, with processions. August 15 to August 17.

International Mariachi Festival, Guadalajara. Public mariachi concerts, with groups from around the world (even Japan!). Workshops and lectures are given on the history, culture, and music of the mariachi. Late August to early September.

SEPTEMBER

Independence Day. Celebrates Mexico’s independence from Spain. A day of parades, picnics, and family reunions throughout the country. At 11pm on September 15, the president of Mexico gives the famous independence *grito* (shout) from the National Palace in Mexico City, which is duplicated by every *presidente municipal* (mayor) in every town plaza in Mexico. Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta have great parties in the town plaza on the nights of September 15 and 16.

OCTOBER

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

Día de la Raza (“Ethnicity Day,” or Columbus Day). This day commemorates the fusion of the Spanish and Mexican peoples. October 12.

NOVEMBER

Day of the Dead. The Day of the Dead is actually 2 days, All Saints’ Day (honoring saints and deceased children) and All Souls’ Day (honoring deceased adults). Relatives gather at cemeteries carrying candles and food, and often spend the night beside the graves of loved ones. Weeks before, bakers begin producing bread shaped like mummies or round loaves decorated with bread “bones.” Decorated sugar skulls emblazoned with glittery names are sold everywhere. Many days ahead, homes and churches erect special altars laden with Day of the Dead

bread, fruit, flowers, candles, and favorite foods and photographs of saints and of the deceased. Children, dressed in costumes and masks, carry mock coffins and pumpkin lanterns through the streets at night, expecting people to drop money in them. November 1 and 2.

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

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

DECEMBER

Puerto Vallarta Film Festival, Puerto Vallarta. Featuring a wide range of North American independent and Latin American productions, this elaborate event includes galas, art expos, and concerts, with celebrity attendees. Check local calendars or visit www.rivieranayarit.com for details. First week of December.

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

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

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

Christmas. Mexicans extend their celebration of this holiday throughout December, with festivities often lasting from 2 weeks before Christmas

through New Year's. Many businesses close, and resorts and hotels fill up. December 24 and 25.

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

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Passports

Citizens from most countries are required to present a valid passport to enter Mexico. As of March 1, 2010, all U.S. citizens, including children, have been required to present a valid passport or passport card for travel beyond the "border zone" into Mexico, with the "border zone" defined as an area within 20 to 30km (12–19 miles) of the United States. (See www.frommers.com/planning for information on how to obtain a passport.)

All U.S. and Canadian citizens traveling by air or sea to Mexico are required to present a valid passport or other valid travel document (see below) to enter or reenter the United States except if returning from a closed-loop cruise. In addition, all travelers, including U.S. and Canadian citizens, attempting to enter the United States by land or sea must have a valid passport or WHTI-compliant document.

Other valid travel documents (known as WHTI-compliant documents) include the new Passport Card and SENTRI, NEXUS, FAST, and the U.S. Coast Guard Mariner Document. Members of the U.S. Armed Forces on active duty traveling on orders are exempt from the passport requirement. U.S. citizens may apply for the limited-use, wallet-size **Passport Card**, available for a cost of about \$40. The card is valid only for land and sea travel between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean region, and Bermuda. As of March 1, 2010, the Mexican Immigration authorities accept the Passport Card for travel into Mexico by air. However, the card is **not** valid for international flights from the U.S. to countries other than Mexico, or to return to the U.S. from countries other than Mexico. This card is available only to U.S. citizens. For more details on application restrictions, see www.getyouhome.gov.

For U.S. citizens and permanent residents returning from Mexico, there is also the new "Global Entry" program for frequent travelers (www.globalentry.gov). U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) offers this program for pre-approved, low-risk travelers. Participants' entry to the U.S. is expedited through the use of automated kiosks, available at various airports.

From our perspective, it's easiest just to travel with a valid passport. Safeguard your passport in an inconspicuous, inaccessible place, like a money belt, and keep a copy of the critical pages with

your passport number in a separate place. If you lose your passport, visit the nearest consulate of your native country as soon as possible to obtain a replacement. See “Embassies & Consulates,” p. 155, for consulate locations in Mexico.

Visas

Citizens from some countries will need a visa to enter Mexico. For detailed information regarding visas to Mexico, visit the website of the **National Immigration Institute** (<https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/usa>).

American and Canadian tourists are not required to have a visa or a tourist card for stays of 72 hours or less within the border zone (20–30km/12–19 miles from the U.S. border). For travel to Mexico beyond the border zone, all travelers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K., and the U.S., as well as several other countries, can get their visas upon arrival. Many other countries require a pre-approved visa, although as of May 1, 2010, non-U.S. citizens with valid U.S. visas may enter Mexico with the U.S. visa, and do not have to obtain a Mexican visa. For the latest requirements, please refer to www.inm.gob.mx/EN/index.php.

Once in Mexico, all travelers must be in possession of a tourist card, also called Tourist Migration Form. This document is provided by airlines or by immigration authorities at the country’s points of entry. Be careful not to lose this card, as you will be required to surrender it upon departure and you will be fined if you lose it.

Your tourist card is stamped on arrival. If traveling by bus or car, be sure you obtain such a card at the immigration module located at the border and have it stamped by immigration authorities at the border. If you do not receive a stamped tourist card at the border, you should, upon arrival at your destination within Mexico, go immediately to the closest National Institute of Immigration office and request a tourist card. Travelers who fail to have their tourist card stamped may be fined, detained, or expelled from the country.

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

If you plan to enter Mexico by car, please see “By Car” in “Getting There,” p. 10, for required documents and other regulations.

Note on travel of minors: Mexican law requires that any individual under the age of 18 traveling to or from Mexico without both parents must carry notarized written permission from **each** parent

or guardian who is not traveling with the child. This permission must include the name of the parent(s), the name of the child, the name of anyone traveling with the child, and the notarized signature(s) of the absent parent(s). The U.S. Department of State recommends that permission include travel dates, destinations, airlines, and a summary of the circumstances surrounding the travel. The child must be carrying the original letter (not a facsimile or scanned copy), proof of the parent/child relationship (usually a birth certificate or court document), and an original custody decree, if applicable. Contact the Mexican Embassy or closest Mexican Consulate for more information.

Tourism Tax

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

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

Medical Requirements

No special vaccinations are required for entry into Mexico. For other medical requirements and health-related recommendations, see “Health,” p. 21.

GETTING THERE

By Plane

Mexico has dozens of international and domestic airports throughout the country. Among the major airports along the mid-Pacific coast are Acapulco (ACA), Guadalajara (GDL), Manzanillo (ZLO), Mazatlán (MZT), and Puerto Vallarta (PVR). Many flights also connect through Mexico City (MEX). There is one major Mexican airline, Aeroméxico, and a handful of newer, low-cost carriers. For a list of the major international airlines with service to Mexico, see “Airline Websites,” p. 162.



Carrying Car Documents

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

ARRIVING AT THE AIRPORT

Immigration and Customs clearance at Mexican airports is generally efficient. Expect longer lines during peak seasons, but you can usually pass through Immigration and Customs within a half-hour. For more on what to expect at Mexican Customs, see “Customs” (p. 154).

By Bus

Greyhound (☎ 800/231-2222; www.greyhound.com) and its affiliates offer service from across the United States to the Mexican border, where passengers disembark, cross the border, and buy a ticket for travel into Mexico. Many border crossings have scheduled buses from the U.S. bus station to the Mexican bus station. We list bus arrival information in each applicable section of this book.

By Car

Driving is not the cheapest or safest way to get to Mexico. While driving is a convenient way to see the country, you may think twice about taking your own car south of the border once you've pondered the bureaucracy involved. One alternative is to rent a car once you arrive for touring a specific region. The mid-Pacific coast is a great place to do this. Rental cars in Mexico are generally clean and well maintained, although they are often smaller than rentals in the U.S., may have manual rather than automatic transmission, and are comparatively expensive due to pricey mandatory insurance. Discounts are often available for rentals of a week or longer, especially when you make arrangements in advance online or from

the United States. Be careful about estimated online rates, which often fail to include the price of the mandatory insurance. (See “Car Rentals,” p. 16, for more details.)

If, after reading the section that follows, you have additional questions or you want to confirm the current rules, call your nearest Mexican consulate or the **Mexican Government Tourist Office** (☎ 800/446-3942; www.visitmexico.com). Although travel-insurance companies are generally helpful, they may not have the most accurate information. To check on road conditions or to get help with any travel emergency while in Mexico, call the **Green Angels** (☎ 55/5250-8221, or 078 for emergencies; www.ontheroadin.com/travelinformation/green_angels_of_mexico.htm), many of whom are English-speaking.

In addition, check with the **U.S. Department of State** (www.state.gov) for warnings about dangerous driving areas.

CAR DOCUMENTS

To drive your car into Mexico beyond 25km (16 miles), you'll need a **temporary car-importation permit**, which is granted after you provide a required list of documents (see below). The permit can be obtained after you cross the border into Mexico through **Banco del Ejército (Banjercito)** officials with Mexican Customs (*aduana*s), or at Mexican consulates in Austin, San Francisco, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Bernardino. For more information, call ☎ 877/210-9469 in the U.S. or visit www.banjercito.com.mx.

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

- **Passport.**
- **Valid driver's license**, issued outside of Mexico.
- **Current, original car registration and a copy of the original car title.** If the registration or title is in more than one name and not all the named people are traveling with you, a notarized letter from the absent person(s) authorizing use of the vehicle for the trip is required; have it ready. The registration and your credit card (see below) must be in the same name. If the car is leased or rented, be sure to have a copy of the contract.
- **Original immigration documentation.** Likely your tourist card (see “Visas,” p. 9).
- **Processing fee and posting of a bond.** You have three options for covering the car-importation fee: Pay \$29 at the border, pay \$39 in advance at a Mexican Consulate, or pre-pay \$49 online at www.banjercito.com.mx. If you apply online, you'll need to wait about 2 weeks before you can go to the Banjercito office to obtain your permit. You will generally need a credit card

to make this payment. Mexican law also requires the posting of a bond at a Banjercito office to guarantee the export of the car from Mexico within a time period determined at the time of the application. For this purpose, American Express, Visa, or MasterCard credit card holders will be asked to provide credit card information; others will need to make a cash deposit of \$200 to \$400, depending on the make/model/year of the vehicle. In order to recover this bond or avoid credit card charges, travelers must go to any Mexican Customs office immediately before leaving Mexico.

If you receive your documentation at the border, Mexican officials will make two copies of everything and charge you for the copies.

For up-to-the-minute information, contact the *Módulo de Importación Temporal de Automóviles*, part of the Customs office in Nuevo Laredo (*Aduana Nuevo Laredo*; ☎ 867/712-2071).

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

MEXICAN AUTO INSURANCE (SEGUROS DE AUTO)

Liability auto insurance is legally required of all drivers in Mexico. U.S. insurance is not valid; to be insured in Mexico, you must purchase Mexican insurance. Any party involved in an accident who has no insurance may be sent to jail and have his or her car impounded until all claims are settled. U.S. companies that broker Mexican insurance are commonly found at the border crossing, and several quote daily rates.

You can also buy car insurance through **Sanborn's Mexico Insurance**, 209 S. 10th, PO Box 52840, McAllen, TX 78505 (☎ 800/222-0158; fax 800/222-0158 or 956/686-0732; www.sanbornsinsurance.com), for a daily, monthly, or yearly time period. The company has offices at all U.S. border crossings. Its policies cost the same as the competition's do, but you get legal coverage (attorney and bail bonds, if needed), roadside assistance, and for a premium, vandalism protection. You also get a detailed guide for your proposed route. Most of the Sanborn's border offices are open



Point-to-Point Driving Directions Online

You can get point-to-point driving directions in English for anywhere in Mexico from the website of the Secretary of Communication and Transport. The site will also calculate tolls, distance, and travel time. Go to http://aplicaciones4.sct.gob.mx/sibuac_internet and click on “Rutas punto a punto” in the left-hand column. Then select the English version.

Monday through Friday; a few are staffed on Saturday and Sunday. AAA auto club (www.aaa.com) also sells insurance.

RETURNING TO THE U.S. WITH YOUR CAR

You *must* return the car documents you obtained when you entered Mexico when you cross back over the border with your car, or within 180 days of your departure. (You can cross the border as many times as you wish within the 180 days.) If the documents aren't returned, serious fines are imposed (50 pesos for each day you're late), your car may be impounded and confiscated, or you may be jailed if you return to Mexico. You can only return the car documents to a Banjercito official on duty at the Mexican *aduanas* building *before* you cross back into the United States. Some border cities have Banjercito officials on duty 24 hours a day, but others do not; some do not have Sunday hours. See www.mexbound.com/mexican-vehicle-permits.php#hours for a list of office hours.

By Ship

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

GETTING AROUND

By Plane

Until recently, Mexico had two large private national carriers, but Mexicana closed operations and filed for bankruptcy in 2010. Now, only **Aeroméxico** remains (☎ 800/237-6399 in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico; www.aeromexico.com), in addition to several low-cost carriers. Aeroméxico offers extensive connections to the United States as well as within Mexico.

Low-cost carriers include **InterJet** (www.interjet.com.mx) and **Volaris** (www.volaris.com.mx). In each applicable section of this book, we mention regional carriers with all pertinent telephone numbers.

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

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

By Car

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

The spirited style of Mexican driving sometimes requires keen vision and reflexes. Be prepared for new customs, as when a truck driver flips on his left turn signal when there's not a crossroad for many kilometers. He's probably telling you the road's clear ahead for you to pass.

GASOLINE There's one government-owned brand of gas and one gasoline station name throughout the country—**Pemex** (Petrobras Mexicanas). There are two types of gas in Mexico: *magna*, 87-octane unleaded gas, and *premio*, 93 octane. In Mexico, fuel and oil are sold by the liter, which is slightly more than a quart (1 gal. equals about 3.8L). Many franchise Pemex stations have restroom facilities and convenience stores—a great improvement over the old ones. Gas stations accept both credit and debit cards for gas purchases, and a small tip—5 to 10 pesos—is expected for the standard full-service.

TOLL ROADS Mexico charges relatively high tolls for its network of new toll roads, so they are less used. Generally, though, using toll roads cuts travel time. Older toll-free roads are generally in good condition, but travel times tend to be longer as these roads pass directly through small towns and villages.

BREAKDOWNS If your car breaks down on the road, help might already be on the way. Radio-equipped green repair trucks, run by uniformed English-speaking officers, patrol major highways

during daylight hours (usually 8am–6pm). These **Angeles Verdes/Green Angels** perform minor repairs and adjustments for free, but you pay for parts and materials. To contact them in Mexico, dial ☎ **078**. For more information, see www.sectur.gob.mx.

Your best guide to repair shops is the Yellow Pages. For repairs, look under *Automóviles y Camiones: Talleres de Reparación y Servicio*; auto-parts stores are under *Refacciones y Accesorios para Automóviles*. To find a mechanic on the road, look for the sign TALLER MECANICO. Places called *vulcanizadora* or *llantera* repair flat tires, and it is common to find them open 24 hours a day on the most traveled highways.

MINOR ACCIDENTS When possible, many Mexicans drive away from minor accidents, or try to make an immediate settlement, to avoid involving the police. If the police arrive while the involved persons are still at the scene, the cars will probably be confiscated and both parties will likely have to appear in court. Both parties may also be taken into custody until liability is determined. Foreigners who don't speak fluent Spanish are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain their version of the event. Three steps may help the foreigner who doesn't wish to do as the Mexicans do: If you were in your own car, notify your Mexican insurance company, whose job it is to intervene on your behalf. If you were in a rental car, notify the rental company immediately and ask how to contact the nearest adjuster. (You did buy insurance with the rental, right?) Finally, if all else fails, ask to contact the nearest **Green Angel** (☎ **55/5250-8221**, or 078 for emergencies; www.ontheroadin.com/travelinformation/green_angels_of_mexico.htm), who may be able to explain to officials that you are covered by insurance. See also "Mexican Auto Insurance (*Seguros de Auto*)," in "Getting There," earlier in this chapter.

CAR RENTALS You'll get the best price if you reserve a car on the Internet. Cars are easy to rent if you are 25 or older and have a major credit card, valid driver's license, and passport with you. Without a credit card, you must leave a cash deposit, usually a big one. One-way rentals are usually simple to arrange, but they are more costly.

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

sure the vehicle is in good shape and has been properly serviced before driving away.

Car-rental companies often charge a credit card in U.S. dollars.

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

INSURANCE Insurance is offered in two parts: **Collision and damage** insurance covers your car and others if the accident is your fault, and **personal accident** insurance covers you and anyone in your car. Note that insurance may be invalid if you have an accident while driving on an unpaved road. Although some international credit cards include as a benefit collision and damage coverage, they almost never include liability.

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

By Taxi

Taxis are the preferred way to get around almost all of Mexico's resort areas. Fares for short trips within towns are generally preset by zone, and are quite reasonable compared with U.S. and European rates. For longer trips or excursions to nearby cities, taxis can generally be hired for around \$15 to \$20 per hour, or for a negotiated daily rate. A negotiated one-way price is usually much less than the cost of a rental car for a day, and a taxi travels much faster than a bus. For anyone who is uncomfortable driving in Mexico, this is a convenient, comfortable alternative. A bonus is that you have a Spanish-speaking person with you in case you run into trouble. Many taxi drivers speak at least some English. For safety reasons, *sitio* (radio) taxis should be used rather than *libre* taxis off the street. Your hotel can assist you with the arrangements.

By Bus

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

Dozens of Mexican companies operate large, air-conditioned, Greyhound-type (or better) buses between most cities. Classes are *segunda* (second), *primera* (first), and *ejecutiva* (deluxe), which goes by a variety of names. Deluxe buses often have fewer seats

than regular buses, show movies, are air-conditioned, and make few stops. Many run express from point to point. They are well worth the few dollars more. In rural areas, buses are often of the school-bus variety, with lots of local color.

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

For each relevant destination, we list bus arrival and contact information. The following website provides reservations and bookings for numerous providers throughout Mexico: www.ticketbus.com.mx/wtbkd/autobus.jsp.

MONEY & COSTS

The currency in Mexico is the peso. Paper currency comes in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 pesos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos, and 20 and 50 **centavos** (100 centavos = 1 peso). The current exchange rate for the U.S. dollar, and the one used in this book, is approximately 12 pesos; at that rate, an item that costs 12 pesos would be equivalent to \$1.

THE VALUE OF THE MEXICAN PESO VS. OTHER POPULAR CURRENCIES

Pesos	US\$	Can\$	UK £	Euro €	Aus\$	NZ\$
100	8.59	8.26	5.35	6.02	7.98	10.25

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

In general, Mexico is considerably cheaper than most U.S. and European destinations, although prices vary significantly depending on the specific location. The most expensive destinations are those with the largest number of foreign visitors, such as Puerto Vallarta. The least expensive are those off the beaten path and in small rural villages. In the major cities, prices vary greatly depending on the neighborhood. As you might imagine, tourist zones tend to be much more expensive than local areas.

Many establishments that deal with tourists, especially in coastal resort areas, quote prices in U.S. dollars. To avoid confusion, they use the abbreviations "DlIs." for dollars and "M.N." (*moneda nacional*, or national currency) or "M.X.P." for Mexican Pesos. **Note:** Establishments that quote their prices primarily in U.S. dollars are listed in this guide with U.S. dollars.

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

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

Don't forget to have enough pesos to carry you over a weekend or Mexican holiday, when banks are closed. Because small bills and coins in pesos are hard to come by in Mexico, U.S. \$1 bills are also useful to have on hand for tipping. **Note:** A tip of U.S. coins, which cannot be exchanged into Mexican currency, is of no value to the service provider.

Casas de cambio (exchange houses) are generally more convenient than banks for money exchange because they have more locations and longer hours; the rate of exchange may be the same as at a bank or slightly lower. Before leaving a bank or exchange-house window, count your change in front of the teller. In addition, most major hotels will change money for you.

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

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

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

Travelers to Mexico can easily withdraw money from ATMs (*cajeras*) in most major cities and resort areas. The U.S. Department of State recommends caution when you're using ATMs in



A Few Words About Prices

Many hotels in Mexico—except places that receive little foreign tourism—quote prices in U.S. dollars or in both dollars and pesos. Thus, currency fluctuations are unlikely to affect the prices most hotels charge.

Mexico, stating that they should only be used during business hours and in large protected facilities, but this pertains primarily to Mexico City, where crime remains a significant problem. In most resorts in Mexico, the use of ATMs is perfectly safe—just use the same precautions you would at any ATM. However, beware of using ATMs in dubious locations; there have been reports of people having their card numbers “skimmed” (a process through which information is copied and money stolen or cards fraudulently charged). The ATM exchange rate is generally more favorable than at *casas de cambio*. Most machines offer Spanish/English menus and dispense pesos, but some offer the option of withdrawing U.S. dollars.

In Mexico, Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are the most accepted cards. You’ll be able to charge most hotel, restaurant, and store purchases, as well as almost all airline tickets, on your credit card. Most Pemex gas stations now accept credit card purchases for gasoline, though this option may not be available everywhere and often not at night—check before you pump. Generally you receive the favorable bank rate when paying by credit card. However, be aware that some establishments in Mexico add a 5% to 7% surcharge when you pay with a credit card. This is especially true when using American Express. Many times, advertised discounts will not apply if you pay with a credit card.

Beware of hidden credit card fees while traveling. Check with your credit or debit card issuer to see what fees, if any, will be charged for overseas transactions. Recent reform legislation in the U.S., for example, has curbed some exploitative lending practices. But many banks have responded by increasing fees in other areas, including fees for customers who use credit and debit cards while out of the country—even if those charges were made in U.S. dollars. Fees can amount to 3% or more of the purchase price. Check with your bank before departing to avoid any surprise charges on your statement.

For help with currency conversions, tip calculations, and more, download Frommer’s convenient Travel Tools app for your mobile device. Go to <http://frommers.com/go/mobile> and click on the Travel Tools icon.

WHAT THINGS COST IN MEXICO	PESOS (US\$ WHERE INDICATED)
Puerto Vallarta beachfront double room, expensive	US\$250
Manzanillo beachfront double room, moderate	US\$120
Guadalajara double room, moderate	US\$110
Puerto Vallarta dinner for one, moderate	200–300
Manzanillo dinner for one, moderate	100–150
Guadalajara dinner for one, moderate	100–200
Tacos from market or street vendor	20–30
Puerto Vallarta canopy tour	US\$75
Admission to most archaeological sites	50
Night dancing in Puerto Vallarta	US\$40

HEALTH

For the latest information on health risks when traveling to Mexico, and what to do if you get sick, consult the **U.S. State Department's** website (www.travel.state.gov), the **CDC's** website (www.cdc.gov), or the website of the **World Health Organization** (www.who.int).

In most of Mexico's resort destinations, you can find health care that meets U.S. standards. Care in more remote areas is limited. Standards of medical training, patient care, and business practices vary greatly among medical facilities in beach resorts throughout Mexico. Puerto Vallarta has first-rate hospitals, for example, but smaller cities along the Pacific Coast often do not. In recent years, some U.S. citizens have complained that certain healthcare facilities in beach resorts have taken advantage of them by overcharging or providing unnecessary medical care. On the other hand, Mexican doctors often spend more time with patients than doctors do north of the border, and may be just as good for less cost.

Prescription medicine is broadly available at Mexico pharmacies, and many drugs that require a prescription in the U.S. can be obtained in Mexico simply by asking. However, be aware that you may still need a copy of your prescription or to obtain a prescription from a local doctor.

SUN/ELEMENTS/EXTREME WEATHER EXPOSURE

Mexico is synonymous with sunshine; much of the country is bathed in intense sunshine for much of the year. Avoid excessive exposure, especially in the Tropics where UV rays are more dangerous. The hottest months on the Pacific Coast are in summer (June–Aug), but the sun is intense throughout most of the year.

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

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

The U.S. Public Health Service recommends the following measures for preventing travelers' diarrhea: **Drink only purified water** (boiled water, canned or bottled beverages, beer, or wine). Choose food carefully. In general, avoid salads (except in first-class restaurants), uncooked vegetables, undercooked protein, and unpasteurized milk or milk products, including cheese. **Choose food that is freshly cooked and still hot.** Avoid eating food prepared by street vendors. In addition, something as simple as clean hands can go a long way toward preventing an upset stomach.

HIGH-ALTITUDE HAZARDS Travelers to certain regions of Mexico occasionally experience **elevation sickness**, which results from the relative lack of oxygen and the decrease in barometric pressure that characterizes high elevations (more than 1,500m/5,000 ft.). Symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue, headache, insomnia, and even nausea. At high elevations, it takes about 10 days to acquire the extra red blood corpuscles you need to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. To help your body acclimate,



Over-the-Counter Drugs in Mexico

Antibiotics and other drugs that you'd need a prescription to buy in the States are often available over the counter in Mexican pharmacies. Mexican pharmacies also carry a limited selection of common over-the-counter cold, sinus, and allergy remedies. Contact lenses can be purchased without an exam or prescription, should you run out.

drink plenty of fluids, avoid alcohol, and don't overexert yourself during the first few days. If you have heart or lung trouble, consult your doctor before flying above 2,400m (7,872 ft.).

BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS **Mosquitoes** and **gnats** are prevalent along the coast and in the Yucatán lowlands. *Repelente contra insectos* (insect repellent) is a must, and you can buy it in most pharmacies. If you'll be in these areas and are prone to bites, bring along a repellent that contains the active ingredient DEET. Another good remedy to keep the mosquitoes away is to mix citronella essential oil with basil, clove, and lavender essential oils. If you're sensitive to bites, pick up some antihistamine cream from a drugstore at home.

Most readers won't ever see an *alacrán* (scorpion). But if one stings you, go to a doctor immediately. The one lethal scorpion found in some parts of Mexico is the *Centruroides*, part of the *Buthidae* family, characterized by a thin body, thick tail, and triangular-shaped sternum. Most deaths from these scorpions happen within 24 hours of the sting as a result of respiratory or cardiovascular failure, with children and elderly people most at risk. Scorpions are not aggressive (they don't hunt for prey), but they may sting if touched, especially in their hiding places (which can include shoes). In Mexico, you can buy scorpion-toxin antidote at any drugstore. It is an injection, and it costs around \$25. This is a good idea if you plan to camp in a remote area, where medical assistance can be several hours away. Note that not all scorpion bites are lethal, but a doctor's visit is recommended regardless.

TROPICAL ILLNESSES You shouldn't be overly concerned about tropical diseases if you stay on the normal tourist routes and don't eat street food. However, both dengue fever and cholera have appeared in Mexico in recent years. Talk to your doctor or to a medical specialist in tropical diseases about precautions you should take. You can protect yourself by taking some simple precautions: Watch what you eat and drink; don't swim in stagnant

water (ponds, slow-moving rivers, or wells); and avoid mosquito bites by covering up, using repellent, and sleeping under netting.

CRIME & SAFETY

Mexico is one of the world's major tourism destinations and millions of visitors travel here safely each year. Yet drug-related violence and widespread media coverage of Mexico's security issues have had a severe impact on its tourism industry. Mexican drug-trafficking organizations have been engaged in brutal fights against each other for control of trafficking routes, and with the Mexican government, which has deployed military troops and federal police across the country. Much of the worst drug-related violence has occurred in the border region. In an April 2011 Travel Warning, the U.S. Department of State urged U.S. citizens to defer non-essential travel to the states of Michoacán and Tamaulipas, and to parts of Chihuahua (particularly Ciudad Juárez), Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Zacatecas. (In Jalisco, the main areas of concern are the regions bordering Zacatecas and Michoacán, several hours by car from Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara.)

The Mexican government is working hard to protect visitors to all major tourist destinations, which do not experience anything like the levels of violence and crime reported in the border region and along major drug trafficking routes, mainly in the north. In most places, it's uncommon for foreign visitors to face anything worse than petty crime. The risk of pickpockets and petty theft rises considerably during the high tourist season in winter. Always use common sense and exercise caution when in unfamiliar areas. Leave valuables and irreplaceable items in a safe place, or don't bring them at all. Use hotel safes when available. Avoid driving alone, especially at night. You can generally trust a person whom you approach for help or directions, but be wary of anyone who approaches you offering the same. The more insistent a person is, the more cautious you should be. Stay away from areas where drug dealing and prostitution occur.

The U.S. and Mexico share a border more than 3,000km (nearly 2,000 miles) long and Americans comprise the vast majority of tourists to Mexico. Because of these countries' close geographic and historical relationship, we recommend that all travelers, from the U.S. or elsewhere, refer to the **U.S. Department of State** travel advisories for Mexico (www.travel.state.gov). The U.S. State

safety IN MEXICO: ONE AUTHOR GIVES HIS TWO CENTS

Stories of murder and mayhem have dominated recent headlines about Mexico. Reports of assassinations, kidnappings, and shootouts sell newspapers but are of little help to tourists evaluating travel risks throughout the country. These incidents are newsworthy in that they document the gravity of the problem Mexico faces in gaining control of its borders and ensuring public safety. The best way to understand the risks of traveling to specific regions in Mexico is to read the travel advisories issued by the U.S. State Department (<http://travel.state.gov>).

The current situation has changed the way I travel in two ways, beyond the usual precautions (not flashing a lot of money, not wearing an expensive watch, keeping aware of my surroundings, and not driving on the highway at night—for reasons that have more to do with practicalities than issues of crime). The changes I've made can be boiled down to two objectives: Avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and avoid the possibility of mistaken identity. The **first** is largely met by not lingering in Mexico's northern border states (including Durango and the interior of Sinaloa). This is where the immense majority of the violence is occurring. The **second** is meant to minimize any risk of being held up or nabbed by kidnapers, and it is achieved by looking as much like a tourist as possible. Kidnappers in Mexico don't target tourists. They target resident foreigners who have family in the country or business people who have associates. They do this because they need someone to demand the ransom from. The risk here is from small-time gangs who act opportunistically. (Serious kidnapers aren't a threat because they won't do anything without planning and surveillance.) In the last few years, small-time gangs have increased. The best way I know of to avoid this risk is not to carry a briefcase or satchel, which is a business symbol. What's more, by hauling around a backpack, you will automatically escape scrutiny because businesspersons in Mexico never use them. The backpack (*mochila*) in Mexico is a strong cultural identifier. It's associated with students and counterculture types, so much so that the word *mochilero* has come to describe hippies.

—David Baird

Department encourages its citizens to stay in well-known tourist destinations and tourist areas with better security, cooperate fully with Mexican military and other law enforcement checkpoints, and provide an itinerary to a friend or family member not traveling with them.

For emergency numbers, see p. 157.

Crime in Resort Towns

Rapes have been reported in a number of resort areas, usually at night or in the early morning. Women should not walk alone late at night. Although this violence is not explicitly targeted at foreign residents or tourists, visitors to resort areas should be vigilant in their personal safety. Armed street crime is a serious problem in all major Mexican cities. Some bars and nightclubs, especially in resort cities, can be havens for drug dealers and petty criminals.

The U.S. State Department offers specific safety and security information for travelers on spring break in Mexico. Visit http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/spring_break_mexico/spring_break_mexico_5014.html.

Crime Nationwide—Kidnapping

Kidnapping, including the kidnapping of non-Mexicans, continues to occur sporadically across the country. So-called express kidnappings, such as attempts to get quick cash in exchange for the release of an individual, have occurred in almost all of Mexico's large cities and can target the wealthy as well as the middle class. See "Safety in Mexico: One Author Gives His Two Cents," above.

Highway Safety

The travel warning issued by the U.S. State Department in April 2011 advises that violence along Mexican roads and highways is a particular concern in the northern border region. As of press time, U.S. government employees and their families are not permitted to drive from the U.S.-Mexico border to or from the interior of Mexico. Travel by vehicle is permitted between Hermosillo and Nogales. While violent incidents have occurred at all hours of the day and night on toll highways and on secondary roads, they have occurred most frequently at night on isolated roads. Drivers are strongly advised to travel only during daylight hours and to use toll roads. Fully cooperate with all official checkpoints, which have increased greatly in number, when traveling on Mexican highways.

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

Bribes & Scams

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

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

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

While traveling in Mexico, you may encounter several types of **scams** that occur throughout the world. One involves some kind of **distraction** or feigned commotion. While your attention is diverted, a pickpocket may make a grab for your wallet (for example). In another common scam, an **unaccompanied child** pretends to be lost and frightened and takes your hand for safety. Meanwhile the child or an accomplice plunders your pockets. A third involves **confusing currency**. A shoeshine boy, street musician, guide, or other individual might offer you a service for a price that seems reasonable—in pesos. When it comes time to pay, he or she tells you the price is in dollars, not pesos. Be very clear on the price and currency when services are involved. Finally, take caution when using **ATMs in deserted locations**; there have been many reports of card numbers being “skimmed” and information copied, money stolen, or cards fraudulently charged.

SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

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

Things are changing here. On December 21, 2009, Mexico City became the first Latin American jurisdiction to legalize same-sex marriage, and the 14th in the world, after the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, and six U.S. jurisdictions.

While much of Mexico is socially conservative, Puerto Vallarta is not. Popular with many gay travelers, the city offer gay-friendly accommodations, bars, and activities. For more information, visit the website of **MexGay Vacations** (www.mexgay.com). Information about gay-friendly accommodations is available at www.gayplaces2stay.com.

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

Mexican airports are upgrading their services, but it is still occasionally necessary to board a plane from a remote position, meaning you either descend stairs to a bus that ferries you to the plane, which you board by climbing stairs, or you walk across the tarmac to your plane and ascend the stairs. Deplaning presents the same problem in reverse.

Escalators (and there aren't many in the country) are often out of order. Stairs without handrails abound. Few restrooms are equipped for travelers with disabilities; when one is available, access to it may be through a narrow passage that won't accommodate a wheelchair or a person on crutches. Many deluxe hotels (the most expensive) now have rooms with bathrooms designed for people with disabilities. Those traveling on a budget should stick

with one-story hotels or hotels with elevators. Even so, there will probably still be obstacles somewhere. Generally speaking, no matter where you are, someone will lend a hand, but you may have to ask for it.

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

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

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

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

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

WOMEN TRAVELERS Women do not frequently travel alone in Mexico, or drive alone on highways. Walking alone on the street can provoke catcalls, and walking alone at night is not advisable except in well-protected tourist areas. I've known women who have had uncomfortable experiences in crowded places such as subways. In general, however, Mexicans are extremely gracious, and will help a woman carry heavy items, open doors, and provide information, among other courtesies.

SENIOR TRAVEL Mexico is a popular country for retirees. For decades, North Americans have been living indefinitely in Mexico by returning to the border and recrossing with a new tourist permit every 6 months. Mexican immigration officials have caught on, and now limit the maximum time in the country to 6 months within any year. This is to encourage even partial residents to acquire proper documentation.

AIM-Adventures in Mexico, Apartado Postal 31-70, 45050 Guadalajara, Jalisco, is a well-written, informative newsletter for prospective retirees. Subscriptions are \$29 in the United States.

Sanborn Tours, 2015 S. 10th St., PO Box 936, McAllen, TX 78505 (☎ 800/395-8482; www.sanborns.com), offers a “Retire in Mexico” orientation tour.

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

However, more hostels have entered the student travel scene. The website www.hostels.com/mexico offers a list of hostels in Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, Guadalajara, and many other cities throughout Mexico.

The U.S. State Department also offers information designated specifically for students traveling abroad. Visit www.students.abroad.state.gov.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

The diverse geography of the Mexican Riviera and its wealth of eco- and adventure-tour options have made it a natural favorite of travelers interested in ecotourism. This stretch of Mexico’s Pacific Coast presents one of the country’s most ecologically stunning landscapes. The Costa Alegre, extending between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, has been designated an “Ecological Tourism Corridor” by the state of Jalisco. This largely undeveloped coastline includes the spectacular beaches, jungles, and surrounding mountains of Barra de Navidad Bay, Tenacatita Bay, Careyes Coast, Chamela Bay, and the Majahuas Coast, and is home to an ecological reserve protecting the region’s land and marine life. The **Hotel Desconocido** (p. 100), located along this coast, is one of Mexico’s most prominent ecotourism resorts.

For hands-on activities with local sea life while in Puerto Vallarta, consider **Dolphin Adventure** (p. 70). Hiking, boating, snorkeling, and scuba diving are all popular activities in Puerto Vallarta and the nearby resorts.

AMTAVE (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.) is an active association in Mexico of eco- and adventure-tour operators dedicated to the operation and promotion of ecotourism and adventure travel in Mexico. They publish an

annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, and for quality and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact AMTAVE (☎ 55/5544-7567; www.amtave.org).

Animal-Rights Issues

The Pacific Coast presents many opportunities to swim with dolphins. The capture of wild dolphins was outlawed in Mexico in 2002. The only dolphins added to the country's dolphin swim programs since then were born in captivity. This law may have eased concerns about the death and implications of capturing wild dolphins, but the controversy is not over. Marine biologists who run the dolphin swim programs say the mammals are thriving and that the programs provide a forum for research, conservation, education, and rescue operations. Animal rights advocates maintain that keeping these intelligent mammals in captivity is nothing more than exploitation. Their argument is that these private dolphin programs don't qualify as "public display" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act because the entry fees bar most of the public from participating.

Visit the websites of the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** (www.wdcs.org) and the **American Cetacean Society** (www.acsonline.org) for further discussion on the topic.

Bullfighting is considered an important part of Latin culture, but before you attend a *correo*, you should know that, in all likelihood, the bulls (at least four) will undergo torture, shed lots of blood, and die before a team of horses drags their carcasses unceremoniously out of the ring. There has been strong opposition to bullfighting on ethical grounds, and you may want to do some research on the controversy surrounding this tradition before making the decision to attend a bullfight. That said, these events provide a window into Mexico's Spanish colonial past, and traditional machismo is on full display. Bullfights take place in towns as different as Tijuana and Puerto Vallarta, and they afford a colorful spectacle like no other, with brass bands playing, matadors sporting traditional costume, spectators shaking their heads at less-than-perfect swipes of the cape, and women throwing roses, jackets, and hats at the matadors' feet.

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

GENERAL RESOURCES FOR green TRAVEL

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

- **Responsible Travel** (www.responsibletravel.com) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas; the site is run by a spokesperson for ethical tourism in the travel industry.
- Sustainable Travel International** (www.sustainabletravelinternational.org) promotes ethical tourism practices, and manages an extensive directory of sustainable properties and tour operators around the world.
- In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** (www.tourismconcern.org.uk) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism. The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)** (www.aito.co.uk) is a group of specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.
- In Canada, **www.greenlivingonline.com** offers extensive content on how to travel sustainably, including a travel and transport section.
- **Carbonfund** (www.carbonfund.org), **TerraPass** (www.terrapass.com), and the **CoolClimate Network** (<http://coolclimate.berkeley.edu>) provide info on “carbon offsetting.”

SPECIAL-INTEREST TRIPS

Academic Trips & Language Classes

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

To explore your inner Frida or Diego while in Mexico, look into **Mexico Art Tours**, 1233 E. Baker Dr., Tempe, AZ 85282 (☎ 888/783-1331 or 480/730-1764; www.mexicanarttours.com). Typically led by Jean Grimm, a specialist in the arts and cultures of Mexico, these unique tours feature compelling speakers who are themselves respected scholars and artists. Itineraries include visits to Chiapas, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Mexico City, Puebla, Puerto

or offsetting the greenhouse gas emitted during flights.

- **Greenhotels** (www.greenhotels.com) recommends green-rated member hotels around the world that fulfill the company's stringent environmental requirements.

Environmentally Friendly Hotels (www.environmentallyfriendlyhotels.com) offers more green accommodations ratings. The **Green Key Eco-Rating Program** (www.greenkeyglobal.com) audits the environmental performance of Canadian and U.S. hotels, motels, and resorts.
- **Sustain Lane** (www.sustainlane.com) lists sustainable eating and drinking choices around the U.S.; also visit **www.eatwellguide.org** for tips on eating sustainably in the U.S. and Canada.
- For information on animal rights issues throughout the world, visit **Tread Lightly** (www.treadlightly.org). For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** (www.wdcs.org).
- **Volunteer International** (www.volunteerinternational.org) has a list of questions to help you determine the intentions and the nature of a volunteer program. For general info on volunteer travel, visit www.goabroad.com/volunteer-abroad or www.idealists.org.

Vallarta, San Miguel de Allende, and Veracruz—and other cities. Special tours involve archaeology, architecture, interior design, and culture—such as a Day of the Dead tour.

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

Adventure & Wellness Trips

AMTAVE (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.) is an association of ecotourism and adventure tour operators. For more information, contact AMTAVE (☎ 55/5544-7567; www.amtave.org).

Food & Wine Trips

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

Volunteer & Working Trips

For numerous links to volunteer and internship programs throughout Mexico involving teaching, caring for children, providing health care, feeding the homeless, and participating in other community and public service, visit www.goabroad.com/volunteer-abroad.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

Mexico's Hotel Rating System

The hotel rating system in Mexico is called "Stars and Diamonds." Hotels are awarded stars and diamonds based on facilities, hygiene, and service. All rated hotels adhere to strict standards, though many of the best hotels in Mexico are not certified under this system. These are ranked instead according to the internationally recognized AAA diamond rating and Mobil star rating systems.

Hotel Chains

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

- **Brisas Hotels & Resorts** (www.brisas.com.mx). These were the hotels that originally attracted jet-set travelers to Mexico. Spectacular in a retro way, these properties offer the laid-back luxury that makes a Mexican vacation so unique. Manzanillo has a Las Brisas property, **Brisas Las Hadas Golf Resort & Marina** (p. 116).
- **Fiesta Americana** and **Fiesta Inn** (www.posadas.com). Part of the Mexican-owned Grupo Posadas company, these hotels set the country's midrange standard for facilities and services. They generally offer comfortable, spacious rooms, and traditional



Boutique Lodgings

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PLANNING YOUR TRIP

Tips on Accommodations

Mexico lends itself beautifully to the concept of small, private hotels in idyllic settings. They vary in style from grandiose estates to palm-thatched bungalows. **Mexico Boutique Hotels** (☎ 877/278-8018; www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com) specializes in smaller places to stay with a high level of personal attention and service. Most options have fewer than 50 rooms, and the accommodations consist of entire villas, *casitas*, bungalows, or a combination.

Mexican hospitality. Fiesta Americana hotels offer excellent beach-resort packages. Fiesta Inn hotels are usually more business-oriented. Mid-Pacific Mexico's offerings include Fiesta Americana Grand Guadalajara Country Club, the Fiesta Americana Guadalajara, the Fiesta Inn Guadalajara, and the **Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta** (p. 48).

- **Hoteles Camino Real** (www.caminoreal.com). Hoteles Camino Real remains Mexico's premier hotel chain, with beach resorts, city hotels, and colonial inns scattered throughout the country. Its beach hotels are traditionally located on the best beaches in the area. This chain also focuses on the business market. The hotels are famous for their vivid and contrasting colors. In mid-Pacific Mexico, Camino Real has three hotels: the Camino Real Guadalajara, Camino Real Guadalajara Expo, and the Camino Real Manzanillo.
- **NH Hoteles** (www.nh-hotels.com). The NH hotels are noted for their family-friendly facilities and quality standards. The beach properties' signature feature is a pool, framed by columns, overlooking the sea. NH Hoteles has only one property in mid-Pacific Mexico, the NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta.
- **Quinta Real Grand Class Hotels and Resorts** (www.quintareal.com). These hotels are noted for architectural and cultural details that reflect their individual regions. At these luxury properties, attention to detail and excellent service are the rule. Quinta Real is the top-line Mexican hotel brand. The only Quinta Real hotel on the mid-Pacific coast is the **Quinta Real Guadalajara** (p. 130).

House Rentals & Swaps

House and villa rentals and swaps are becoming more common in Mexico, but no single recognized agency or business provides this service exclusively for Mexico. In the following chapters, we

provide information on independent services that we have found to be reputable.

You'll find the most extensive inventory of homes at **Vacation Rentals by Owner (VRBO; www.vrbo.com)**. They have thousands of homes and condominiums worldwide, including a large selection in Mexico. Another good option is **VacationSpot (☎ 888/903-7768; www.vacationspot.com)**, owned by Expedia and a part of its sister company, Hotels.com. It has fewer choices, but the company's criteria for adding inventory is much more selective and often includes on-site inspections. They also offer toll-free phone support.